

The world's superpowers' show of force against China's Silk Road Initiative (US confrontation)

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Abstract. From 2013 to 2023, the United States has followed a specific path in its response to China's Silk Road Initiative, gradually moving from a position of silence and indirect measures to aggressive and confrontational behavior towards China's infrastructure initiative. The purpose of this article is to explain the process of the gradual confrontation of the United States' position towards China's Silk Road Initiative.

In this regard, the main question based on the descriptive-explanatory method of the article is why, in the ten years since the announcement of the Silk Road Initiative (2013-2023), the position of the United States has gradually become more confrontational towards it? The hypothetical answer to this question is that the US's increasingly confrontational stance towards China's Silk Road Initiative is a result of the changing nature of the relationship between the two countries from cooperation to competition, and this has led to a shift from the Obama administration's relatively cooperative approach to the initiative to a more competitive approach under the Trump administration and an intensification of competition under the Biden administration.

The article finds that, given the evolving U.S. approach to the Belt and Road Initiative, there is also the potential for further intensification of competition with China in the area of international infrastructure development.

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1. Statement of the Issue

China's Silk Road Revitalization Initiative, now officially known as the Belt and Road Initiative, has assumed a central position in China's international approach more than a decade after its announcement by President Xi Jinping and is considered a signature or brand of China's foreign policy. The initiative is also aimed at addressing China's domestic challenges, such as ensuring economic growth, energy security, and job creation. The initiative aims to facilitate cooperation in infrastructure, trade, and finance between China and partner countries.

The initiative also seeks to strengthen soft links, meaning the promotion of common rules, standards, and procedures for people-to-people exchanges. As of March 2024, more than 180 countries and international organizations have signed agreements with the Chinese government on the initiative. Most of the signatories are developing countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, known as the "Global South."

On the other hand, China's efforts to promote the Belt and Road Initiative have been met with increasing negative reactions from the United States over the 2013-2023 decade. The country initially pursued a contradictory stance toward the initiative, based on occasional criticism of China's infrastructure performance and declarations of conditional willingness to cooperate in implementing infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. However, as Washington increasingly understood the global dimensions and scope of China's initiative, its tone gradually shifted from a more selective criticism of China's infrastructure initiative to a cautionary approach to partnering with China and proposing alternative infrastructure plans.

The turning point in Washington's stance toward China's infrastructure initiative can be seen in the second half of 2017. The United States explicitly identified China as its most important rival in its national security strategy at this time, and "strategic competition" became the overarching framework for explaining U.S.-China relations.

The Biden administration's National Security Strategy report, released in October 2022, also described China as the greatest geopolitical challenge facing the United States. The report also spoke of a "ten determinants" of competition between the United States and China. This means that relations between these two great powers will move towards competition in various areas from now on and for the foreseeable future.

It is natural that in these circumstances, one of the important aspects of this competition will be the confrontation between the United States and China in the field of limiting and discrediting China's Belt and Road Initiative and the presentation of alternative infrastructure plans by Washington and its allies.

This article attempts to examine and analyze the reactions of the United States to China's infrastructure initiative over the more than ten years that have passed since the announcement of this initiative. In

this regard, the main question based on the descriptive-explanatory method of the article is why, in the ten years since the announcement of the Silk Road Initiative (2013-2023), the position of the United States has gradually become more confrontational towards it? The hypothetical answer to this question is that the US's increasingly confrontational stance towards China's Silk Road Initiative is a result of the changing nature of the relationship between the two countries from cooperation to competition, and this has caused the Obama administration's relatively cooperative approach to the initiative to shift towards a more competitive approach under the Trump administration and an intensification of competition under the Biden administration.

To test the above hypothesis, the article, after reviewing the relevant literature, introduces a theoretical framework in the form of the concept of "great power competition" to show that from this theoretical lens, the changing nature of US-China relations and Washington's reactive pattern towards China's infrastructure initiative can be better understood.

In the following, for the purpose of analyzing the hypothesis, the public and practical reactions of the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations to China's Belt and Road Initiative are examined and evaluated.

