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Impact of US-China Rivalry on the G20 Leadership: Possibilities and Problems¹

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Abstract

Reflecting the timeless pattern of global power shifts favouring emerging powers over established ones, the current state of US-China relations corresponds to this trend. Academic consensus regards shifts since Trump's presidency and the pandemic as dominant factors worsening US-China relations. One of the implications of the US-China rivalry is that issues of global governance are increasingly falling under the purview of geopolitical undercurrents, undermining the ability of the Group of 20 (G20) to deliver global public goods (GPGs). Although embedded within institutions such as the Group of 7 (G7), the G20, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the supply of GPGs is an attribute of global leadership. Theoretical and empirical accounts indicate that the regular supply of GPGs is dependent upon either the hegemony of a single power or the level of cooperation among the multiple centres of power prevailing in the international system at a given point in time. The decline of US hegemony and the lack of US-China cooperation poses questions for the future of G20 leadership and the global supply of GPGs. Given the uncertainty, this article aims to answer the following research problem—can the G20 lead the process of global governance by offering GPGs under the constrained conditions produced by the US-China rivalry? Specifically, this article addresses the following research questions: why the US-China rivalry affects the G20's ability to deliver GPGs; which actors have led the field of global governance in the past; whether these actors are still capable of leading under contemporary conditions; and what pathways stifle the leadership potential of varied actors inside the G20. The article argues that the leadership crisis of the G20 is a cumulative effect of the declined ability of the G7 to play its traditional leadership role, coupled with its newly developed willingness to counter China's rise. Moreover, the leadership gap is augmented by the polarization-based strategic pulls faced by middle powers, compromising their customary ability to lead global governance.

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Introduction

The G20 is a forum comprising systemically significant powers. Any alteration in the systemic variable, i.e. global power distribution, is bound to affect G20 dynamics, including the leadership trajectory. A major alteration in the global power distribution is occurring with the rise of China, whose impact threatens to fracture the process of global governance in recent years. Although China's rise is not an overnight development yet its manifestation within the framework of great power rivalry is a relatively new phenomenon. Though concerns began much earlier; however since the Trump Administration [2017], a major reorientation has occurred in the American perception towards China's rise manifested in the greater political willingness (i.e. trade war) to address the "China threat". Following Trump's footsteps, the Biden administration has also embraced competitive logic over blind cooperation with China.

The battle of tariffs has broader implications. Besides unsettling the domestic constituents (exporters, importers and consumers), it threatened to rupture the foundation on which the global economy has flourished since WWII. The pandemic and its unequal impact on the US and China played its part in exacerbating the rift, which led to the undercutting of the supply of GPG, i.e. health emergency goods. Given the historical linkage between technological edge and the potential for global leadership, it is no surprise that the 'technology realm' has also emerged as a key site of contestation [Seidl, 2024]. In a typical Thucydides Trap-like situation, China seeks to undermine the narrative whereby a rising power may leverage technology to reorder global order. Instead, China posits technology as an apolitical variable meant for economic progress or "peaceful rise". On the other hand, the US increasingly views technology not as a neutral factor but as a crucial element in strategic great power dynamics. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the US has put forth various policy frameworks, such as decoupling or de-risking, to contain China threat.

The strategic rivalry between the world's two most powerful nations holds inevitable consequences for global governance. Historically, most countries benefit from global leadership, as powerful nations offer advantages or GPGs to the rest of the world (ROW). In the post-war period, the US took on a leading role until the mid-1970s when the G7/8, led by the US, became a prominent actor leading global governance. In the 21st century, phenomena like the rise of the BRICS and the 2007 crisis led to a historic compromise resulting in the institutionalisation of global leadership under the G20. Though the G20 outperformed as a crisis manager, satisfying the world's demand for stimulus, and financial stability, nevertheless, the schisms of fundamental nature between the US-led West and China-Russia duo soon surfaced prominently. Two events in 2014— Russia's attack on Ukraine and China's assertiveness in the South China Sea— exacerbated Sino-U.S. tensions. In the US, the narrative of threat embodied by revisionism and authoritarianism has deepened.

At a more fundamental level, the world witnesses two distinct and largely incompatible worldviews held by the US and China. Both regard their “exceptionality”³ as a key contributing variable towards global prosperity and stability. In a strategic scheme, the US has embraced unilateralism as a key foreign policy toolkit to address China threat by aligning itself with like-minded nations— G7, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), AUKUS (trilateral alliance between US, UK and Australia) etc. Blinken's 2022 policy, ‘invest, align, and compete’ also reinforced such competitive stance. In contrast, China seeks to downplay this narrative by presenting itself as a morally superior global leader and rejecting Western constructs like hegemony. Nonetheless, the ROW faces two implications of this polarisation—first, increased pressure to defend their strategic autonomy; second, consensus lag in G20 crippling the supply of GPGs.

