

79/2025

10/12/2025

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**Neither enemy nor vassal:
reflections on Spain's strategic
outlook in the context of U.S.–China
rivalry. Theoretical frameworks for
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Abstract:

Spain's strategic position in the face of the growing rivalry between the United States and China is analysed through a combination of theoretical approaches such as the "Thucydides Trap" and "complex interdependence." After examining the historical roots of China's strategic culture that is shaped by the "Century of Humiliation," the absence of a colonial tradition, and the pursuit of national rejuvenation—the text assesses the country's transformation into a global power and its progressive challenge to the liberal order led by Washington. The article also explores China's strategic perceptions, its geographical vulnerabilities, the central role of Taiwan, military modernisation, and its expanding economic and political presence across the Global South. This vision contrasts with the United States' Indo-Pacific geopolitical frameworks such as Mahan and Spykman. Finally, the article proposes that Spain should not allow itself to be drawn into confrontations that are not its own, but should instead manage its relationship with China through realism, prudence, and its transatlantic anchor, maintaining a balanced position that preserves its economic interests, strategic autonomy, and influence within the European Union.

Keywords:

China, United States, strategic rivalry, Spain, Thucydides Trap, complex interdependence, Indo-Pacific geopolitics, liberal international order, Security and Defence, European strategic autonomy, Taiwan, BRICS / BRI.

How to cite this document:

BADOS NIETO, Víctor. *Neither enemy nor vassal: reflections on Spain's strategic outlook in the context of U.S.–China rivalry. Theoretical frameworks for its understanding*. Documento de Analysis Paper IEEE 79/2025. [enlace web IEEE](#) y/o [enlace bie³](#) (consultado día/mes/año)

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Preliminary considerations

Assessing whether China should constitute a geopolitical rival for Spain requires understanding how China conceives of itself, what historical traumas it carries, how it interprets its contemporary rise, and how it currently relates to the United States and to the liberal international order led by Washington since 1945. To avoid an analysis based less on opinion and more on academic rigor, this study is situated within a conceptual framework informed by scholarly literature on strategic rivalries and power transitions, drawing on authors such as Graham Allison, Joseph Nye, and Robert Keohane, whose contributions help contextualise the emerging competitive logic.

Only through this structural understanding does it make sense to ask what role Spain occupies on the “grand chessboard” described by Brzezinski¹, and to what extent it may be drawn—or not—into the dynamics of geopolitical competition between the United States and China. Above all, it allows us to consider whether Spain's national interests advise seeing China as a threat, as a direct adversary, as a systemic competitor to approach with caution, or as a complex but necessary partner with whom mutual interests may converge.

The history of China and its strategic legacy. From the Middle Kingdom to the century of humiliation

From very early in its history, China understood itself as *Zhōngguó*, the “Middle Kingdom.” This centrality was not merely geographical but civilizational. Under the concept of *tianxia*—“all under heaven”—the political order was expected to revolve around the emperor, whose moral authority radiated outward to the surrounding realms. China viewed neighbouring polities as tributary states that, ideally, acknowledged the cultural and political pre-eminence of the imperial court. Confucian tradition reinforced this worldview: a ruler's legitimacy derived from his ability to preserve harmony and internal order, not from conquering distant lands. Domestic stability, social cohesion and good governance were prioritised over the kind of overseas expansion pursued by European empires².

¹ Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

² Fairbank, J. K., *China: A New History*, Harvard University Press, 1998.

Within this framework, China developed a defensive strategic instinct, marked by limited curiosity or appetite for external expansion. Over the centuries, it faced repeated incursions from the northern and western steppes: Mongols, Manchus and other nomadic peoples crossed its borders repeatedly. The Qin dynasty responded by constructing the Great Wall in the 3rd century BCE, under Emperor Qin Shi Huang—not to project power abroad, but to shield the imperial heartland from instability³. This logic endured over time. While Spain, Portugal and England built fleets to explore trade and colonise, China built walls to avoid invasion. Much of its military effort focused on securing land borders and integrating neighbouring peoples—often labelled as “barbarians”—through tributary arrangements, rather than establishing colonial domains overseas.

A significant exception came with the great maritime expeditions of Admiral Zheng He between 1405 and 1433. His vast “treasure fleets” travelled across Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and even the eastern coast of Africa, establishing diplomatic and commercial relationships with numerous kingdoms⁴. Although there is no record of direct encounters with Spanish or Portuguese ships—whose exploration patterns began slightly later—contact did occur when the Portuguese navigator Jorge Álvares reached the southern coast of China in 1513, landing on Lintin Island in the Pearl River estuary and marking the start of maritime relations between Portugal and the dynasty Ming in China⁵.

Even at the height of this extraordinary maritime capability, China's logic remained non-colonial. Zheng He's expeditions did not establish permanent trading posts or networks of military bases in the European manner. They functioned as large floating embassies that distributed gifts, collected tribute and displayed the prestige of the Middle Kingdom. After the death of Emperor Yongle, the principal patron of these voyages, China turned inward once again, focusing on its vast geography and internal affairs. Its long-term strategic orientation remained one of containment rather than exploration.

This equilibrium collapsed violently in the nineteenth century. The so-called “Century of Humiliation,” generally dated between 1839 and 1949, constitutes the central trauma of

³ Lovell, J., *The Great Wall: China Against the World, 1000 BC–AD 2000*, Grove Press, 2006.

⁴ Brook, T., *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*, University of California Press, 1999.

⁵ Jiménez, J.A. (2013). Los planes españoles para conquistar China a través de Filipinas. *Revista de Estudios Históricos*, 15(2), pp. 45-62.

modern Chinese historical consciousness. The First Opium War (1839–1842) initiated this era. Determined to correct its trade imbalance, the British Empire forced the importation of opium into China. When Qing authorities attempted to stop the trade, Britain responded militarily, defeated China and imposed the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), the first of the “unequal treaties.” China ceded Hong Kong, opened treaty ports, paid heavy indemnities and accepted a legal regime that eroded its sovereignty⁶.

