

# The Effect of 9/11 on US–China Relations

## 11 Eylül'ün ABD–Çin İlişkilerine Etkisi

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### ABSTRACT

The US–China relations are increasingly important for international politics. It is a matter of curiosity what kind of relationship the United States, which is still the hegemonic power, will have with the rising China. As an unexpected event, the 9/11 attacks changed the foreign policy priorities of the United States. Likewise, these attacks caused a significant change in the normal course of China–US relations. This study aimed to respond to the question of how the 9/11 attacks and the events that followed impacted China–US relations. In this study, it is claimed that the 9/11 attacks delayed the rise of China as a top priority in the US foreign policy for a long time. It is argued that the 9/11 attacks prevented the formation of a consistent policy against China. The 9/11 attacks and the developments afterward delayed the US view of China as a strategic competitor.

**Keywords:** 9/11, China, strategic competitor, strategic partner, The US

### ÖZ

ABD ve Çin ilişkileri uluslararası politika için giderek artan bir şekilde önem arz etmektedir. Hala hegemonik güç olan ABD'nin yükselmekte olan Çin ile nasıl bir ilişki biçimi yürüteceği merak konusudur. Beklenmedik bir olay olarak 11 Eylül saldırıları, ABD'nin dış politika önceliklerini değiştirmiştir. Aynı şekilde bu saldırılar, Çin-ABD ilişkilerinin olağan seyrinde önemli bir değişime neden olmuştur. Bu çalışmada, 11 Eylül saldırılarının, Çin'in yükselişinin ABD dış politikasında en temel öncelik olarak görülmesini uzun bir süre için ertelediği iddia edilmektedir. 11 Eylül olayının Çin'e karşı süreklilik arz eden tutarlı bir politikanın oluşmasını engellediği savunulmaktadır. 11 Eylül olayları ve sonrasında yaşanan gelişmeler, ABD'nin Çin'i stratejik bir rakip olarak görmesini ertelemiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** 11 Eylül, Çin, stratejik rakip, stratejik ortak, ABD

### Introduction

The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq were the most important developments that shaped the first decade of the twenty-first century. These developments appear to be the main factors shaping the international order that emerged after the Cold War. The developments experienced after 9/11 not only changed the outlook of international politics in general but also created a significant change in China–US relations.

The attacks led to the United States launching a global war on terrorism, which included military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The United States sought to build a coalition of nations to support its efforts in the war on terrorism, and China was seen as an important player in this coalition. The impact of 9/11 on US–China relations was complex and multifaceted.

9/11 can be considered a critical juncture, as it had a profound impact on global politics and shaped the foreign policy of many countries. Critical junctures are times when more radical change is possible. Critical junctures constitute the starting points for many historical developments (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 341). A critical juncture is a significant event or turning point that has the potential to shape the direction or course of events in the future. 9/11 changed the US perception of China and triggered the evolution of relations with China in a different direction.

It is seen that the best theory that can explain the change in the US perception of China is the constructivist theory. According to the constructive theory, the relationship between states is shaped by a combination of material factors and ideational factors, such as shared values and common interests. Security and military cooperation between the United States and China increased as both countries viewed the terrorism threat as a common concern.

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The constructivist theory argues that the identities and interests of states will change over the course of interaction between them (Wendt, 1999, p. 367). International politics is determined by the beliefs and expectations that the actors have about each other. It is the process of constantly acquiring various identities and forming counter-identities within the framework of states' relations with others (Wendt, 1999, pp. 20–21). Constructivist theorists emphasize that the system of shared ideas, beliefs, and values has a decisive influence on the actions of states (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 196). Constructivists argue that actors are deeply social, and their interests are shaped in the process of social interaction and are a result of identity acquisition (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 199). The social structures that determine the identities and interests of states are formed through mutual interaction (Wendt, 1992, p. 406).

Developments in the late 1990s led to tense relations between China and the United States. The 9/11 attacks highlighted cooperation rather than competition in Sino–US relations. In the US war on terror, China was seen as a “strategic partner” rather than a “strategic competitor.” After 9/11, relations between the two countries gradually developed and deepened throughout the 2000s. By the 2010s, the rivalry between the two countries became more visible again. The rivalry between the two countries peaked with the trade wars that started during the period of former president Donald Trump. Today, the United States sees the rise of China as the most fundamental challenge in foreign policy.

This study tried to find an answer to the question of how the 9/11 attacks and the developments after them affected China–US relations. In this framework, first, the general course of relations in the period before 9/11 was discussed. Afterward, the change in relations with 9/11 was examined. Then, the re-dominance of competition in China–US relations was analyzed. Finally, the effect of 9/11 on the relations between the two countries was discussed. The process tracing method is used in this study.

### **US–China Relations Before 9/11**

During the World War II, US–China relations were quite good. In the Chinese Civil War after 1945, the United States supported the nationalists because of the ideologically competitive nature of the Cold War. Relations with the United States came to a standstill when the victorious Communist Party in the civil war seized power in mainland China in 1949. The Korean War (1950–1953) brought the two countries into a state of open conflict. Until the reconciliation between Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon in 1971–1972, the two countries saw each other as enemies (Moore, 2010, p. 130). The shared perception that the Soviet Union was an increasing threat brought the two sides together by the 1970s, and conflicts were kept to a minimum for nearly two decades (Koehler, 2013, p. 92).

