United States and China Strategic Competition

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U.S.-China Strategic Competition and Its Impact on North American Security.

"When China and the United States first restored relations forty years ago, the most significant contribution of the leaders of the time was their willingness to raise their sights beyond the immediate issues of the day."

Kissinger was correct in his assessment: forty years ago, Sino-American relations operated under a fundamentally different strategic logic. Yet this vision of enlightened statecraft has failed to materialize. Today, com-

petition between the United States and China reflects deeper structural transformations that have shaped North America's strategic and economic landscape – a bilateral dynamic that has defined regional relations since the 1070s.

The initial partnership was born of convenience, not ideology. In 1972, President Richard Nixon visited Beijing in order to exploit the Sino-Soviet split. Formal diplomatic relations were then established in 1979 ,with Washington's explicit goal was to bring China into the global community as a "counterweight" to Soviet expansionism. Following the Cold War's conclusion, the U.S. strategy moved from geopolitical balance to economic integration. China's entry into the World Trade Organizations (WTO) in 2001 symbolized this new approach, as a calculated bet that economic liberalization would inevitably produce political liberalization.

President Clinton articulated this logic explicitly: by joining the WTO, China would not simply be agreeing to import more American products; it would be 'agreeing to import one of democracy's most cherished values, economic freedom'. As Clinton predicted, "the more fully it will liberate the potential of its people." This assumption proved fundamentally misguided. While China's economy expanded dramatically following WTO accession, its political system remained authoritarian. Washington's faith in the transformative power of economic integration dissolved, replaced by growing anxiety that Chinese state power could exploit Western openness to undermine democratic systems themselves.

This strategic recalibration has exposed North America's internal vulnerabilities. Mexico, as the United States' largest trading partner, faces unique exposure to Chinese economic competition and the risk of becoming a potential gateway for Chinese goods and technology into the U.S. market. On the contrary, Canada has been seeking to diversify its trading allies beyond the United States, and warmed its relations with China, creating tensions with the USA that threatened to raise tariffs on Canadian goods.

Taking this context into consideration, the following paper seeks to answer the question: to what extent does the rise of China as a global power constitute a strategic threat to the security and economic interests of the North American region in the contemporary international order? To address these interconnected challenges, this paper is structured in two complementary sections. The first one examines the strategic spillovers of China's rise, more specifically, how technological competition, military modernization, and supply chain reconfiguration have fundamentally altered the security calculus for North America. The second section shifts focus to the political and institutional dimensions of this challenge by exploring three critical vulnerabilities: democratic interference operations and the institutional framework that prevents a coordinated response. The subsequent analysis argues that the rise of China can be considered a threat to the North America region, as it has had a multilateral effect, visible in

the political, economic, and security landscapes, thereby challenging the current power dynamics.

Section 1: the strategic spillovers MARCO

China has become one of the few countries widely seen as a possible threat to the U.S. predominance. Indeed the fear behind this is connected with the growth of China's relative power, in particular concerning foreign policy. While still trying to blunt destabilizing influences from abroad, to avoid territorial losses, to reduce its neighbours' suspicions, and to sustain economic growth, China's integration into the world economic system has become more and more part of a larger goal: to define a global role that serves Chinese interests but also wins acceptance from other powers.

The rise of China's military power, coupled with the use of its economic power, has prompted a reevaluation of strategic competition by the United States and the rest of North America. The US national security leaders have become much more anxious about the defensive development of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), prioritizing it over the threat posed by Russia. In identifying China as the new "pacing threat", the US administration based its efforts on long-term military planning.