Given the increased international polarization, the fate of the G20 demands an investigation of the following questions—How might the strategic rivalry among the G20’s most influential member states impact the group’s responsibility to lead global governance and deliver the GPGs? In other words, does the strategic competition between US and China “outside” G20 affect their interaction “inside” G20? Do the seemingly irreconcilable differences on hard issues affect consensus formation on ‘soft issues’? The study does not focus on the factors that contribute to the US-China rivalry, a subject that has already been extensively covered in existing literature; instead, the study concentrates on examining the impact of this rivalry on the G20. Thus, the study specifically explores how rivalry influences the leadership dynamics within the G20, expressed in terms of the supply of GPGs.

To substantiate the claims, the paper advances the following arguments. First, the US-China rivalry adversely affects the G20 leadership and the delivery of GPGs due to international polarization. Secondly, this polarization has weakened the leadership ability of significant players, including the G7 and Middle Powers, in providing GPGs, thereby amplifying the leadership vacuum. Third, the polarization has drawn the Western world closer, evident in the altered disposition of the G7, which is now oriented to assume a more strategic role, especially in relation to Beijing. Fourth, the middle powers have experienced shrunk space to display leadership and are susceptible to external pressures compelling them to align with one side or the other. Finally, due to the polarization, the G20 appears to be struggling to fulfil its core mandate of supplying GPGs, as illustrated by a case study on climate change.

1. Global Leadership in Theoretical Framework

The dominant shades of realist International Relations (IR) framework rely upon the behaviour of great powers as a measure of their explanatory and predictive utility. Global leadership is achieved by demonstrating both the capacity and willingness to lead, with the supply of GPGs as a key measure. The hegemonic stability theory evinces that a hegemonic leadership implies a preponderance of a single overwhelming power that facilitates openness in international trade, a key GPG. A liberal order is a consequence of a hegemon who leads by creating rules, institutions and incentives for the maintenance of the order [Kindleberger, 1973: 28; 1981:

³ American exceptionalism is rooted in the belief that liberal values and system as espoused by US global leadership is a foundation for world order. Likewise, Chinese exceptionalism is rooted in the notion of China being morally superior and different from the ROW especially US and the hierarchical hegemonic order it maintained.

247, 251]. Thus, the hegemonic stability theory conflates the terms hegemony and leadership into hegemonic leadership.

Robert Gilpin asserts that hegemon is required to “secure status quo free trade, foreign investment and a well-functioning international monetary system” [Gilpin, 1975, p. 145]. The instrumental use of the market to espouse global leadership has been a part of both British and US leadership models. The post-war American efforts epitomized ‘transformational leadership’ wherein Japan and Germany’s ‘social purpose’ was to be reinvented to prevent an interwar-like fallout that produced fascism [Ikenberry, 1996]. In recent years, President Xi has demonstrated transformative leadership by solidifying his authority within the party and using initiatives like BRI as a springboard for global influence [Maihold, 2020].

Ikenberry [1996] identifies three kinds of international leadership prevalent in the field of IR—structural, institutional and situational. The structural view stresses the role of material factors like technology, military, economy and resources in the exercise of international leadership. The hegemonic control is buttressed by both the prestige of the hegemon as well as the rules governing the system. However, the power shifts occur over a period of time, leading to hegemonic wars and reordering of the order. [Gilpin, 1981]. Within the hegemonic theory tradition, long-cycle theorist Modelski argues that global leadership occurs “naturally” through ‘systemic decisions’ facilitating the sequencing of hegemons at the apex of the global system. Hegemonic leadership consolidates as it shares the benefits of innovation globally producing a positive-sum dynamics having minimal coercion [Modelski, 1987].

The view on structural leadership has its variants. In the Marxist tradition, Wallerstein criticises the world capitalist system as hegemonic, underpinned by coercion, political hierarchy, military domination, inequality and exploitation [Wallerstein, 1979]. These structural theories posit that the source of leadership is not the person or policy but the *structure itself*. Many also believe that erosion of hegemonic power is likely to destabilise the order, thus the precondition for stability is the concentration of power [Ikenberry, 1996].

Secondly, leadership on a global scale can manifest subtly through institutions, often seen as an alternative in the post-US hegemonic era. While institutions don’t enforce their will on states, they shape state behaviour through established rules, principles, practices, and mutual expectations [Hodzi, Chen, 2018]. A rooted form of institutionalism has emerged, shaping a Western order with the US at the core. The system relies less on hegemonic control and more on America’s decentralized political structure engaging transnational participation in policymaking [Ikenberry, 1996]. The third leadership category in IR is called ‘situational leadership’. This emanates from the ability of an individual (e.g. foreign minister) to capitalize on the opportunities and reorder the power distribution in the system. Bismarck’s role in 19th century Europe is one of the finest examples of situational or what Young calls ‘entrepreneurial leadership’ [Young, 1991; Ikenberry, 1996].

Besides focusing on power, the hegemonic leadership literature also underscores the relevance of legitimacy. A legitimate order entails a sense of common purpose, observance of principles or norms, compromise and reciprocal consent [Ikenberry, Kupchan, 1990]. Drafting a new legitimate political order necessitates that the hegemon open space for other states to add substantive aspects drawn from their preferences. In the post-war era, the US accommodated the European vision to make order more legitimate and acceptable [Ikenberry, 1996].