2. Related Literature

China's Belt and Road Initiative, along with its increasing scope and dimensions, has attracted more attention in intellectual and political circles in various parts of the world, especially in Western countries.

One of the aspects related to this phenomenon that has also received attention has been the reaction of the United States and Western countries to China's largest infrastructure development program in the world. A separate Persian article and a number of other works in English have been published on this subject.

In Persian, one can refer to the article "Strategic Competition between America and China in the Infrastructure Plan for Building a Better World and the Belt and Road" published by Hossein Dehshiar and Mehdi Pourbaqar. The article focuses on the Biden administration's response to the so-called "Building a Better World" plan announced in 2021 by the US government and other G7 countries to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative. While the present article examines the broader range of US responses from the Obama administration to Biden in a specific context to China's infrastructure initiative.

The article concludes that "the United States, as a hegemonic power, with a serious understanding of the strategic challenge posed by China, is seeking to prevent a possible China-centric order, with political, economic, and ideological deterrents as an initiative to build a better world, in order to preserve the current nature of the world order structure" (Dehshiyar and Pourbaqar, 2023:49).

The Institute for American and China Studies, a non-profit think tank, published a report entitled "Perspectives on the The American Report on the Belt and Road Initiative: Concerns and Opportunities for Cooperation" was published. As the title of this report suggests, it attempts to present

and collect the views of American strategic studies, political economy, and international affairs experts on China's infrastructure initiative.

The report notes the ambiguity of the initiative, and the criticisms leveled at it, but its policy recommendations are also. The colorful media coverage of the bilateral cooperation and mutual benefits between China and the United States. It has also been concluded that the initiative "should be designed in a way that can promote cooperation, not competition, in US-China relations" (Institute for China-America Studies, 2016).

The US House of Representatives Foreign Relations Committee, in a report titled "Assessment of US Efforts to Counter China's Coercive Belt and Road Diplomacy," published in June 2023, Lahn has been highly critical of China's infrastructure initiative, believing that "this debt trap diplomacy leaves developing countries with unpayable debt and allows China to use it to increase its influence" (Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2023: 1).

In an article titled "The Belt and Road Initiative and US-China Competition in the Global South" (Zhao, 2021), Mingao Zhao has pointed out that most of the participating countries in China's revitalization of the Silk Road, developing countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America are known as the Global South.

According to the author, China's efforts to promote innovation have aroused suspicion in the United States, which has sought to prevent China's expansion into this vast part of the world by strengthening its ties with the Global South.

Jean-Marc Blanchard, in an article entitled "The United States, Competition with China and the Belt and Road Initiative" "By examining the official positions of the Obama and Trump administrations and interviewing media activists, it has attempted to show that the announcement and promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative has led to a more competitive relationship between the United States and China (Blanchard, 2021).

The present article also focuses on the United States' reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative, but its distinguishing feature from the existing literature is that:

- 1- Over a ten-year period, the media reactions and it has practically examined all three Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, and from this point of view, the scope of its study is broader than the existing works.
- 2- It has tried to conduct this study in a systematic and analytical manner, based on the theoretical framework of great power competition, and on the basis of indicators related to cooperation and competition in bilateral relations.

3. Theoretical Framework: Great Power Competition

The concept of great power competition (GPC) has become an important reference and interpretive lens for researchers and policymakers in today's international space. Its popularity stems from the idea

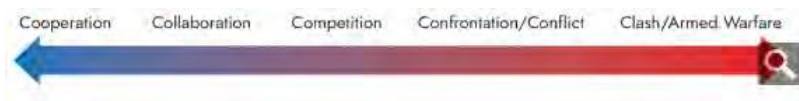
of China's rise to power, Russia's resurgence, and the relative decline of the United States' position in the international arena.

Based on this approach, observers speak of the persistence and intensification of differences between countries that are able to dominate a region or compete for global dominance (Wright, 2020). Criticisms have been raised about the explanatory power and strategic value of the concept of great power competition (Ashford, 2021), but this has not prevented a large number of researchers from using it to explain US strategy in the current context.