The next decade could see the PLA achieve equivalent nuclear capacity to that of Russia and the United States. If Beijing seeks to maximize its nuclear capabilities against the United States, it could station up to 300 ICBMs, each carrying several warheads, in these fields alone, while keeping its existing arsenal of missiles in deeply buried silos or on protected road-mobile vehicles in other parts of China. In response to this the United States' administration has supported the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defence Authorization Act, to authorize appropriations for military and defense activities and to prescribe military personnel strengths for such fiscal year. Key to the Chinese government development is the Military-Civil Fusion(MCF) policy, which ensures that any commercial technological advancement (AI, quantum, or biotech) is immediately available for military application, blurring the line between trade partner and security adversary. Its goal is to develop the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a "world class military" by 2049. By eliminating the barriers between China's civilian research and commercial sectors, and its military and defence industrial sectors, the MCF permits new technological innovation to increase simultaneously the economic and military development. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ambition is to be the first country to transition into an "intelligent warfare," using AI to achieve military dominance, and targeting quantum computing, big data, semiconductors, 5G, advanced nuclear technology, and aerospace technology.

From an American perspective the main concern about the rise of China as a leading world power is its influence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific region, by solidifying an extensive military power that would force the U.S. out of the region. To avoid this scenario the Biden Administration adopted a particularly aggressive policy toward China, imposing diverse technological

restrictions, and establishing a tapestry of military and economic alliances against it, whose effect was a reduction of the economic ties between the countries. The CHIPS and Science Act (2022) serves as the cornerstone of the U.S. strategy to "de-risk" from China. The Act endeavors in restoring U.S. leadership in leading-edge manufacturing, new manufacturing capacity, and in research and development. In doing so the government's effort at making the United States safe, extended also to the North American allies. An example of this could be found in the U.S. exerted significant pressure on Canada to ban Huawei from its 5G infrastructure.The argument was that Huawei equipment could serve as a "backdoor" for Chinese espionage, potentially compromising the "Five Eyes" intelligence-sharing network (US, UK, CA, AU, NZ), where the security of the technology used by all members to process, transmit, and store secret information must be absolute. The USA repeatedly warned that it was ready to stop sharing sensitive intelligence with those allies which would allow Huawei technology in their networks.

Therefore this strategy of the US seems to involve other actors, in particular Canada and Mexico. Canada has tightened its Investment Canada Act to prevent Chinese state-owned enterprises from acquiring stakes in Canadian mining firms, treating mineral access as a matter of national security rather than just trade. Through the Inflation Reduction Act the Trump administration is committed to strenghten and prioritize domestic mining and processing. Canada has made efforts in increasing domestic mining and investment, and to improve access for critical minerals projects.

In 2022, Mexico's domestic mining value was $3.3 billion, which paved the way for Mexico to have an opportunity to expand its mining sector and increase its private investment. Furthermore a solid supply chain is guaranteed by the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA), allowing intra-regional trade in goods and services to grow by 37 percent. In 2024 Mexico was the top U.S. trading partner, reaching nearly $930 billion in total trade. This data demonstrate that Mexico provides the low-cost labor and manufacturing base that China once offered, but with shorter, more secure supply lines.

Section 2: Interferencedam in politics and defense MARTINA

Firstly, the democratic pillar that governs most countries in the North America region can be affected by China's capacity to corrupt electoral processes and undermine institutional integrity. Indeed, modernization theory predicted that China's economic integration in the liberal order would democratize its authoritarian regime (Rostow, 1959). However, the last two decades, after China's incorporation in the World Trade Organisation in 2001, have proven different, as Beijing has become a centralised authoritarian system and the country experiences a constant repression of democratic rights (Freedom House, 2024). This shift from traditional espionage to "political interference operations", based on coordinated

campaigns designed to corrupt democratic processes, represents China's weaponization of Western institutional vulnerabilities.

The 2024 Canadian National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) report documents the first comprehensive public evidence of Chinese interference within North America. In Toronto and Vancouver, Chinese operatives conducted three coordinated operations: electoral interference targeting Chinese diaspora communities; transnational coercion threatening families of Chinese officials abroad to enforce compliance; and surveillance of pro-democracy activities and ethnic minorities. These tactics exploit the legal gray zones of liberal democracies – leveraging freedoms of movement and association as weapons against those very societies. The significance of these actions extends beyond specific tactics. The NSICOP report demonstrates that China possesses capacity for sustained, sophisticated political interference within advances democracies with any need of military force. Operations are designed to be durable and difficult to detect, operating within the protection offered by democratic freedoms themselves.