In totality, a nation's capability, willingness and legitimacy all affect the possibility of leadership. As Stoessinger argues that mere availability of capabilities and resources shall not "make a nation powerful unless its leadership uses these resources with maximum effect on the international scene" [Stoessinger, 1991: 34]. Thus, willingness matters. Similarly, underscoring the significance of legitimacy, Stoessinger asserts that— "the quality of a nation's leadership and the image which it projects upon the world are important sources of power. If leadership is defective, all other resources may be to no avail" [Stoessinger 1991: 34]. The quality of leadership is dependent upon a nation's "image of itself and, perhaps, most crucial of all, the way it is viewed by other nations" [Stoessinger, 1991: 34].

The application of the global leadership theoretical frameworks in contemporary US-China relations has raised intense debate on the ambit of global leadership. Many have asserted that a world without a leader or hegemon (a post-American leadership scenario) is a "no one's world", "G zero", and a "non-polar" world that would invite global instability, halt liberalisation, undermine rules-based multilateralism [Haass, 2008; Bremmer, Roubini, 2011; Bremmer, 2012; Kupchan, 2013; Haass, 2014; Wolf, 2017].

Some contend that the vacuum has emerged as a result of the "voluntary abdication" of leadership during the Trump administration, where the US was found either incapable or unwilling to lead [Kristenson, 2017]. The US's abdication of a leadership role is directly associated with the question of China taking over, especially since President Xi announced in Davos in 2017 about China's "responsive and responsible leadership". A core concern is that the end of American leadership may bring an end to an order underpinned by liberal values as China would like to inject authoritative values undergirding global norms and institutions [Kausikan, 2017]. Thus, the predictions of power transition theory have raised concerns about the rising revisionist power, i.e. China, and its potential impact on global stability [Kaplan, 2016; Lieberman, 2016].

Nonetheless, some regard the Kindleberger Trap or a leaderless world as a more dangerous situation than the power transition phase as the "leadership deficit" may produce a shortage of GPGs [Lehmann, 2016]. In the past, the US was accepted as a leader when it "stood for more than just its own well-being and that the world economy was not a zero-sum game" [Patrick, 2017]. Thus, leadership may demand sacrifice or at least adjustment, as global interest (not least supply of GPGs) is an intrinsic part of how a leader conceives their own national interest. Some like Ian Bremmer warned about the imminent Kindleberger Trap as early as 2012 by predicting the situation as "G-zero" [Grundleger, Creehan, 2012].

Some also claim that arguments of a 'leaderless' or 'G-Zero' world aren't just neutral observations but also political tactics. It may entail ulterior objectives like unilateral leadership, containing other leadership contenders, and defining the contours of "good leadership" [Kristenson, 2017]. Others have proposed the perspective of a 'Second Cold War' wherein US and China are competing in the realm of infrastructure, finance, digital and production [Schindler et al., 2023]. In the realm of critical discourse, the US rebalancing is regarded as an articulation of historical narratives in which 'Chinese other' plays a crucial role to reinforcing 'American self' [Turner, 2016]. In regional terms, classical geopolitical frameworks predict East Asia as a notable site of US-China rivalry [Schreer, 2017].

However, such academic propositions— especially the ones highlighting the inevitable US-China rivalry and China's hegemonic intents— have invited criticism from Chinese scholars. They castigate such discourses as Euro-centric and unworthy of comprehending China's worldview. Some Chinese observers argue that the semantic and conceptual confusion arises due to the western intellectual tendency to equate hegemony with global leadership. In his frame, hegemony differs from global leadership as the latter is devoid of zero-sum logic [Sun, 2019: 193-194]. In other words, leadership allows “more than one country to harmoniously and complementarity exerting leading roles in global affairs” [Sun, 2019: 190]. He defines global leadership as—

“Global leadership of countries means playing leading roles in global affairs, which has five essential conditions, namely leading position, leading abilities, leading skills, leading desire and leading means” [Sun, 2019: 192-193].

Others, like Xuetong Yan, in his theory of moral realism, regard the quality of leadership as an independent variable affecting the leadership position held by a country in world affairs. In a predictive tone, he speculates that moral correctness may allow the aspiring state (China) to displace the existing leader (US) from the top position despite the asymmetric distribution of capabilities between the two [Yan, 2016]. To sum up, the operationalisation of global leadership stipulates that a state or set of states must display virtues of ‘capability, willingness and legitimacy’. The next part investigates why G7 and Middle Powers are likely to struggle in assuming leadership role within the G20 thereby widening leadership gap.

2. Polarisation in G20: Effect on G7 and Middle Powers

Polarisation and Recalibrating G7

The G7 emerged when the US faced challenges in single-handedly leading global governance and offering GPGs to the ROW. After the Nixon shock and the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in the early 1970s, the G7 was formed in 1976 to meet the leadership gap. Theoretical frameworks like Alison Bailin's ‘group hegemony’ explained this shift [Bailin, 2005]. Bailin's ‘institutionalized hegemony’ model explains G7-led global governance by harmonizing power-based hegemonic stability and institution-based neoliberal institutionalism. Group hegemony, led by ‘like-minded liberal democracies’, ensured collective provision of diverse GPGs such as free trade and exchange rate stability [Bailin, 2001]. The utility of G7 did not dissipate even after the establishment of the G20 in 1999 at finance minister and central bank governor level.