It should also be noted that the US national security strategy documents published by the Trump and Biden administrations have mentioned great power competition as a key feature of the international environment and have reminded us that in this new international space, this country's strategy must be readjusted.

The Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy specifically used the term "great power competition," and the Biden administration's 2021 National Security Strategy Interim Guidance also used the term "strategic competition" (United States Department of Defense, 2018: 2,4).

Figure 1. The continuum of the nature of relations between countries, from cooperation to armed conflict.



Source: Lynch II, 2020: 3.

Relations between countries can be depicted along a continuum, which, as shown in the figure above, starts with cooperation on the left and ends with armed conflict at the right end of the spectrum. In this case, it is important to clarify the two concepts of cooperation and competition.

First, competition does not mean conflict, cooperating states are exceptionally aligned in their geopolitical goals and the means to achieve them, and are therefore able to pursue them in a coordinated manner. Cooperating states have similar goals and there is general agreement on the means to achieve them.

Rival states agree that only some of their core goals are compatible, while they also disagree about the best way to achieve the common interests in the agreed goals. Conflict and confrontation mean that the states in question are at odds over almost all of the core goals and the legitimate means to achieve those goals. At the other end of the spectrum, there is an unfavorable environment in which state goals are perceived as so incompatible and even threatening that the dominant form of state interaction with another state becomes armed conflict (Lynch II, 2020: 3).

Second, great powers have enormous, complex, and diverse capabilities. These capabilities are both material and intangible. Tangible elements include territory, population, wealth, comprehensive

wealth, which includes health, education, environment, and infrastructure, and military and technological power.

Intangible elements include the ability to use these capabilities or the ability to mobilize and maintain them. Public support and diplomacy or the ability to obtain support from other countries (Onega, 2021). To enjoy great power status, a state must outperform conventional states in all areas and meet or approach the standards of members of the great power club on various dimensions.

Third, a great power uses those capabilities to pursue broader foreign policy interests beyond its immediate neighborhood. Ultimately, the relative position of that country is perceived by other countries as the dominant position, and other countries act accordingly towards that country. Using this definition, the three major powers in the modern era can be broadly considered: the United States, Russia, and China.

Fourth, the fact that relations between the United States and China are sometimes referred to as becoming competitive means that in the relations between these two powers, differences of opinion about the goals and methods of achieving them are increasing, and this is at a time when in the post-Cold War era, the tendency towards cooperation between the great powers had increased.

In this case, it can be concluded that continuing to move in the direction of competition may lead to the possibility of confrontation and conflict between these two powers (Mazarr et al, 2018).

In summarizing the discussion on the concept of great power competition, it can be noted that, citing US national security documents, this country views its relationship with China from the perspective of great power competition, which means that in relation to the subject under discussion, namely China's Belt and Road Initiative, it has differences with this country both in terms of the goals of this initiative and the methods that China pursues for the development of the infrastructure in question.

Accordingly, the United States believes that China's Belt and Road Initiative is a tool in the service of expanding the various dimensions of China's power in the international arena, which will ultimately lead to the loss of the United States' position and influence. The article shows that, in parallel with the reflection of the idea of great power competition in official documents of the United States, this country's public and practical approach to China's Belt and Road Initiative has become more aggressive and confrontational, and is approaching a state of confrontation and confrontation, the signs of which can be seen in the announcement and promotion of rival initiatives and the open rejection and criticism of China's initiative.

4. Hypothesis Analysis: Reactions of the Three American States to China's Initiative

4.1 The Obama Administration: Reaction within the Framework of Cooperation

The initial reactions of the United States to China's Belt and Road Initiative were expressed in opposition to the idea of creating the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The White House's position against the establishment of the bank came at a time when European countries were competing to join as founding members of the bank, leading analysts to claim that the United States was isolated in this regard (Ashbee, 2023: 41). Meanwhile, in September 2015, the White House

announced that the United States would welcome China's growing support for development and infrastructure financing in Asia and beyond (Wuthnow, 2018).