The Second Opium War (1856–1860), this time led by Britain and France, deepened the humiliation. The most emblematic event was the looting and burning of the Old Summer Palace (*Yuanmingyuan*) in 1860, one of China's greatest cultural and artistic treasures, deliberately destroyed by European troops. In Chinese historical pedagogy, the image of the palace in flames symbolises the contempt with which Western powers treated a civilisation that viewed itself as superior⁷. Meanwhile, Russia exploited China's weakness to secure major territorial concessions under the Treaties of Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860), annexing vast regions north of the Amur River and in the Far East⁸.

By the late nineteenth century, Japan's rise as a modern industrial and military power delivered an even deeper shock. China's defeat in the First Sino–Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ceded Taiwan and cemented Japanese influence in Korea exposing the Qing dynasty's technological and military backwardness in the face of an Asian neighbour that had embraced Western-style modernization⁹. This reinforced a profound sense of civilizational decline. Soon after, the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) ended with an eight-power occupation of Beijing, new indemnities and enhanced foreign privileges. China shattered into concessions, spheres of influence and districts administered by Western and Japanese powers¹⁰.

The lowest point of the Century of Humiliation came with Japan's expansion after 1931. The occupation of Manchuria, the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo and the full-scale invasion launched in 1937 produced atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre, where hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed and systematic crimes—including

⁶ IRI (2020). *A 175 años del tratado de Nankín*. Centro de Investigación en Relaciones Internacionales, Argentina. <https://iri.edu.ar/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Brito.pdf>

⁷ Hevia, J. L., *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China*, Duke University Press, 2003.

⁸ Perdue, P., *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, Harvard University Press, 2005.

⁹ Harrell, S., *China's War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

¹⁰ Bickers, R., *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914*, Penguin, 2011

sexual violence and biological experimentation by the infamous Unit 731¹¹—were committed. This long decade of war, destruction and foreign occupation forged a historical memory that blends extreme vulnerability with the belief that the international order had betrayed China.

During the Second World War, China fought actively alongside the Allies against Japanese aggression, sustaining a prolonged and devastating war of resistance that contributed decisively to Japan's strategic exhaustion and, ultimately, to its defeat. Beijing regards this military effort as one of the clearest demonstrations of its historical commitment to international security, stressing that its human, economic, and political sacrifice has not always been acknowledged to the extent it deserves. China frequently recalls that it was among the victorious powers of the conflict, a status that played a decisive role in securing a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council—a point of particular national pride. This historical narrative has gained special prominence this year on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, a commemoration attended by twenty-six heads of state and government at the parade held in Beijing, reflecting the symbolic and political weight China attributes to its role in the Allied victory¹².

In the years following Japan's defeat, China became engulfed in the renewed civil war between Mao Zedong's Communist Party and Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang, a conflict that had begun in 1927 and was only temporarily suspended during the Second World War due to the necessity of forming a common front against Japan. Although both sides engaged in a forced cooperation during that period, mutual distrust never disappeared, and the fragile understanding collapsed as soon as the global conflict ended. Mao's final victory in 1949 not only redefined the country's internal balance but also marked the beginning of a new political project that sought to overcome the fragmentation, weakness, and foreign interference characteristic of the so-called "century of humiliation," presenting itself as the definitive closure of that ignominious nineteenth century. "The Chinese people have stood up" encapsulated the idea that, under Communist Party leadership, China would never again be subjected to external domination¹³. Since then, the official narrative has insisted that only a strong, unified, and vigilant state can prevent a recurrence of that

¹¹ Mitter, R., *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937–1945*, Houghton Mifflin, 2013.

¹² Xinhua News Agency (2025) *World leaders attend China's 80th Victory Day commemoration parade in Beijing*.

¹³ Meisner, M., *Mao's China and After*, Free Press, 1999.

national catastrophe. Furthermore, the birth of the PRC took place despite the support that the United States and other Western powers had extended to the Kuomintang, while Formosa—today's Taiwan—continued for decades to be recognised in the international system as the “official China.”

The redefinition of China's role in the international system culminated in 1971, when the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 2758, which officially recognised the People's Republic of China as the sole legitimate representative of China and granted it the permanent seat on the Security Council, expelling the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek, which had held that representation from Taipei until then. The decision reflected the international acceptance of the territorial reality—the PRC's control of the mainland—and the new geopolitical alignment marked by the Sino-Soviet split and the strategic shift in U.S. policy. For Beijing, this restoration constituted a historical vindication and confirmed its return as a legitimate and central power within the international architecture.

It was at the urging of his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, that Washington decided to exploit the Sino-Soviet split to draw Beijing strategically closer and distance it from Moscow, culminating in Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972¹⁴. That manoeuvre left a deep imprint on the Chinese elite, who also took careful note of the Soviet Union's implosion as a warning of what the Chinese Communist Party must never allow to happen.

Taken together, this historical trajectory shows that China carries a strategic memory fundamentally different from that of Western powers. It does not see itself as a colonial or seafaring empire—unlike European states, China never built an overseas imperial project based on conquering and exploiting distant territories. Instead, it views itself as a civilization that endured and survived the pressures of Western and Japanese colonialism.

The awakening of the dragon: China's global rise in the 21st century

After the upheavals of Maoism—the famine resulting from the Great Leap Forward and the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution—Deng Xiaoping launched the policy of “reform and opening” in 1978. China liberalized parts of its planned economy, created special

¹⁴ G. Moreno, *100 años de Kissinger: Un liderazgo polémico*, Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Documento de Opinión 81/2023, pp. 9-11, 2023.

economic zones, welcomed foreign investment, and allowed market mechanisms to operate—always under the Party's ultimate control¹⁵. Deng articulated the principle of “hide your strength and bide your time” to grow, modernize, integrate into the global economy, and avoid direct confrontation with the United States. The goal was not to overturn the international order immediately, but to use it to China's advantage.