In the Marxist tradition, Soederberg [2002] posited that the G20 emerged in response to the G7's (post-Asian financial crisis) endeavour to shape a New International Financial Architecture (NIFA), as highlighted in the G7's 1999 Cologne Summit. In critical appraisal, NIFA was described as — “NIFA constitutes a transnational class-based strategy to reproduce the power of financial capital in the world economy and, in effect, the structural power of the United States” [Soederberg, 2002: 176]. Thus, various perspectives continue to view G7 as a dominant force leading the sphere of global governance.

Nevertheless, the narrative around G7 as a leader of global governance could not be sustained in the wake of the 2007 financial crisis and G20 (elevated at leaders level) emerged as the premium forum of global economic governance. In the post crisis phase until the symptoms of

US-China rivalry became evident, the G7 played a relatively diminished role. However, some like Larionova et al. [2015] have argued in favour of division of labour among various institutions as an effective modus operandi to resolve global problems. In specific terms, its operationalisation would rely upon the competence showcased by each collective body i.e. G20 on economic matters, G8 on geopolitical issues, BRICS on societal risks [Larionova et al., 2015].

Nonetheless, polarization is shifting such cooperative division of labour among institutions into strategic camps centred around US-China rivalry. The increasing polarisation has re-energised the G7 by bestowing it with a new mandate of strategic competition with China. Until the 2007 global financial meltdown, the G7 sought universality in the scope of its global leadership as no other truly global challenger(s) existed. With the relative gains prism assuming ascendancy lately, the redefined task for G7 is not to offer 'inclusive' but 'exclusive global leadership'.

Some of the recent initiatives and resurgences like Build Back Better World' (B3W) [2021], QUAD [2017], AUKUS [2021], Summit for Democracies [2021], etc., show the resolve of the G7 to counter China by taking initiatives with restricted membership. The B3W has been relaunched at the 2022 G7 Summit in Germany as Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). A shared characteristic of these initiatives is their aim to counteract China's ascent. The polarization effect has revitalized the G7, but with a more strategic mandate, increasingly operating outside G20. Some, like Zhou and Zha [2023], argue that BRI has been an accelerant pushing the actualisation of some of these initiatives. In a similar tone, [Lioa, Beal 2022: 3] remarked—

“B3W was proposed as the G7's strategic response to global challenges, in particular, the global infrastructure gap; the COVID-19 recovery; and the perceived need to counter China's economic and political influence in the developing world” [Lioa, Beal, 2022: 3].

The Biden administration stresses the connection between development strategy and national security. The administration prioritised enhancing partnerships, building resilient supply chains, and investing in key areas like climate, gender, health, security, etc., during visits to different regions, chiefly Indo-Pacific, Africa and Latin America [Lioa, Beal, 2022: 5]. The visits reflect the diplomatic investment as well as efforts to align the provision of GPGs to G7's strategic considerations.

The US-China competition has an added dimension of 'struggle over legitimacy'. This involves competition over who can deliver GPGs to the ROW with the greatest legitimacy. According to Cao [2019], the 'sustainability framework' is a key criterion for determining the credibility of any project; thus, casting GPGs within this framework cushions the call for legitimacy. Some propose that the alignment of BRI with the 2030 Agenda would bring greater legitimacy, and China would be recognised as a key player in fulfilling global development needs. Moreover, it would allow China to “win the hearts and minds of other stakeholders involved in the BRI” [Cao, 2019: 234].

The B3W emphasised its green investment oriented distinctiveness from Chinese initiatives, thus prompting China to adopt 'green investment principles' within the BRI. Snubbing BRI for the criticism it faced, the B3W emerged as an initiative loaded with good governance ideals of transparency and sustainability. Beijing has also acted cautiously by recasting BRI seeking

greater legitimacy. To counter the narrative of ‘predatory lending’ and ‘low returns on investment’, President Xi sought to revamp BRI as BRI 2.0 emphasizing transparency, freedom from corruption, high-quality standards, and adherence to rules in project planning and execution [Chang, 2019].

In recent years, the G7 and China have openly criticized each other, highlighting significant disagreements on a range of issues. In a critical reference to China, G7 in Hiroshima communique [May, 2023] remarked that states that “have the capabilities and are not yet among the current providers of international climate finance” to step up and play a more active role in climate-related projects [The White House, 2023]. Likewise, in the G7’s foreign ministers meeting in Tokyo in Nov 2023, the G7 leaders called upon China to— confront its non-market policies; maintain peace across the Taiwan Strait; refrain from supporting Russia in the Ukraine war; restrain from illegitimate technology transfer; grant a substantial autonomy to Hong Kong; respect human right in Tibet and Xinjiang— and so on [G7, 2023]. Reacting to it, the Chinese embassy asserted that “China will resolutely counter any smear campaigns from external forces” [Reuters, 2023].