It is clear that at this time the United States government has generally taken a contradictory position towards China's infrastructure initiative. Perhaps one important reason for this was that Washington was not well informed about the dimensions and significance of the Chinese initiative. "When China announced the Silk Road Initiative, most analysts believed that the plan did not threaten American interests.

Of course, it should be noted that at that time, the scope of the initiative and its subsequent consequences were still unknown. The United States sees cooperation with China to counter the North Korean nuclear threat, negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran, and unifying the world under the Paris climate and water agreements as positive and realistic goals.

Therefore, the US-China bilateral relationship was based on cooperation on these international issues, and therefore the US government pursued an open-handed approach to dealing with the Chinese initiative, which was based on freeing lower levels of decision-making to propose their own ideas on dealing with this phenomenon. (Lew et al, 2021:82)

It was thus that the Obama administration did not officially comment on the Chinese initiative, and based its policy on trying to complete The negotiations for the Transatlantic Partnership Agreement were launched.

The government's vision was that the agreement could create a trading bloc representing 40 percent of world production. In this context, the United States, as the most competitive economy in Asia, could pressure China to improve its standards. (Lew et al, 2021:83)

The Obama administration also made smaller commitments to connectivity and investment in the Indo-Pacific region and launched a plan called the Africa Power 2 Public-Private Partnership. It also led to the creation of a global training and development program at the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) aimed at providing tailored training to developing countries on more transparent and better methods for determining fair value for procurement and guidance in selecting smarter and more sustainable infrastructure.

As a result, it can be said that rather than obstructing China's efforts to fill the significant infrastructure investment gap in Asia, the Obama administration is emphasizing the importance of ensuring good financial and governance standards in the implementation of the proposed Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank projects.

In this regard, the United States sought to promote its own rules and standards in infrastructure development projects based on the principles of its own liberal order. As Obama reminded them: "If we don't write the rules, China will write them" (Wall Street Journal, April . 27, 2015). In addition, at that time, the strategic focus of the Obama administration was focused on the conclusion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

The President argued that the pact would not only set U.S. standards for Asia-Pacific trade, but would also facilitate economic growth among the participants. Therefore, the pact would play a significant role in empowering the United States and its allies, and in this sense, this coalition, not China, would be able to shape the future of the region. It was as if China's Belt and Road Initiative and its implications were ignored. Therefore, it is clear that at this time, the Obama administration is still pursuing a cooperative approach with the Chinese government and has not taken a negative approach to the goal of infrastructure development in various parts of the world and the direction of China's initiative in this field.

However, the United States disagreed with China on how to achieve this goal, and while promoting its own ideas in this area, it tried to continue cooperation with China in other areas and, through indirect means, maintain the United States' superiority in this area.

4.2 The Trump Administration: Responding in a Competitive Context

The policy of the Donald Trump administration towards China appeared uncertain and uncertain for most of 2017. In this context, a US delegation was dispatched to the first Belt and Road Forum, which was convened in Beijing in mid-May 2017.

Matthew Pottinger, the White House's top Asia official who led the delegation, declared that U.S. companies "are ready to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, and they have a lot to offer." He pointed to the long and successful track record of U.S. companies in infrastructure development around the world (Gan and Delaney, 2019).

However, since the second half of 2017, the Trump administration has demonstrated a fundamental shift in its approach to China, and this has also had a profound impact on its stance on China's infrastructure initiative. Accordingly, the US move against the Belt and Road Initiative was part of a broader shift in the US approach toward strategic competition with China that began in the second half of 2017.

In this context, Chinese innovation was no longer perceived as a public good that could boost regional development, but rather as a tool in the hands of the Chinese government and in its efforts to pursue a mercantilist economic strategy.