China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 marked a point of no return in its integration into globalisation and the capitalist economy. As Breslin and Lardy note, WTO accession dramatically accelerated China's export capacity and consolidated its incorporation into global value chains dominated by Western firms¹⁶. During the following decade, the Chinese economy grew at rates close to or above 10% annually, transforming the country's urban, social, and industrial landscape. Millions of workers migrated from rural areas to major coastal manufacturing hubs—Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai—to join an economy increasingly driven by intensive manufacturing and export activity¹⁷. In this process, China became the well-known “factory of the world,” a symbol of asymmetric globalisation that deepened interdependence with the United States and Europe. Yet it also provided China with the material and technological foundation necessary to envision a more ambitious global role, underpinned by currency reserves accumulation, industrial development, and enhanced state capacity¹⁸.

The year 2008 marked the symbolic moment when China moved decisively from an emerging power to one with global ambitions. The Beijing Olympic Games displayed to the world a modern, confident, and technologically sophisticated China, articulating a powerful narrative of national success. They symbolised the country's definitive emergence as a modern and self-assured power—an event shaped in part by the rising influence of Xi Jinping, then an ascending leader responsible for coordinating key elements of the Games. For many analysts, the 2008 Olympics represented the starting point of the far more assertive international projection that Xi would later consolidate as China's paramount leader. Only months later, the global financial crisis struck the United States and the European Union with full force, while China maintained robust growth

¹⁵ Naughton, B., *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth*, MIT Press, 2007.

¹⁶ Shaun Breslin, *China and the Global Political Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 78–85; Nicholas R. Lardy, *The State Strikes Back: The End of Economic Reform in China?* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2019), pp. 12–20.

¹⁷ Naughton, B., *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth*, MIT Press, 2007.

¹⁸ Naughton, B., *The Rise of China's Industrial Polic*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021, pp. 34–41.

thanks to an unprecedented stimulus package worth more than 586 billion dollars¹⁹. Beijing also became one of the principal holders of U.S. public debt, increasing its structural influence over the global economy. For Chinese elites, the message was clear: the Western economic model had lost its aura of inevitability, while “socialism with Chinese characteristics” appeared effective in macroeconomic management and social stability²⁰.

With Xi Jinping's arrival to power in 2012, this renewed self-confidence evolved into an explicit leadership agenda. Xi proclaimed the goal of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and, in 2013, launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed as a global network of land and maritime infrastructure linking China to Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and—at an accelerating pace—Latin America²¹. Highways, railways, ports, industrial zones and energy corridors financed by Chinese banks and built by Chinese companies multiplied across dozens of countries in the so-called Global South. This was more than logistics: the BRI creates financial and political dependencies, generates influence and consolidates China's position as a provider of public goods (infrastructure) in regions traditionally linked to the West. China's success and growing presence in Africa, Asia and other parts of the Global South also draw on a powerful historical narrative: China presents itself as an alternative to the Western colonial past, with an approach many countries perceive as less intrusive and more respectful of their sovereignty. This narrative has been highly effective, fostering broad receptiveness to China across much of the Global South.

This momentum was reinforced by the role of China within the BRICS, a platform Beijing has used to challenge the international financial architecture dominated by the IMF and the World Bank, and to promote alternative instruments such as the New Development Bank. The expansion of the BRICS to include new members from the Global South strengthened China's ambition to articulate a “club of emerging powers” capable of counterbalancing the G7. In parallel, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—which includes China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran and several Central Asian states—

¹⁹ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 92–101; Minxin Pei, “China's Response to the Global Financial Crisis,” *Journal of Democracy* 20, n° 3 (2009): 25–30

²⁰ Suisheng Zhao, *The China Model and Global Crisis: From Friedrich List to the Present* (Oxon–Nueva York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1–5 y 45–52;

²¹ Fallon, T., *The New Silk Road: China's Belt and Road Initiative*, Agenda Publishing, 2019.

has consolidated itself as a major Eurasian security forum that deliberately excludes the United States and its allies.

China and its worldview: strategic perceptions and the influence of geography. Taiwan as the pebble in the shoe

China's strategic vision stems from a unique combination of historical consciousness, a sense of vulnerability shaped by its geographic and strategic constraints, and a deep ambition for national rejuvenation. On the one hand, the country sees itself as a civilization-state, with a natural role in East Asia and a historical destiny of global centrality — a return to the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” proclaimed by Xi Jinping. On the other hand, the Communist Party elite believes that the international system remains dominated by maritime powers which, since the 19th century, have sought to contain and humiliate China through blockades, structural inequalities, and naval superiority.

The dual lens — civilizational pride combined with a memory of vulnerability and victimhood — reinforces the belief that China must “protect itself from encirclement” in order to secure its maritime routes and break the limitations imposed by a geopolitical environment perceived as unfavourable.

From this perspective, the world is divided between those who accept China's peaceful rise and those who seek to prevent it. Chinese leaders view the Indo-Pacific strategic architecture — U.S. bases, island chains, naval alliances, and energy chokepoints — as a structure designed to restrict China's access to the open ocean and, by extension, to the status of a major power. As a result, maritime policy, naval expansion, and overseas infrastructure are justified domestically as efforts to protect sovereignty, ensure economic continuity, and prevent “strangulation” by external powers. This conceptual framework encompasses everything related to the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean, and the broader Asian Rimland.

In China's strategic narrative, perceives the maritime geography as a source of structural constraint. The so-called first island chain — extending from Japan and the Ryukyu Islands to Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo — and the second island chain — Guam, the Marianas, Micronesia — lie under the military influence of the United States and its allies. Beijing interprets this configuration as a containment belt intended to prevent its breakout into the western Pacific. As multiple studies point out, the narrow straits that

pierce the first chain (Miyako, Bashi, Luzon) are easily monitored or blocked, turning China's passage through them into a constant vulnerability²².