The reconciliation that started in the 1970s and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 made the United States and China allies again. An unprecedented level of military and strategic cooperation took place between the two countries in the 1980s. This strategic cooperation situation came to an end in 1989 when China brutally suppressed the pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. The United States ended military cooperation with China and began imposing sanctions on the country (Moore, 2010, p. 130). The US government reacted to the Tiananmen Square events by canceling existing arms deals, ending military-to-military exchanges, imposing sanctions on the regime, including travel bans on high-ranking officials, suspending loans and export credits, and tightening controls on military hardware and advanced technology exports to China (Koehler, 2013, p. 92). After the Tiananmen Square events in 1989, the United States began to see China as an unsuccessful modernizer, despite its growing capabilities. China, on the other hand, perceived the United States as a hegemonic power carrying out imperial policies (Thies, 2016, p. 105).

In the 1970s, the United States saw China as a secondary actor that helped to balance the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, China was seen as a country that had made positive economic and political reforms. The United States encouraged and supported China's move toward economic and political openness. China's reforms were creating a relationship of mutual interdependence that benefited the two countries (Thies, 2016, p. 105).

Until the 1990s, the United States had no concerns about its own global power. Therefore, the United States did not perceive China's rise to a great power position as a threat to itself. This presented China with an important opportunity to develop its own power capabilities (Thies, 2016, p. 106). The collapse of the Soviet Union undermined the strategic relations between the United States and China (Koehler, 2013, p. 92). The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to the decline of China's geostrategic importance to the United States and Western countries. Therefore, Western countries, especially the United States, have started to adopt a more critical attitude toward China.

China's economic and political openness has widened the spectrum of acceptable behavior in the international arena. When the Tiananmen Square events signaled that China would limit political openness, this spectrum began to narrow for the United States and Western countries (Thies, 2016, p. 106). On the other hand, China attempted to mend its strained official ties with the United States and other Western countries after 1989 (Jia, 2008, p. 45). The impact of the Tiananmen Square events began to fade in the mid-1990s. Cooperation in China–US relations has started to come to the fore again.

The US–China relations, which had been positive since the mid-1990s, evolved in a different direction in 1999. The intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the issue of the Buddhist Falun Gong sect and the accusations made against China for trying to leak the US military information were at the forefront of disruptive events that changed the course of bilateral relations (Pekcan, 2019, p. 79).

The US-led NATO's intervention in Kosovo without a UN resolution was seen as a threat to China. Faced with the challenge of different ethnic and religious problems, China was concerned that a similar situation would be displayed against it (Pekcan, 2019, p. 79). The bombing of the Chinese Embassy during NATO's intervention in Kosovo led to massive protests and harsh reactions in China. The “accidental” bombing of the Chinese embassy by the United States and the subsequent demonstrations by Chinese demonstrators in front of US diplomatic and consular representatives brought the relations between the two countries to a freezing point (Qingguo,

2003, p. 161; Sutter, 2020, p. 217). Although the US Government said that the bombing of the embassy was “accidental,” China has never believed it.

During the George W. Bush election campaign, he strongly condemned President Clinton’s policy of improving relations with China. Emphasizing China’s ideological preferences and ambitions, Bush opposed the development of cooperation with China (Qingguo, 2003, p. 162). Bush criticized the Clinton administration’s China policy for being too soft during the presidential election campaign. He stated that it was wrong to see China as a “strategic partner” but rather a “strategic competitor” (deLisle, 2011).

Evaluating Clinton’s policies toward China as weak, Bush emphasized that he would pursue harder policies toward China. In his first year in power, the Bush administration declared more openly its support for Taiwan by suspending the strategic partnership framework that the former Clinton administration tried to carry out. In April 2001, the Bush Administration pledged to support Taiwan at all costs against any Chinese attack (Sutter, 2020, p. 217).

In the early years of his presidency, Bush took a tough stance against China within the framework of the promises he had made during the election process. When Bush took the presidency, although he made phone calls with almost all the leaders of major countries, he did not call the Chinese President Jiang Zemin (Qingguo, 2003, p. 162).

The April 2001 collision of a US reconnaissance plane with a Chinese jet plane in the South China Sea strained relations between the two countries. This accident led to an increase in tension and distrust between Washington and Beijing. Both sides made statements accusing the other side (Qingguo, 2003, p. 162). After the accident with the US spotter plane, China detained the crew of the plane, and the United States declared that it would do everything to support Taiwan. This caused bilateral relations to continue on a conflicting ground (deLisle, 2011). The plane crash incident caused the United States to perceive China as a potential threat and to increase its support for Taiwan.