From the American perspective, enshrining the Silk Road Initiative in China's constitution and enshrining it in Xi Jinping's legacy and thought demonstrated that the initiative was indeed a tool for China's national rejuvenation. In October 2017, the US Secretary of Defense told a Senate committee hearing: "In today's globalized world, there are too many Belts and Roads. And no nation should be in a position to dictate 'One Belt, One Road.'" US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also reminded them, in what has since become a central feature of US policy statements on the initiative, that "the initiative has failed to create local jobs and has left poorer countries with heavy debts." "The US Pacific Command also agreed with this change in approach, declaring that "the Belt and Road Initiative is a coordinated and strategic activity by China to gain a foothold in the region and to take the place of the United States and our allies and partners" (Ashbee, 2023: 43).

In general, the more negative US stance towards China's infrastructure initiative can be said to have been rooted in growing concerns in Washington about the emergence of Chinese power. At the same time, in this new approach, the initiative itself was also interpreted as part of China's grand strategy to sideline US power. "Considering the Belt and Road Initiative as part of China's grand strategy has led the United States to perceive it as a 'threat to China's rise'" (Blumenthal, 2018: 5).

If we compare the United States' approach to China under previous administrations from Richard Nixon to the Trump administration, it becomes clear that the biggest change under the Trump administration has been that China has become a 'The title of "the main strategic challenge" for American national security has been introduced, and in this regard, it has taken a lead over Russia. It was in this context that Washington's strategy towards China, which had been based on "partnership and protection" for several decades, was transformed into a competitive strategy. The publication of the Trump administration's first National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2017 highlighted this change (The White House, . 2017)

The report mentioned China more than 30 times. The report was largely focused on countering the "China threat." According to Thomas Fingar, in the past few decades, China was considered an ordinary country by American policymakers, perhaps not even among the top 10 national security concerns, whereas now, countering the "China challenge" has taken a central place in the US national security policy agenda (Fingar, 2019: 15).

It should be noted that America's perception of the "China threat" is multifaceted and focuses on the areas of economics, technology, security, diplomacy, ideology, etc. These areas are interconnected and influence each other (Cardenal et al., 2017).

Obama administration officials rarely speak publicly about China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, as the dimensions of the plan have grown in recent years, the United States has come to realize that the initiative has gradually become a key pillar of China's national development strategy and foreign policy. It was at this point that the initiative itself became one of America's concerns about the phenomenon of "rising China." Thus, the Trump administration took a very negative approach to the Chinese initiative. Trump once said behind closed doors that the initiative had the potential to disrupt global trade (Karni, 2018).

Mike Pompeo, the then US Secretary of State, also expressed a very negative approach to the initiative. He not only criticized China's initiative on several occasions, but also put a lot of pressure on Pakistan, Panama, Israel, and other countries to be wary of Chinese investments and reduce their economic cooperation with China (Pompeo, 2019).

In March 2018, the U.S. Senate Armed Services Intelligence Committee held a "Global Threat Assessment" hearing. During this session, Dan Quast, Director of National Intelligence, claimed that China has strengthened its geopolitical advantages around the world through the Belt and Road Initiative, which poses a serious threat to the global influence of the United States (Coats, 2018: 13).

By the end of 2017, the Trump administration was on a clear path, although concerns about China's initiative were generally framed within a broader critique of China's ambitions. In this context, while

the initiative itself was considered, it was remembered as a Chinese project to create a new global economic architecture, alongside the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, which serves China's geostrategic objectives in the South and East China Seas. Alongside this approach, there has been a growing realization, not least within Washington's think tanks, that Chinese innovation will extend beyond the Indo-Pacific, to the Middle East, for example (Chaziza, 2021). In sum, as the National Security Strategy stated in December 2017, "China's infrastructure investments and trade strategies serve its geopolitical interests" (White House, 2017: 46).

At the same time, a broader critique of China's revitalized Silk Road Initiative emerged in American intellectual and academic circles. In this regard, the Belt and Road Initiative was seen as similar to other grand infrastructure projects, such as the Berlin-Baghdad railway, which served the interests of the German Empire and encouraged the expansion of trade in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Doshi, 1402:345). In this regard, the old adage that "trade follows the flag" was seen as being reversed, with the Chinese flag following the patterns of trade (Patey, 2021: 54)

Based on this idea, it was assumed that China would use this initiative to gain leverage in relations with other countries. For example, the Heritage Foundation, which has close ties to the Trump administration, supported this idea (Rolland, 2017: 94). In early October 2018, Trump signed the Building Better Investments for Development (BUILD) Act. The act provided the basis for the creation of a new agency in the United States to provide development assistance, called the International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC). Although there was no direct reference to China in the act, commentators had little doubt about its overall purpose.