The “Malacca Dilemma” heightens this sense of fragility²³. Approximately 80% of China's oil imports and a large share of its maritime trade pass through this strait, one of the most congested chokepoints on the planet²⁴. Hu Jintao²⁵ himself warned that “certain powers” could exploit this passage by— a veiled reference to the United States and, to a lesser extent, India — to pressure or even cut off China's energy supplies²⁶. This “umbilical cord” linking the Middle East to China's coast forms the logistical centre of gravity of Beijing's economy, making the security of the strait a matter of national security.

To mitigate the risk of strangulation, China has advanced what is known in the West as the “String of Pearls” — a network of ports, dual-use facilities, and logistics nodes across the Indian Ocean: Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Kyaukphyu (Myanmar), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Port Klang (Malaysia), and the naval base in Djibouti, among others²⁷. Although presented as commercial projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, these infrastructures possess clear military potential, strengthening China's capacity for naval operations, power projection, and protection of its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Alongside this maritime expansion, China has developed overland energy corridors — oil pipelines from the Indian Ocean and gas pipelines from Central Asia — aimed at reducing dependence on Malacca, while continuing to expand its naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

In parallel, Beijing has sought to “internalise” part of its maritime security by consolidating its position in the South China Sea. The controversial “nine-dash line”²⁸, asserted by China, claims nearly 80% of the maritime space, overlapping with the exclusive economic

²² *Island chain strategy, US shifts priority to Indo-Pacific's second island chain*, Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2025.

²³ The “Malacca Dilemma” is one of the key concepts for understanding China's strategic vulnerability in the energy, naval, and geopolitical domains. It was explicitly formulated by President Hu Jintao in 2003, when he warned that the Strait of Malacca — a narrow, congested, and easily to blockade maritime corridor — constitutes a critical point for China's national security, to the extent that “foreign powers could control the situation” if they wished to strangle the country's energy imports.

²⁴ *Malacca dilemma*, Zhongxiang Zhang, “China's energy security...”, Energy Policy, 2011.

²⁵ Hu Jintao served as President of the People's Republic of China from 2003 to 2013, and as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party from 2002 to 2012. His tenure was associated with a technocratic style of governance, greater internal collegiality, and the guiding slogan of a “harmonious society.”

²⁶ Shaofeng Chen, *China's Self-Extrication from the 'Malacca Dilemma'*, *International Journal of China Studies*, 2010.

²⁷ *String of Pearls (Indian Ocean)*, *String of Pearls: China's oceanic gambit*, Baku Network, 2025.

²⁸ *The South China Sea Arbitration (Philippines v. China)*, 12th July 2016, CONVEMAR.

zones of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled that China's historical claims lacked legal basis and rejected the nine-dash line. Beijing ignored the ruling and continued its policy of *faits accomplis*.

The main instrument has been the construction of artificial islands through massive dredging: over 3,000 hectares of new land, transforming reefs such as Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief into fortified bases with 3,000-metre runways, air-defence systems, radars, and deep-water ports²⁹. These outposts enable the PLA Navy to extend its operational radius, maintain a permanent surveillance network, and effectively control a maritime space central to the country's energy and commercial security³⁰.

This revisionist hard-power strategy contradicts China's diplomatic narrative of mutual respect, armony and stability, revealing a clear gap between the self-image Beijing seeks to project and the perceptions generated by its actions on the ground.

To all this, we must add Taiwan, which plays a fundamental role in China's geopolitics and is considered essential for national reunification. From Beijing's viewpoint, the island is not merely a territorial dispute inherited from the civil war but a "core interest" whose "full reunification" is presented as necessary to complete national greatness by 2049³¹. It is important to underline that the United Nations does not recognise Taiwan as a state. This reality deeply shapes its international position and reinforces the Chinese Communist Party's claim that Taiwan is strictly an internal matter tied to sovereignty, territorial integrity, Xi Jinping's national rejuvenation project, and the legitimacy of the Party.

Militarily, China's Defence White Paper states that the PLA must be prepared to resolutely defeat anyone attempting to separate Taiwan from China" and "safeguard national unity at all costs." The scenario of the Taiwan Strait is fully integrated into force modernisation, A2/AD capabilities, and operational planning³². In the same theoretical and narrative vein, the new National Security White Paper of May 2025 adopts a holistic security approach, by listing sovereignty, unity, and maritime rights as core national interests. It also explicitly

²⁹ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), CSIS, "Island Tracker"; Ryan Martinson, *War on the Rocks*, 2016.

³⁰ Ministry of Defence of Japan, *China's Activities in the South China Sea*, 2025; *The Guardian*, 21 Mars 2022; *Newsweek*, 28 August 2025.

³¹ Libro Blanco *The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era* (2022)

³² Libro Blanco de Defensa *China's National Defense in the New Era* (2019)

identifies the Taiwan question — and the presence of external forces in the Strait — as an area where any attempt at secession or foreign interference constitutes an existential threat. The document makes clear that Beijing does not renounce the use of force to prevent Taiwan's formal independence and that any military or political intervention by third parties in support of such a move would be interpreted as a *casus belli* — a red line whose violation could trigger an armed response from the People's Republic of China³³.

The U.S. Strategic Reading: From Mahan to Spykman's Rimland

The U.S. strategic architecture surrounding China reflects, from a doctrinal perspective, a blend of mahanian and spykmanian thinking. On the one hand, Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that global primacy depends on control of the sea, its major routes, and its strategic chokepoints³⁴. The U.S. naval presence along both the first and second island chains, as well as in the major straits of the Indo-Pacific, is interpreted as a continuation of the “maritime grand strategy” that has sustained the liberal order since 1945.

On the other hand, Nicholas Spykman emphasized that the geopolitical key to world power did not lie in the Heartland — the Eurasian core — but in the Rimland, the vast coastal belt surrounding it³⁵. For Washington, preventing a continental–maritime power like China from dominating the Asian Rimland is essential to preserving the global balance of power. Hence the revitalization of alliances such as the QUAD³⁶ and AUKUS³⁷, the strengthening of ties with the Philippines, and support for Taiwan: all part of a strategy aimed at keeping maritime space open and preventing China from turning the South China Sea into a closed bastion.