China has been cautious in observing G7’s transformation. *People’s Daily* castigated the G7’s Hiroshima Summit [May, 2023] as a “hegemonic clique undermining global order, equity and justice”. The G7 faced accusations of meddling in states’ internal affairs, sparking conflicts and being labelled a “tool to protect US hegemony”. Criticism included charges of double standards; advocating for Ukraine’s sovereignty while neglecting calls for Taiwanese independence; and reducing the G7 to a US accomplice against China. Also, China criticized G7 for endorsing the “China threat theory” and embarking upon US pushed economic coercion agenda disrupting supply chains, politicising and even weaponizing trade relations. Beijing claimed that the world rejects the Western rules dictated by the G7 and warned that the G7 will inevitably become isolated given its unabated backing of the US sponsored divisive agenda [People’s Daily, 2023].

The evolving situation suggests that internally congruent (i.e. common liberal ideology) informal groups like G7 are prone to heightened cohesion and shoulder a more strategic agenda amid great power rivalry. The rivalry dynamics compels informal groups to align with like-minded nations, intensifying the pressure for collaboration. Therefore, the study argues that under the conditions of global power restructuring or ‘power transition’, the informal groups are likely to gravitate towards their original core members (i.e. G7), disregarding the mandate of inclusive decision-making epitomised by democratised or legitimized global governance (i.e. G20). Such disregard has comprised the ability of G20 to deliver leadership or GPGs as the dominant camp (G7) is geared at pushing GPGs as “their” initiatives.

Polarisation and Middle Powers

Acronyms like CIVETs (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, and South Africa) or MIST (Mexico, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, and Turkey) are used to denote the rise of middle powers. Based on temporality, academicians have also distinguished between the traditional i.e. Canada, Australia and emerging middle powers like South Korea, Mexico, Indonesia etc. [Cooper, Mo, 2013: 2]. Some float normatively loaded notions about middle powers as “good international citizens” who act responsibly [Holbraad, 1984]. Others like Keohane have defined them as— “A middle-power is a state whose leaders consider that it cannot act alone

effectively, but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution” [Keohane, 1969: 296].

The G20 has a special relationship with Middle Powers as the latter have been instrumental in facilitating the former’s formation as well as playing a proactive role in leading the process of global governance. In G20, middle powers have performed varied functions— triggering international initiatives, agenda shaping, formulating issue-centric coalitions etc. The middle power leadership, especially Canada’s entrepreneurial skills, played a critical role in the G20’s formation [Ibbitson, Perkins, 2010]. The role of Canada, Australia and South Korea has been critical in forging global consensus on issues like macro policy coordination, global imbalances etc. In the past, South Korea has proactively pushed for global financial safety, widening the role of the IMF in crisis prevention, a key GPG. The adoption of mechanisms like the expansion of the Flexible Credit Line and the creation of the Precautionary Credit Line by the IMF are decorated moments of middle-power diplomacy [Cooper, Mo, 2013:7-8].

Nonetheless, the polarisation effects of US-China rivalry have shrunk the scope for middle powers to play an effective role in G20. Australia’s spectacular performance as a middle power during its G20 Presidency in 2014 was made possible because of the absence of such polarisation [Downie, 2017: 1504]. At present, the field of IR is struggling with three interrelated shocks and their after effects—US-China rivalry; fourth industrial revolution; and Covid-19 crisis [Lee, 2021]. In these moments, the middle powers are facing the heat of strategic pulls, wherein striking a balance is increasingly eclipsing as a choice. Siding with one power risks bringing the wrath of another. For instance, China imposed punitive trade measures on Australia when the latter pitched for an international inquiry on the origin of coronavirus, a demand parroted by the US. As Australian Treasurer Josh Frydenberg remarked—

“I am not downplaying the impact of China’s actions. They have hurt specific industries and regions, significantly in some cases..... Australia was “on the front line” of a new era of strategic competition between the United States and China, adding it was “no secret” that Beijing had tried to damage Australia's economy over political grievances” [Westcott, 2021].

In the US-China global leadership battle, Australia despite its trade dependence on China is clearly siding with the US. The birth of AUKUS in September 2021 is unprecedented to check growing Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific [The White House, 2022]. Likewise, on US insistence, Canada got involved in a conflict with China by arresting Huawei’ chief financial officer which ignited a Chinese response [Desjardins, 2021]. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that with a defensive bent, “many middle-power states are now shifting to a more reactive search for security” [Carr, 2020].

Similarly, South Korea is stuck to choose between its security dependence on the US or economic reliance on China [Lee, 2020]. China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi has in the past expressed deep scepticism on US’s proposal to expand ‘Five Eyes’, an intelligence-sharing group constituting the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Expressing dismay, he remarked — “I think that is utterly a by-product of the Cold War era that is already outdated” [Ryall, 2021]. Nevertheless, it is not easy for South Korea to disregard its significance.

Daniel Pinkston, a professor of IR at the Seoul campus of Troy University, describes the South Korean dilemma as follows—

“Seoul is very sensitive to the fact that it is in a difficult position and is very uncomfortable that it is being pressured to make a decision on which of the 'big powers' it should align with....China wants to peel away those countries and decouple them from US-led institutions. If Beijing can degrade those alliances and deal with countries on a bilateral basis, then it can use its immense economic power to greater effect” [Ryall, 2021].