The corporation was designated to provide loans for commercial investments, for example, in energy, port, and other projects. infrastructure in low-income countries. With a budget of \$60 billion, the organization will work to mobilize and facilitate private sector capital participation and economic development skills in developing countries.

In addition, a commitment was made to address challenges in partnership with the United States, including Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. As of September 2020, the company had more than 200 projects in the Indo-Pacific. It was busy and had made commitments of \$5.4 billion (Parpiani, 2021: 8).

It should be noted that the investment capacity of this institution has more than doubled compared to the previous institution in the US government. The African Prosperity Initiative was another step of the Trump administration in countering China's Belt and Road Initiative, which was announced in late 2018 but was officially launched in Mozambique in mid-2019.

The initiative's stated goals are to promote development by "advancing U.S. trade relations with countries throughout the region for the benefit of the United States and Africa." In fact, doubling U.S.-Africa trade and strengthening security have been key goals of the initiative. John Bolton, who served as the Trump administration's national security adviser from April 2018 to September 2019, has described the Africa Prosperity Initiative as a U.S. strategy in response to the described the Belt and Road Initiative and other trade and military initiatives of China (White House, 2018).

The Build Act and the corporation that was created on its basis were designed to be implemented around the mobilization of private sector capital rather than the extensive use of public sector resources. This approach is to some extent rooted in the established principles of development assistance in developed countries, which are rooted in a firm belief in market forces.

Therefore, one of the implicit goals of these initiatives, beyond competing with the Chinese initiative for alternative financing, has been to move recipient countries away from the state-led growth model and instead promote a market-based growth model. The Blue Dot Network (BDN) 2 was another policy initiative launched during the Donald Trump administration, with the leadership of the United States and in cooperation with Australia and Japan, as a counterweight to China's infrastructure initiatives.

This showed that the Trump administration was also considering multilateral measures against China. Of course, this initiative, like the Building Better Investment for Development Act (BUILD Act) of 2018, was not framed in direct and overt opposition to China's Silk Road Initiative.

Its stated goal was to “promote quality infrastructure investment that is open and inclusive, transparent, economically and financially sustainable, and environmentally and socially sustainable and consistent with international standards, laws, and regulations.”

However, there was no doubt that this initiative was also viewed in opposition to China. The word “quality” was a key term that was widely used in these years as a way to compare infrastructure projects initiated by Japan or Western countries with those initiated under the auspices of China's Silk Road Initiative (Ashbee, 2023: 77).

In fact, Western and Japanese companies had been avoiding infrastructure investments in developing countries because they saw such projects as risky and uncertain. China's Silk Road project, which was more risk-averse, was implemented to fill this gap. The goal of the Water Point Network was to reduce these risks and uncertainties so that it could compete with Chinese innovation by conducting independent assessments of quality.

The Trump administration also committed to strengthening the Export-Import Bank (U.S. EXIM) to better compete with China. In 2019, China provided export credits worth more than six times that of the United States, and in the five years prior to that date, the value of China's official export credits had reached 90% of all credits provided by the G7 countries. Much of this financing was also provided to partner countries in the initiative.

Recognizing the need to provide necessary alternatives to the Belt and Road Initiative, the US Congress in 2019 approved a seven-year authorization for the Export-Import Bank of the United States, which would allow it to provide loans with lower rates and more flexible terms to compete with Chinese loans in high-tech sectors, including 5G and renewable energy. Congress also authorized the bank to allocate up to 20% of its lending authority, which amounts to \$27 billion, to this program. (Lew et al, 2021: 85)

To prevent Chinese technology companies from infiltrating critical infrastructure in partner countries, the Trump administration has pressured countries to refrain from using Chinese equipment in their 5G infrastructure. In 2020, US Secretary of State Pompeo launched the Clean Network Initiative, which aims to promote privacy and information security in 5G networks. More than thirty carriers around the world have joined the network and pledged not to use Chinese equipment in their 5G infrastructure (Lew et al, 2021:86).