In this context, China views the world through a combination of historical resurgence and strategic vulnerability. It believes that maritime powers are attempting to limit its rise through a containment belt stretching from the island chains of the western Pacific to the straits of the Indian Ocean. Consequently, Beijing has developed a comprehensive

³³ Libro Blanco de Defensa *China's National Defense in the New Era* (2019)

³³ Mario LABORIE IGLESIAS, *La visión estratégica de la República Popular China en la nueva era: análisis del Libro Blanco sobre Seguridad Nacional (2025)*, Documento de Opinión, IEEE, nº 77/2025, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Ministerio de Defensa, Madrid, 6 de octubre de 2025.

³⁴ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890).

³⁵ Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics* (1942); *The Geography of the Peace* (1944).

³⁶ The QUAD is a strategic alliance between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, focused on maritime security, regional stability, and balancing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific.

³⁷ AUKUS is an advanced defence agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, centred on cooperation in nuclear-powered submarines and next-generation military technologies.

strategy to break that encirclement: securing Malacca, building a “String of Pearls”, consolidating its hold over the South China Sea, and modernizing its naval presence.

The interaction between these two logics — security for one side, containment for the other — constitutes the most dangerous core of their geopolitical competition. Indeed, the current strategic convergence between Moscow and Beijing reinforces precisely what the classical doctrines from Mackinder to Spykman sought to prevent: a solid alliance at the heart of Eurasia capable of challenging the global balance of power.

Between Complex Interdependence and the Thucydides Trap

Authors such as G. John Ikenberry describe the post-1945 institutional framework as an “international liberal order” built on rules, multilateral institutions and the centrality of the dollar, but also on U.S. hegemony³⁸. China no longer limits itself to participating in that order: it increasingly questions it by promoting an alternative vocabulary rooted in its Confucian and non-aligned tradition — *multipolarity, non-interference (albeit, as noted above, this stands in clear contradiction to its policy regarding the nine-dash line), absolute respect for sovereignty, cooperation without political conditionality*³⁹. This language appeals to many states uncomfortable with the Western discourse on democracy and human rights. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and, more recently, Xi Jinping's Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative and Global Civilization Initiative, Beijing is driving the gradual erosion of Washington's monopoly over global governance norms and forums.

Yet the relationship between China and the United States cannot be understood purely through the lens of confrontation. Since Nixon's visit to Beijing, orchestrated by Henry Kissinger in the 70's, and especially since the 1990s, the two countries have developed a dense web of commercial, financial and productive ties. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye conceptualised this type of interaction as “complex interdependence”⁴⁰: major powers are connected through multiple transnational channels — economic, technological, financial, diplomatic and social; they manage broad agendas far beyond

³⁸ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

³⁹ Nadège Rolland, *China's Vision for a New World Order, NBR Special Report*, n.º 83 (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020), pp. 9-10.

⁴⁰ Robert O. Keohane y Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977).

military issues; and they face extraordinarily high costs if they resort to war. Under such conditions, military coercion loses relative effectiveness, while *mutual vulnerability* arising from economic and technological interdependence becomes a key factor shaping state behaviour.

In the Sino–American case, this interdependence is visible in integrated supply chains, investment flows, debt holdings, and — most prominently today — in the exchange and restriction of strategic inputs such as rare earths and advanced semiconductors. China dominates much of the processing of rare earths, essential for high-tech, military and energy industries; the United States and its allies control advanced chips — mainly through Taiwan — and the machinery required to produce them, notably the Netherlands⁴¹. This creates a precarious balance: an open conflict or radical decoupling would be devastating for both sides, providing strong incentives to prevent rivalry from escalating into open war.

However, as Graham Allison has popularised through the metaphor of the “Thucydides Trap”⁴², history offers numerous examples of established and rising powers ending up at war despite deep economic ties and institutional links. The analogy draws on Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian War, where the underlying cause of conflict between Sparta (the established, declining power) and Athens (the rising power) was the fear that Athenian hegemony inspired in Sparta. After studying 17 cases of rising powers confronting established ones, Allison found that 12 ended up in armed conflict⁴³. In his view, this is the paradigm shaping today’s geopolitics: the United States as an established hegemon in relative decline and China as a rising — and revisionist — power whose ascent threatens to displace the dominant one. This dynamic produces insecurity, commitment dilemmas, and domestic pressures that can spiral into confrontation.

Yet the Thucydides Trap should not be read as a deterministic law, but as a structural tendency in power transitions — one that alters expectations and, above all, risk perceptions. The established power fears losing status, alliances and the benefits of the

⁴¹ Chris Miller, *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology* (New York: Scribner, 2022), pp. 57–65 y 189–210

⁴² Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

⁴³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trad. de Antonio Guzmán Guerra (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2000), Book 1.

order it built; the rising power sees the international architecture as unfair or restrictive and seeks recognition commensurate with its growing weight. Reinforcing this dynamic, some strategic analyses have noted that the United States had long viewed India as a potential regional counterweight to China. Recent developments, however, suggest a different logic: Trump's binary approach — “with me or against me” — limits Washington's willingness to support the consolidation of another Asian rising power, even if doing so might balance Beijing⁴⁴.

Applied to the U.S.–China rivalry, the analytical frameworks of the “Thucydides Trap” and “complex interdependence” indicate that even dense commercial, financial and technological ties do not guarantee peace. The history of the early 20th century shows that strong economic linkages did not prevent the outbreak of World War I; similarly, today's Sino-American relationship combines deep exchange with escalating strategic competition in the geopolitical-institutional, technological, economic, and military domains — each reinforcing the others. The risk is that, under perceived existential threats — e.g., Taiwan or control over critical technologies — each side may interpret the other's defensive measures as offensive, fuelling a classic security dilemma⁴⁵.