According to Hwang [2022], the global leadership struggle between US and China is a reflection of the third phase of security scenarios in the Korean peninsula, earlier two being bipolar and unipolar moments of the 20th century. To play a more independent role, Huynh [2021] suggests that Seoul must position itself as a balancer in the Indo-Pacific by bolstering alliances with middle powers and deepening ties with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Concerning sensitive topics like Taiwan, South Korea is likely to face increased pressure as the US anticipates support from Seoul, given its role as a historical security provider. The pressure would also mount on Seoul as Japan, another US ally, is openly siding with the US [Bandow, 2021; Moon, 2023].

Indeed, a closer observation shows that South Korea has been quietly siding with the US as evidenced by growing US-South Korea convergences under various formats i.e., President Biden’s Summit for democracy, Global Supply Chain Resilience Summit etc. [Pardo, 2022]. Seoul is a key partner in the techno-nationalist struggle in which the US seeks to tackle China via ‘access control’ restricting the supply of critical technology. This is bolstered by the technology alliance, i.e., the Chip 4 alliance, which includes the US, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan [Moon, 2023]. China's hope for Seoul to observe neutrality was challenged when Seoul proceeded with fully activating the THAAD missile defence system. Furthermore, under Yoon Suk Yeol’s Presidency, Seoul has aimed to strengthen ties with Japan, ignoring disapproval from Beijing [Borowiec, 2023].

Proposing the notion of ‘neo-middle power diplomacy’, Stephen Nagy suggests the following strategies for middle powers to avert polarisation pressure—seek alignment partners, emphasize synergy in key areas utilising comparative advantages, prioritize cooperation in the digital economy, and secure a trade safety net agreement. Thus, they must engage in “lobbying, insulating, and rulemaking in the realms of security, trade, and international law to protect their national interests” [Nagy, 2022: 177-179]. Others argue in favour of transcending diplomacy, an innovative approach by which a weaker state aims to overcome anarchy and advocates multilateralism. A closer collaboration with states—Australia, Canada, Japan, Germany etc.—falling in similar situations would be a preferred route to put forth new norms [Moon, 2023].

Another key reorientation adopted by the Middle Powers is to act towards managing their interest in the G20 than leading in a truly traditional sense. Under PM Albanese, the Australian government is striving to mend relations with China with an objective to remove trade restrictions and encouraging Beijing to comply with the rules-based international system. Alongside, it also supports AUKUS, the QUAD, and the US alliance crafting regional strategic partnerships [Australian Financial Review, 2023]. Such multi alignment posturing involves capitalising on the limited manoeuvring space to regain autonomy and avoid over dependence.

Nonetheless, an effective middle power leadership within G20 has relied upon unbiased, credible and clean image. The likelihood of maintaining such credentials dilutes significantly when choosing sides is increasingly pushed as a strategic necessity [Lee, 2021]. Apparently, the scope for middle power leadership is intractably linked with the changing global power dynamics [Downie, 2017: 1504]. The ongoing global power redistribution hampers the potential of middle powers to lead creatively in G20. This is not to suggest that middle powers are on the verge of becoming irrelevant actors; rather, it is anticipated that they will either act more like a committed partner of a great power or take strides to defend their strategic autonomy.

The cumulative effect of the inability of G7 and Middle Powers to lead global governance by steering G20 hinders the supply of GPGs. In addition to making the G7 and middle powers unlikely contenders, the US-China discord has on occasions directly frustrated the outcomes of G20. Since 2008, the G20 maintained a firm commitment to combating protectionism, however such sacred promise came under attack when Trump opposed it. The American interpretation of China's unfair trade practices has affected not just their bilateral accounts but also the G20's performance. In the 2018 Buenos Aires G20 Summit, the American veto of language addressing protectionism in the leader's final communiqué led to the commitment's decline. The American pressure was vital during the drafting stage of the final communiqué resulting in the avoidance of term "protectionism" altogether. The participants finally settled for a milder reference to the 'benefits of world trade' [Walker, 2018]. Likewise, President Xi regards politicising and weaponizing of food and energy security agenda by US as a major roadblock preventing its resolution [Lo, 2022].

Ideally, every summit meeting necessitates that its members have a shared understanding of common challenges. However, this perception is significantly undermined when the two most powerful members view each other as a greater threat than the common challenges facing the international community. The ongoing US-China rivalry reverberates such tendency inside G20. Resultantly, many global challenges that require US-China cooperation and the supply of GPGs have been inadequately dealt with. For instance, Debt relief is critical issue for low-income and vulnerable middle-income countries (LVMICs). The G20 established the Common Framework for Debt Treatment and the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) to tackle this issue with an intent to bring together major creditors like China and the Paris Club for debt restructuring. The framework requires debt-stricken states to obtain bilateral relief before approaching multilateral institutions, a provision China contests. China prefers assessing debt relief on a case-by-case basis for strategic leverage and wants multilateral bodies to share losses, a demand resisted by the US. The G20's struggle towards Sri Lankan debt relief lucidly illustrates this contradiction. The G20's incoherence was glaringly noticeable as members acting independently through groups like the G7, QUAD and Paris Club, undermining the G20's relevance. Likewise, China has largely addressed the issue bilaterally [Shivamurthy, 2023]. Such prioritizing national interests over coordinated efforts does not bode well with the G20's vision.