As shown, in the early days of the Trump administration, the government's approach to China's Belt and Road Initiative was not yet negative. However, after the publication of the National Security Strategy in the second half of 2017 and the introduction of China as a strategic competitor of the United States, the official US position on the Belt and Road Initiative was first negative, and then the government tried to present alternative approaches to competing with China's infrastructure initiative in various dimensions. Thus, it is clear that from the perspective of American intellectual and political circles, there was no longer any possibility of cooperation with China, neither in terms of objectives nor in terms of methods of assistance to the development of international infrastructure.

Also, since the Belt and Road Initiative was seen as a tool in the service of China's rise to power, competition with this country in providing alternative routes and efforts to discredit projects under the Belt and Road Initiative became a central part of US public statements and operational programs.

4.3 The Biden Administration: Moving from Competition to Confrontation

During the first months of the Biden administration, David Dollar, a researcher at the Brookings Institution, noted that the administration has largely continued Trump's approach to China.

According to him, China-US relations are undergoing a major transformation characterized by "great power competition," and China's Belt and Road Initiative will play a significant role in the strategic competition between the two powers for the foreseeable future (Dollar, 2021).

From January 2021 onwards, the new administration should strive to distance itself from the Trump administration's policies. However, the government was also quick to emphasize that it was committed to competing with China, but would do so on the basis of a broader and more inclusive coalition bloc.

Indeed, in some cases, the government seemed to have a stronger position vis-à-vis China. In this regard, the Water Point Network Initiative was completely reorganized. After some uncertainty about the new government's intentions, the network was relaunched in early June 2021 with a high-profile audience of investors, infrastructure developers, construction companies and civil society representatives. In a move that was seen as strengthening the multilateral dimension of the initiative, it was announced that the network would henceforth operate under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The initiative established an Executive Advisory Group that attracted 150 business leaders and members of civil society organizations (OECD, 2021: 5). However, one of the most important measures taken by the Biden administration, in cooperation with its allies in the face of China's Belt and Road Initiative, is the infrastructure initiative called Building a Better World.

The initiative was announced at the G7 summit in June 2021. Participating leaders sought to restore ties that had been damaged during the Trump era. At the same time, a more direct position was also announced regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative. Within the framework of this initiative, infrastructure was also understood on a broader basis.

While financing was envisaged for infrastructure projects ranging from "railways to wind farms", particular emphasis was placed on areas that went beyond traditional infrastructure, namely climate, health, digital technology, equality and gender equality (Bartlett, 2021). It was announced that this plan would collectively invest hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries over the coming years (Bermingham and Delaney, 2021).

The United States has committed to engaging multilateral development banks and other development finance institutions to invest up to \$40 trillion by 2035, in addition to official development support from its domestic institutions, and through international partnerships, to leverage the nearly \$3.3 trillion in infrastructure investment needed in target countries.

In addition to US federal financial institutions, many UN agencies are also present as partners and advisory bodies in relevant specialized fields (Dehshiar and Pourbaqer 2023:31). The challenge posed by China's Belt and Road Initiative has not only led to efforts to develop large-scale infrastructure projects in competition with Beijing but has also generated domestic demand for infrastructure projects. In The Biden administration has just unveiled the America's Business Plan, which in its first phase, envisioned spending as much as \$2.6 trillion. The deterioration of much of the United States' physical infrastructure is readily apparent to the average visitor, especially those whose lives have been damaged by the erosion of urban facilities. The United States may be a hegemonic power, but in terms of infrastructure, its situation can be compared to Many smaller, less affluent Latin American countries have done the same (OECD, 2016: 89).

Estimates show that in the decades following the construction of metropolitan areas in the 1950s, the United States devoted less than 1 percent of its gross domestic product to domestic infrastructure development. It has been argued that inadequate infrastructure provision has led to low-productivity growth in the United States (Sprague, 2017: 3).