In this sense, Allison's analogy functions less as a self-fulfilling prophecy and more as an analytical warning: without effective crisis-management mechanisms, robust communication channels, and some willingness to accommodate mutual interests, the combination of structural change and insecurity can push even interdependent powers toward open confrontation⁴⁶. The United States and China risk reproducing that historical pattern of collision between an established hegemon and a rising challenger if distrust⁴⁷, fear and threat perceptions continue to intensify. Their strategic competition now unfolds across four major arenas — geopolitical-institutional, technological, economic and military —, which overlap and mutually reinforce one another.

A strategic competition that manifests across four interconnected domains: geopolitical-institutional, technological, economic, and military. Geopolitically, China promotes

⁴⁴ Fernández Aparicio, J. (2023). *Will history repeat itself? India today, like China yesterday, and the risk of a new Thucydides Trap*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), Ministry of Defence.

⁴⁵ The security dilemma describes a situation in which the measures a state adopts to increase its own security (more armaments, alliances, bases, deterrence) are perceived by others as a threat, prompting them to strengthen themselves as well. This process — even without aggressive intent — can generate mistrust, escalation, and unintended conflict.

⁴⁶ Allison, G., *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

⁴⁷ Ibid

alternatives such as expanded BRICS (with 2024-2025 accessions by Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, UAE, and Indonesia), SCO, BRI, and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) to counter the U.S.-led liberal order (NATO, G7, World Bank, IMF, WTO), positioning itself as the Global South's voice despite internal divisions. The U.S. responds by reconfiguring the G20, QUAD, AUKUS, and agreements with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and India—the latter exercising strategic autonomy by sourcing arms from multiple suppliers. This U.S. pivot to the Indo-Pacific and China's reaction must be interpreted as structural competition for primacy in the international system⁴⁸.

Technologically, the "chip war" escalated from 2019 with U.S. restrictions on Huawei and SMIC in semiconductors, lithography, and EDA⁴⁹ tools, intensified in 2022-2023 and 2025 under Trump⁵⁰. China counters with self-reliance (*zili gengsheng*) in AI, supercomputing, and cybersecurity, restricting rare earths, gallium, and germanium exports in 2025 in retaliation⁵¹. The Trump-Xi agreement in Busan (October 30, 2025) paused mutual controls for one year without dismantling prior sanctions⁵². This rivalry impacts third parties in 5G/6G and standards, identified as "high-intensity competition" in IEEE Indo-Pacific analyses⁵³.

Economically, interdependence has turned hostile with average 20% tariffs since 2018, raised to 145% in 2025 by Trump against fentanyl and domestic industry—despite inflationary tensions⁵⁴. China redirects exports and advances de-dollarization, promoting friend-shoring/near-shoring in Mexico, ASEAN, and India; the EU pursues de-risking in semiconductors and minerals. The "Busan truce" paused new tariffs but sustains structural decoupling, with no return to 2000s openness.

⁴⁸ Eva V. Pérez, *The Indo-Pacific Turn in United States Foreign Policy: A Geopolitical Approach from Neoclassical Realism*, Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, no. 20, 2022, pp. 39–68.

⁴⁹ Electronic Design Automation (EDA) refers to the suite of advanced software tools used to design, simulate, verify, and optimize integrated circuits — chips. Without EDA, it is not possible to manufacture modern semiconductors.

⁵⁰ M. Shrivastava, *China's semiconductor conundrum: Export controls under the Trump and Biden administrations*, 2025.

⁵¹ Eldiario.es, *China se fija como prioridad para la próxima década alcanzar la autosuficiencia tecnológica*, 2025. https://www.eldiario.es/economia/china-prioridad-proxima-decada-alcanzar-autosuficiencia-tecnologica_1_10549117.html.

⁵² El País, *Trump y Xi alcanzan un acuerdo sobre tierras raras y aranceles en Busan*, (last access 30th November 2025). <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-10-30/xi-y-trump-se-citan-en-corea-del-sur-para-resolver-las-tensiones-comerciales.html>.

⁵³ Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos, *Naval Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific*, IEEE Analysis Document DIEEEA31-2021 (Madrid: Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021).

⁵⁴ El Confidencial, *Trump y la horma de su zapato o TACO 2.0*, (last access 30th November 2025). https://blogs.elconfidencial.com/economia/tribuna/2025-10-17/guerra-comercial-trump-china-aranceles-1hms_4227537/la-horma-de-su-zapato-o-taco-2-0

Militarily, the U.S. prioritizes area denial in the Indo-Pacific via the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)⁵⁵ expanded with the Philippines (nine bases), AUKUS (Australian nuclear submarines), Balikatan exercises, and regular freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) plus air and naval patrols in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait—despite doubts over QUAD/AUKUS efficacy. China modernizes the PLA toward "world-class" status by 2050, with the largest navy (370 ships), A2/AD (anti-ship missiles, air defense), and nuclear expansion⁵⁶. Taiwan remains the red line, pivotal for Chinese legitimacy and U.S. credibility.

Spain, useful partner for China and a firm ally of the United States

In this context of structural rivalry between the United States and China, where does Spain stand from Beijing's perspective? To understand appropriately Spain's position in the U.S.–China rivalry, it is worth recalling that relations between Spain and China have a long historical trajectory beginning in the 16th century, when the Manila Galleon created, from this Spanish-controlled Filipino port, a trans-Pacific corridor connecting the Hispanic world with East Asia. This maritime line of communication gave rise to a solid commercial interdependence where Chinese and Spanish merchants traded and exchanged American silver, silks, porcelains, and spices for approximately 250 years⁵⁷, without any confrontations, tensions, or conflicts⁵⁸. Many historians regard this steady flow of goods, people, and ideas as one of the earliest forms of Eurasian globalization⁵⁹.

In contemporary times, it was after the mutual diplomatic recognition in 1973 between Spain and the People's Republic of China that a new phase opened, further strengthened by Spain's democratic transition and China's policy of reform and opening⁶⁰. For China, Spain is neither an enemy nor an adversary, but a relevant European country with which it is worthwhile to maintain a stable, pragmatic, and long-term relationship. This process consolidated in 2005, in the "*Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*,"⁶¹ a designation

⁵⁵ Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement is a military cooperation pact signed between the United States and the Philippines in 2014.