The next section illustrates this tendency in reference to the unpredictable nature of climate change negotiations.

3. Strategic Competition and GPGs: Case of Climate Change

The US-China political consensus is a precondition to supply GPGs, and climate change serves as a litmus test. The climate crisis is a worldwide challenge acknowledged globally for its

severe impact on planet Earth. The pressure, from both national and international fronts, for the US and China to collaborate is perhaps most intense in this regard. Under the weight of substantial pressure, constructive collaboration between the US and China *should* materialize through concerted efforts. To put it differently, if these two nations can't find common ground on a crucial matter that jeopardises the planet and aligns with the global consensus on the urgency of action, the likelihood of successfully addressing other, less critical issues with lower consensus becomes even more challenging.

Initially, at the Copenhagen Summit [2009], US-China cooperative leadership on climate action mirrored consensus on aspects like 'common but differentiated responsibility', emission reduction targets etc. [Yu, 2018]. From the 2013 Sunny Lands 'bilateral' meeting to the November 2014 'joint announcement' on climate change and subsequent 'joint Presidential statements' in September 2015, followed by the March 2016 declaration, US-China collaborative leadership activated global efforts for a climate-resilient, green and low-carbon atmosphere. They jointly played a foundational role in pushing the Paris Agreement [The White House, 2016].

In 2014, China, under Xi's leadership, surprised the world by deviating from Deng Xiaoping's 30-year policy of 'never take the lead'. Xi, in a joint announcement with Obama, expressed political willingness to lead efforts towards the climate crisis. Showcasing the willingness, Xi asserted that "addressing climate change and implementing sustainable development is not what we are asked to do, but what we really want to do and we will do well". Over the following two years (2015-16), Xi played a crucial role in promoting the concept of 'ecological civilization', initially articulated by Hu Jintao [Rudd, 2020].

The change in leadership in the US disrupted this mutual commitment. Trump characterized the Paris Agreement as a form of "punishment" for the country, asserting that complying with the U.S. carbon reduction commitments would result in a loss of nearly 3 trillion U.S. dollars in GDP and 6.5 million jobs. Critics contended that Trump's failure to meet climate finance (i.e. Green Climate Fund) commitments eroded global confidence in emission reduction investments [Yu, 2018: 286].

During the Buenos Aires G20 Summit [2018], China urged for joint efforts to address climate threats. Though 19 members of G20 espoused the Paris deal, Trump's withdrawal substantially weakened the trend. In a comparative stance, he criticized China and India for not taking sufficient measures to improve the poor air quality while asserting that the US already has some of the "cleanest air" [India Today, 2019]. Similarly, Trump in 2019 remarked —"China, India, Russia, many other nations, they have not very good air, not very good water in the sense of pollution and cleanliness. They don't do the responsibility" [India Today, 2019]. Moreover, Trump called climate change a 'hoax' and accused scientists of holding a 'political agenda'.

Given US reluctance, one perspective suggested that Beijing could leverage America's reluctance by showcasing responsible leadership. During the American absence, China collaborated with the EU and Canada paving the way for initiatives like the Ministerial on Climate Action (MoCA). However, the endeavour encountered a setback emanating from the geopolitical undercurrent when Huawei's CFO, Meng Wangzhou, was arrested by Canada in 2018, a move influenced by American pressure [Rudd, 2020].

Evaluating the negative effects of the US-China rivalry on climate agenda, Yu remarked—

“The China-U.S. cooperative leadership, once pivotal to fostering strong collective actions of the international community in tackling climate change, is now dormant, causing serious leadership deficits in global climate governance for the time being” [Yu, 2018: 286].

In the US-China dynamics on climate change, leadership roles switch rather too frequently. In a ministerial-level meeting on climate threat in UNSC in 2020, China criticised the US on several fronts— a glaring gap in receipts of climate finance; Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, terming it as a climate-induced security risk and even suggested enforcement measures; and lamented green protectionism [Sikorsky, 2023]. The tables turned with the US leadership change, as the Biden administration renewed American commitment on climate issue. During the G20’s Rome Summit [2021], Biden remarked that— “The disappointment relates to the fact that Russia and ... China basically didn’t show up in terms of any commitments to deal with climate change” [Jones et al., 2021]

At COP 27 in Nov 2022, China was criticised by states from the Global South including ‘Alliance of Small Island States’ for the alleged free ridership on climate mitigation measures and climate finance. The US questioned China’s policy of promoting coal plants [Sikorsky, 2023]. In a striking contrast to its stance during the Paris deal in 2015, Xi declared that China will create its own path and its climate policies will be immune from outside factors. Conditioning its cooperation, China is now asserting that its transition to clean energy depends upon how effectively renewables are able to compensate for the traditional source. In 2022, Xi clarified that China would not abandon coal fired power plants until renewables are potent enough to compensate for the loss, a highly unlikely substitutability [Furchtgott-Roth, 2023].