It was against this backdrop that the Biden administration introduced the American Jobs Plan, which relied on a \$2.2 trillion increase in government spending over ten years and included \$400 billion in tax credits. The scale of the American Jobs Plan was far greater than the American Jobs Program implemented under the Roosevelt administration's New Deal in the 1930s (in adjusted dollars, the cost of this plan was \$324 billion). (based on today's dollar value). The proposals included a budget of \$115 billion for bridges, highways, roads, and major thoroughfares that were in dire need of repair. It was also decided to promote electric vehicles (Nilsen and Ward, 2021: 18).

The interesting point to note here is that the government should be able to attract support for this domestic infrastructure plan, as the US competes with China in the field of infrastructure. He sought to persuade his rival Republican Party to support it in Congress.

However, despite the belief among senior Democrats that a bipartisan coalition could be built around the America Jobs Plan, such a thing did not materialize in practice and the plan was met with opposition. After lengthy struggles in Congress, some of the plan's proposals were incorporated into a bipartisan infrastructure bill and signed into law in mid-November 2021. However, the cost of securing bipartisan support for the plan was a sharp reduction in the projected cost level to \$550 billion (Ashbee, 2023: 132).

The latest example of the Biden administration's efforts to counter the Belt and Road Initiative can be seen in the announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) at the G20 summit in September 2023. President Joe Biden announced at the meeting that the goal of launching this economic corridor is to counter China's advances through the Belt and Road Initiative by connecting India, the Persian Gulf, and Europe.

A report on the project by the Council on Foreign Relations said the announcement of the new initiative shows that the United States remains concerned about China's progress in its Belt and Road Initiative.

However, the report stressed that there are many uncertainties surrounding the implementation of the connectivity initiative and that "fundamental questions remain about its financing, timing, and sustainability." The report also described the range of Western initiatives in the face of China's Belt and Road Initiative, including the Initiative to Build a Better World, as "inadequate" in practical terms (Council on Foreign Relations, September 2023).

As noted, the Biden administration continued the China-competition strategy begun by the Trump administration and, in its national security strategy, spoke of ten determinants of China-competition. The same approach was followed in dealing with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

In this way, the government should pursue areas of competition with China in larger geographical areas and also try to include the United States in this competition. The government should also try to consider a broader definition of infrastructure that includes soft infrastructure and, on that basis, extend the competition and alignment with China to these new areas.

Even this government, based on the logic of competition with China, has presented an unprecedented plan to strengthen the domestic infrastructure of the United States and has tried to obtain the approval of the rival Republican Party for the approval of this plan in Congress.

All of these cases indicate a growing trend of competition between the United States and China over the development of a very broad and expansive spectrum of infrastructure, which is accompanied by a kind of blockade against the competitor.

5. Conclusion

Today, there are many signs of intensifying confrontation in relations between the United States and China, the nature of which can be understood in terms of the concept of "great power competition."

This article attempts to examine why the United States' response to China's Belt and Road Initiative has become more confrontational and assesses Washington's set of countermeasures against China's rival initiative from 2013 to 2023.

As the article showed, the United States, with its portrayal of the threat posed by China's rise in its national security documents, interpreted China's infrastructure initiative as a tool to advance China's aggressive reorientation of the international order.

Thus, it can be said that the field of infrastructure development in its hard and soft dimensions has today become an arena for competition between these two great powers, and it can be said that the United States' counter-positions and actions against China's infrastructure initiative will continue for the foreseeable future.

Today, the nature of the US-China relationship has shifted from cooperation to competition, which means that the two sides' differences on many international goals and the methods for achieving them have intensified. This is clearly visible in the bilateral efforts to develop various types of infrastructure in different parts of the world.

The alignment of the US and its allies against China's Belt and Road Initiative and the effort to discredit the rival's actions in this field means intensifying the competition between the US and China, and this could shift the nature of bilateral relations from competition to confrontation and contradiction, although it is not yet possible to express a definitive opinion on this matter.

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