⁵⁶ Fernández Aparicio, J. (2024). *Japan Moves Toward Its Strategic Autonomy*. Cuadernos de Estrategia, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), Ministry of Defence.

⁵⁷ Flynn, D. & Giráldez, A., *Born with a 'Silver Spoon': The Origin of World Trade in 1571*, Journal of World History, 1995.

⁵⁸ Cervera Jiménez, J.A. (2020). *El Galeón de Manila: mercancías, personas e ideas viajando a través del Pacífico (1565-1815)*. Revista México y la Cuenca del Pacífico, 9(26), pp. 45-72

⁵⁹ Echavarría et al., *El Galeón de Manila y las conexiones transpacificas*, Barcelona: Casa Asia/UAB, 2019.

⁶⁰ China Chair, *Mutual Recognition Spain-China, Establishment of Diplomatic Relations*, Madrid, Spain, 1973.

(Accessed November 2, 2025). A Look at the History of Bilateral Spain-China Relations on Their 50th Anniversary

⁶¹ Joint Declaration between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Spain on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Madrid, 15 November 2005; see also the Spain–China Joint Declaration, Madrid, La Moncloa, 28

China reserves for a limited group of partners. This trajectory has been defined by some authors as the shift "from distrust to strategic partnership," underscoring the stability and absence of a logic of structural enmity in the Sino-Spanish relationship⁶².

Beijing views Spain as an "important EU country," geographically positioned in the Mediterranean, with historical links to Latin America and sufficient political weight to be useful within the European Council, even if far from the centrality of Germany or France.

In recent years, this perception has been reinforced by official visits: Xi Jinping's visit to Spain in 2018, the visit of Spain's Prime Minister, and—most importantly—the State Visit of the Spanish King and Queen to China in November 2025, the first such visit by a Spanish monarch in nearly two decades. Prime Minister Sánchez's trip to Shanghai to meet Xi Jinping allowed him to participate in business forums and advocate for a relationship based on openness and pragmatism, emphasizing that Spanish foreign policy "is not against anyone," in implicit reference to the United States⁶³.

During the November 2025 State Visit, King Felipe VI chaired business meetings, stressed the need to reduce the significant trade imbalance—highly favourable to China—and simultaneously defended human rights and international law, in line with Spain's foreign policy doctrine. From Beijing's perspective, these gestures confirm that Spain does not belong to the group of more hostile European states but rather to those that, without abandoning their principles, seek to maintain an intense economic and political dialogue⁶⁴.

China also values Spain for its role as a bridge to other regions. In Latin America, Spain's business presence, cultural linkages, and linguistic footprint are viewed as assets that can facilitate Chinese projects in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, or telecommunications. In the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, Spanish ports—Algeciras, Valencia, Barcelona—are embedded in logistics networks where Chinese shipping

November 2018, which reaffirms and updates the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership within the framework of the "new era" of bilateral relations.

⁶² O. V. Volosyuk and I. Kozylov, *Spain and China: From Mistrust to Strategic Partnership. Political Dimension*, *Latinskaya Amerika*, no. 5, pp. 34–52, 2024.

⁶³ Press releases and official statements from the Presidency of the Government of Spain regarding official visits to China, 2023–2025. Reports from EFE and La Moncloa on the State Visit of Their Majesties the King and Queen to China, November 2025.

⁶⁴ State Visit of their Majesties the King and Queen to the People's Republic of China. Official statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, Madrid, 27–29 October 2024; see also the statement of the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China on China–Spain relations, Beijing, 29 October 2024, which highlights the "constructive and pragmatic" nature of the bilateral relationship.

companies play an increasingly important role, and where Chinese firms are particularly interested in opportunities related to renewable energy, electric mobility, and logistics. For China, Spain is, in short, a manageable Western partner: aligned with the EU and NATO, but less inclined toward open confrontation and with a political culture accustomed to multilateral dialogue and negotiation⁶⁵.

From the Spanish perspective, the picture is more ambivalent. The United States is Spain's principal ally and strategic partner within NATO. Our security—both conventional and nuclear—relies on the transatlantic link. Yet at the same time, Spain, like the rest of the European Union, is embedded in a global economy in which China is simultaneously a market, a supplier, and a competitor, with clear commercial interdependence for the EU as a whole. Moreover, Spanish industry depends, to varying degrees, on supply chains in which China plays a central role⁶⁶; the agro-food sector exports to a rapidly expanding Chinese market; and Spain's own ambitions for energy and digital autonomy require engagement with Chinese technologies and companies, albeit under the EU's "de-risking" framework aimed at reducing strategic vulnerabilities⁶⁷.

Between Thucydides and complex interdependence: Spain's strategic posture toward China

Where does Spain stand in this competition between the two superpowers? Here intersect the "Thucydides trap" which, for the United States and China, can represent the almost "existential" logic of rivalry that may lead them to consider conflict including war inevitable, along with systemic decoupling. But on the other side, there exists "complex interdependence", a dense network of economic and other types of interests that serves as a vaccine and buffer to avoid maximum friction and conflict.

In this dynamic context, Spain—like the rest of Europe and other allies of the United States—would be well advised not to interpret this strategic logic as a trap of its own, but rather to understand it as an external dynamic that must be managed with caution. Spain's national interest should avoid both a direct confrontation with China and any

⁶⁵ Sergio Trigo Saugar, *Spain and China: Strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in a Multipolar World*, (accessed November 30, 2025), <https://ceinaseg.com/espana-y-china-reforzando-la-asociacion-estrategica-integral-en-un-mundo-multipolar/>

⁶⁶ Lucia Salinas Conte, Real Instituto Elcano, *La dependencia de China en las cadenas de suministro españolas*, (accedido el 30 de noviembre 2025), <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-dependencia-de-china-en-las-cadenas-de-suministro-espanolas/>

⁶⁷ European Commission (2023). *European economic security strategy*, COM(2023) 453 final, Brussels, 20 June 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3351

abrupt economic decoupling that could seriously harm our companies and our economy. What is preferable is to prevent Sino-American rivalry from escalating into a conflict from which Spain would gain nothing and which it has no desire to confront. This position is shared by other countries in the region, such as Japan, whose main think tanks — including the NIDS and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation — consider that a confrontation in the Indo-Pacific would be devastating for all actors involved, starting with China and the United States⁶⁸.