The strategic rivalry has also intertwined climate mitigation with concerns over economic superiority. It involves prioritizing domestic industries and preventing rivals from gaining advantages in the process. President Biden’s notable ‘Inflation Reduction Act’ implemented in August 2022, drew concern in China as it was perceived as a tactic to boost the U.S. domestic renewables sector, most likely at the cost of Chinese manufacturers. The bill is aimed to enhance competition with China, a major beneficiary of the clean energy transition [Mazzocco, 2022]. Emphasizing the impact of power politics on climate change, Josep Borrell noted—

“Achieving a fair distribution of efforts between countries is particularly complex because climate change, and its antidote, the green transition, are making losers and winners and shaking up the global balance of power. Nevertheless, we must succeed” [Borrell, 2023].

The newest development in tariff politics involves the promulgation of ‘carbon footprint-linked tariffs’ on Chinese imports, designed to incentivize emissions reduction. Chinese policymakers refer to these measures as ‘green trade barriers’, with the intention of potentially undermining competitiveness in global markets [Birnbaum and Shephard, 2023 2023].

The climate discussions have also been held hostage to vicissitudes of strategic diplomacy as witnessed by the pause triggered by Pelosi’s Taiwan visit in Aug 2022. Likewise, the US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific, global geostrategic tensions, technology race etc. adds

uncertainty over sustained climate action [Zhou, Zha, 2023, Mori 2019]. Many scholars regard the cumulative effect of polarisation pull and conditioned supply of GPGs as a tough moment for G20. As Zhou and Zha noted—

“Climate action is caught in the increasingly volatile push-and-pull between cooperative global governance and great power competition, a fraught dynamic readily apparent in relations between China and the United States” [Zhou, Zha, 2023].

Similarly, Gallagher argues that— “Climate is understood by China to be something the U.S. wants, and it’s using climate as a source of leverage in the multifaceted relationship” [Gallagher, 2023]. China may exploit rift within West on matters like climate change to create schism in the transatlantic partnership [Sanger, Perlez, 2017]. In a pessimistic assessment, Jacobs [2023] argues that the cumulative weight of traditional and non-traditional challenges would not be enough to drive US-China cooperation inside G20. Highlighting G20’s leadership crisis, he remarks —

“Global challenges such as climate change, hunger, and disease and regional ones like the Ukraine conflict might be on the table at the G20 meeting, but the two sides are unlikely to make much progress towards resolution as the contention between the United States and China intensifies and others on the side-lines remain unable to lead and find pathways away from the US-China dyad” [Jacob, 2023].

Nevertheless, some notable figures like Kevin Rudd have proposed innovative solutions like ‘mutual strategic literacy’. The approach emphasizes each nation’s awareness of how their actions are perceived by the other. The possibility of developing a ‘joint strategic narrative’ between the US and China hinges upon the recognition of this factor. Its operationalisation involves agreeing on redline principles, e.g. Taiwan; identifying non-lethal security and ideological competition zones; and recognizing areas for strategic cooperation like climate change [Rudd, 2022].

Another positive view is that initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), B3W (now PGII), Trans-African Corridor, etc., are positive parallels competing with BRI as they expand the choice spectrum of the developing world. Thus, the competition does not necessarily scuttle the availability of climate finance but increases its supply [Zhou, Zha, 2023]. This line of reasoning aligns with the argument made in this paper that the ongoing rivalry is producing a leadership crisis in and through G20 without necessarily crippling the supply of GPGs as groups like G7 and China as leadership rivals are more inclined towards acting in silos. How the ROW strikes balance, protects their strategic autonomy and draws GPGs would rely excessively upon their diplomatic and adaptive skills.

Conclusion

The article contends that underlying contradictions that emerged prominently during the Trump era have been evident over the past several years, particularly since 2014. The rivalry pressure has compelled the reorientation of G7 from a benign leader or hegemon of global governance towards a more calculated and strategic forum. Thus, the purpose of G7 is not to lead the uncontested terrain of global governance (as it once did) but to organize itself as a potent homogeneous group restraining authoritative international coalitions and perceived threats.

The G7 is seeking to co-opt democratic allies from the middle powers and the emerging world to expand its circle of comfort. Likewise, China is also vehemently engaged in a balancing act by expanding its own international circle.

In the domain of GPGs, it is rather uncommon to see US and China coming together with an intent to steer global governance. Instead, they are working separately towards erecting parallel mechanisms. The G20 annual summitry are increasingly witnessing tension over old/new issues between the US-China often resulting in suboptimal outcomes. Thus, the powers—US and China—fracturing global order in general cannot pretend to be fixing it through the G20 annual summits. The middle powers are facing a pressure to align, compromising their image and status as a relatively neutral leader of global governance. The polarisation is linking the provision of GPGs to one's political orientations making them more conditional, ad-hoc and interruptive.

The climate change negotiations are just one example of the uncertainty prevailing in the practice of the contemporary phase of global governance. Nonetheless, an optimistic side is that the two powers are engaged in a 'struggle over legitimacy', and the method they have resorted to is by positing themselves as a reliable supplier and leader of GPGs. The future of global governance in general and G20, in particular, is uncertain as sporadic incidents like 2022 Pelosi's Taiwan visit and the 2023 Chinese balloon incident are playing a key role in injecting volatility into the cooperation-conflictual cycle. The scheduled US Presidential elections in Nov 2024 and the new administration's China policy will set the tone for the next half a decade.

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