Simultaneously, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) documented parallel Chinese espionage campaigns targeting American security infrastructure. Between 2023 and 2024, the DOJ press releases and Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) reports revealed coordinated targeting of three vulnerability nodes, including government officials, academic researches and technology sector personnel. FBI Director Christopher Wray's 2024 Congressional Testimony characterized this as one of the most significant counterintelligence challenges facing the U.S., distinguished by systematic precision and integration of commercial espionage with state security objectives.

These operations reflect a division of labor: Canadian operations target democratic processes and diaspora communities; American operations target national security infrastructure and technological advantage. Together, they constitute a comprehensive interference architecture, as a coordinated system designed to simultaneously weaken democratic institutions, compromise security infrastructure, and exploit institutional vulnerabilities across North America (Parello-Plesner, 2018).

Secondly, North America's institutional response to Chinese interference remains fragmented despite repeated diplomatic efforts. Trilateral summits between the United States, Canada, and Mexico have produced numerous declarations identifying shared threats. However, these documents lack binding enforcement mechanisms or coordinated budget allocations. The Wilson Center (2023) argues that aspirational declarations without institutional enforcement capacity cannot adequately address threats of the scale and sophistication China currently poses to the region.

Mexico's vulnerability within this trilateral framework is structurally distinct and more acute than of its regional peers. First, Mexico maintains limited independent capacity in cyberdefense and threat analysis, render-

ing it dependent on U.S. and Canadian intelligence infrastructure for security assessments and threat monitoring. This institutional asymmetry creates vulnerabilities that adversarial actors can exploit. Second, unlike Canada, Mexico is neither a member of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance not NATO, excluding it from advanced intelligence-sharing protocols and integrated defense mechanisms. This institutional isolation means Mexico cannot participate in decision making processes that shape North American security strategy or access real-time threat intelligence available to alliance members. Third, Mexico faces pressing internal security challenges, particularly organized crime and drug trafficking, that necessarily command significant government resources and policy attention. Indeed, this internal security burden constrains Mexico's capacity for sustained international cooperation and weakens its negotiating position within trilateral frameworks (Devanny & Buchan, 2024). Scholar Vázquez del Mercado (2025) confirms these constraints, recognizing that Mexico cannot simultaneously address internal stability crises and maintain robust internal defense coordination.

As illustrated in Table 1, Mexico's structural position within North America security frameworks differs fundamentally from that of its regional peers across three measurable dimensions.

Table 1. North American institutional security asymmetry: A comparative assessment of alliance membership and internal security capacity. Sources: Government of the United Kingdom (2010); NATO (2024); Devanny & Buchan (2024); NSICOP (2024).

The convergence of these structural vulnerabilities positions Mexico as the weakest institutional link in North American security coordination.Adressing this gap requires establishing binding mechanisms address four priorities: harmonized cybersecurity and defense standards across all three nations; systematic knowledge-sharing regarding Chinese threat assessment and methodologies: coordinated investment in continuous intelligence gathering and threat monitoring; and pre-established rapid response protocols for addressing political interference operations and cyberattacks. Without such binding institutional frameworks, institutional asymmetry will persist as a critical vulnerability that China can systematically exploit (Parello-Plesner, 2018)

The strategic rise of China constitutes a profound economic threat to the North American regions, by destabilizing critical economic networks and exploiting Western institutional vulnerabilities from within. Furthermore North American security is deeply interconnected; although this integration furnishes a great asset, it also means that a localized vulnerability, whether a structural gap in Mexico's asymmetric cyberdefense or a compromised mineral supply chain in Canada, immediately jeopardizes continental stability. That's why to protect its collective interest the region should adopt a trilateral enforcement strategy. By harmonizing and securing a strong supply chain, and a joint military and economic development path, also integrating Mexico into advanced threat-intelligence pipelines,

North America could really avoid exploitation. Developing this integrated institutional architecture is imperative to neutralizing contemporary strategic pressures and ensuring long-term continental stability.

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