In this regard, Spain should continue moving toward the strengthening of European strategic autonomy—enabling the EU to expand capabilities and reduce critical vulnerabilities—while managing its relationship with China. However, doing it in a way that allows it to carve out its own geopolitical space within the limits set by its obligations to the EU and the Atlantic Alliance, through a prudent combination of realism, caution, and the defence of fundamental principles.

In terms of international relations theory, the complex interdependence of Nye and Keohane reminds us that the density of economic, technological, and social ties between China and the West makes war extremely costly and consequently unlikely. The Thucydides trap warns us that history is nevertheless full of fatal miscalculations. For Spain, a medium-sized country, strongly open and dependent on the international order, the priority should be to contribute to the first logic prevailing over the second. This implies supporting collective defence within NATO; strengthening multilateralism and institutions that channel competition; diversifying dependencies in critical materials (chips, rare earths, sensitive technologies); and at the same time maintaining a relationship with China that is neither naïve nor suicidal hostile.

Therefore, is China our geopolitical rival? Clearly not in the classical sense of the term, as it poses no direct military threat to Spain, harbours no territorial claims, nor explicitly seeks to undermine our national security. While it is true that China erodes the liberal order in which Spain has developed for decades and represents a political model openly incompatible with liberal democracy, being an autocracy and authoritarianism according

⁶⁸ Statements expressed by members of the NIDS and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation during the discussions and exchanges held with IEEE representatives during the visit to their respective headquarters in Tokyo on 26–27 November 2025.

to the academic metrics⁶⁹, at odds with the values enshrined in our Constitution. However, China is also a key trading partner, an indispensable interlocutor on global issues (climate change, financial stability, health security), and an actor with deep economic ties to our economy.

For all these reasons, Spain's—and Europe's—position should orient toward the constructive management of relations with China, without turning it into an enemy, learning to coexist with a power that will not disappear, that will continue challenging certain elements of the international order, and with which, like it or not, we will have to negotiate, cooperate, and, if necessary, deter. This pragmatic approach, aligned with Spain's multilateral tradition, prioritizes negotiation over confrontation and enables a strategic coexistence betting on mutual interest amid inevitable interdependence

On the other hand, there is the conceptualization by the US administration of Joe Biden expressing its rivalry with China in terms of a clash between democracies and autocracies, a fundamental confrontation between opposing political models: democratic, free, and based on the rule of law versus authoritarian and autocratic regimes that repress basic rights and freedoms. A narrative that emphasizes defending the liberal international order against growing Chinese influence, which represents a systemic challenge to global democratic values⁷⁰.

However, this reasoning should not drag Spain into this strategic struggle between the US and China, as it would limit Spanish strategic autonomy. Actually, the US maintains complex and often pragmatic relations with various autocracies and authoritarian regimes that do not fit the democratic ideal proclaimed in the dual limiting option of the American administration, as shown by its alliances with openly autocratic countries that violate rights and freedoms as understood in liberal democracies. A paradigmatic case of this argument was the recent Anchorage summit episode where Trump applauded Putin,

⁶⁹ The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict* (London: EIU, 2024), pp. 6–7, where the People's Republic of China is categorized as an "Authoritarian Regime". Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Authoritarian Regimes* (Washington D.C.: Freedom House, 2024), pp. 11–13, classifying China as "Not Free," with a score of 9/100 due to severe restrictions on political rights and civil liberties. V-DEM considers China an authoritarian regime with very strong limitations on political freedoms, civil rights, and pluralism. BTI also considers China an authoritarian regime lacking democratic transition or reforms aimed at liberalizing politics.

⁷⁰ Márquez y de la Rubia, Francisco. (2025). *the UN in the Face of the Eclipse of Multilateralism: Between Irrelevance and Reinvention. IEEE Journal, CESEDEN.*"

legitimizing what he represents politically and geopolitically with the violation of international law by illegally annexing Crimea and invading Ukraine. Therefore, Spain within the limits and constraints of its international commitments, should preserve its space to manoeuvre strategically without being pushed into forced polarization and without limiting its national interests.

Consequently, Spain as a medium actor is not condemned to the trap of Thucydides, nor obliged to replicate the hostility logic of the two great powers. Academic literature warning about this risk emphasizes the need to design management frameworks to avoid war⁷¹. Spain, firmly anchored in NATO and the transatlantic link, can assume its main ally's concern about China's rise without mechanically translating it into a bilateral confrontation policy with Beijing. However, Spain is obliged to think strategically not to be trapped, and in parallel, interconnect with China in a balanced relationship that is not servitude like Russia⁷². A relationship with limited real strategic autonomy allowing it to position itself as a relevant European partner while also avoiding traps such as the so-called debt trap into which some Belt and Road Initiative countries have fallen⁷³. At the same time, Spain should help ensure that the geopolitical rivalry between Washington and Beijing does not become an inevitable collision course, allowing a bilateral cooperation framework enabling a symbiotic Sino-Spanish relationship of mutual benefit, clearly focused on shared gains.

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⁷¹ García, J. (2023). *Middle Powers and Conflict Management in a Competitive International System: The Case of Spain*. IEEE Journal, CESEDEN, 35, pp. 78–95.”

⁷² Alexander Gabuev, *China's New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow into Beijing's Junior Partner*, *Foreign Affairs*, 9 de agosto de 2022

⁷³ Lowy Institute (2025). *La trampa de la deuda china: análisis geoeconómico de la influencia de Pekín en países en desarrollo*. Report in May 2025.