The Quadrennial Defense Review, the main public document that analyzes the US strategic goals and potential military threats and explains its military doctrine, named China as a potential threat in 2001 and tried to determine a basic framework for the United States to deal with China (Qingguo, 2003, p. 163). Bilateral relations were tense during the first months of the Bush administration. The United States condemned China’s oppression of minorities, including Christians, Muslims, and Dalai Lama followers, as well as its ban on the Buddhist Falun Gong sect. The Bush administration said that China was heavily curtailing religious freedoms. In the pre-9/11 period, the notion of the “Chinese threat” and the idea that the rise of China would inevitably lead to a conflict with the United States were especially expressed by neoconservatives (deLisle, 2011).

The Bush administration sought to further develop strategic cooperation with Japan and India. The United States developed new proposals under the name of “regional dialogue” with its traditional allies, Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Simultaneously, the United States attempted to develop cooperation with Russia against China (Qingguo, 2003, p. 162). At that time, Chinese policymakers were concerned about the hawkish policies of the Bush administration (Moore, 2010, p. 134).

Debate about “the China threat” heated up in the United States before 9/11 (Koehler, 2013, p. 92). Bush was determined to deepen collaboration with US allies in Asia while downplaying China’s influence (Koehler, 2013, p. 93). The Bush administration emphasized the US–Japan partnership as the key focus for US Asia–Pacific objectives and rediscovered India as a counterbalancer. These attempts aimed to downgrade China’s influence and weaken Sino–US relations (Chen, 2008, p. 59). When these policies of the Bush administration are evaluated as a whole, it is clear that America was implementing a containment policy toward China.

In relations between China and the United States, the period before 9/11 can be described as a period when differences decreased but conflicts increased. As a result of the policy of opening up in the late 1970s, China became more integrated into the world economy than ever before. American influence extended beyond the economic sphere and into the cultural sphere. American culture was more widespread than it had ever been in previous periods. Although the differences between the two countries were still huge, it could be seen as a period in which the differences were diminishing as never before in history. Despite this, tensions between the two countries continued to rise (Qingguo, 2003, pp. 159–160).

Due to the US status as the lone superpower in the post–Cold War world, Chinese decision-makers have paid a lot of attention to the United States. They perceived the United States as a global and Pacific force in historical, economic, security, and political terms. The Chinese officials had a realistic awareness of the role of United States in global affairs and wanted to enhance ties with the United States (Liu, 2017, p. 6).

While President George W. Bush campaigned on the idea that China was a “strategic competitor,” and many in his administration saw China as a potential adversary, a group of top officials worked to establish a more stable, cooperative, and long-term relationship with Beijing (Shambaugh, 2017, p. 200). China, on the other hand, was constantly attempting to maintain ties with the United States before 9/11 (Jia, 2008, p. 45). Although there were some attempts to get Sino–US relations back on track in the pre-9/11 period, relations continued to be out of balance.

### **Changing China–US Relations with 9/11**

The 9/11 attacks changed the foreign policy priorities of the United States. By the attacks, China was seen as an actor to cooperate with rather than a competitor (Sutter, 2020, p. 217). The 9/11 attacks became an important turning point in China–US relations and relations began to develop rapidly (Pekcan, 2019, p. 81). The Chinese government offered condolences immediately after the attacks. China declared its strong support for the US war on terror (Qingguo, 2003, p. 164).

China voted in favor of the United States in resolutions against terrorism in the United Nations Security Council and encouraged Pakistan to cooperate with the United States. China directly supported the attempts of the United States to create an international consensus against terrorism (Qingguo, 2003, p. 164). President Bush, who attended the APEC summit held in Shanghai in October 2001, made his first overseas visit to China after the 9/11 attacks (Pekcan, 2019, p. 81). The Shanghai Summit played an important role in increasing international support for the United States. It was also the first concrete indicator of the change in bilateral relations.

China's cooperative efforts eventually drew positive responses from the Bush administration (Jia, 2008, p. 51). President Bush praised China for its quick response in expressing its support for the United States. He emphasized that US–China relationship was extremely important. He also stated that China is a wonderful country and that it is not an enemy. He saw China as a friend, and his administration was dedicated to fostering open, cooperative, and constructive relations with China (Jia, 2008, p. 52). After the attacks, both countries committed to sharing intelligence. While China has taken initiatives to prevent the financing of those who carry out activities that are seen as terrorism, the United States has started to see the East Turkestan Islamic Movement as a terrorist organization (Pekcan, 2019, p. 92).

The most important impact of the 9/11 attacks on China's security policy was that the global focus on terrorism gave China the opportunity to justify its Uyghur policy in Xinjiang (Fishman, 2011, p. 53). The 9/11 attacks directly affected the Uyghur issue and China's policy toward the Xinjiang autonomous region. The US war on terror on a global scale has presented a very good opportunity for China to introduce the Uyghur issue as a terrorist threat. In response to China's support in the US war against terrorism, the United States has included Uyghur organizations such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement on the terrorist list (Sun, 2021, p. 26). Without 9/11, it would not have been possible for China to present the Uyghur issue as a terrorism issue so easily. The US war on terrorism prevented China from facing stronger international pressure on its Uyghur policy (Sun, 2021, p. 26). China has reached the ease of presenting the Uyghur issue, which it has had to deal with for many years, to the international arena under the name of terrorism. China has gained the comfort of fending off international criticism against itself in the name of fighting terrorism. The US war on terrorism has provided a framework within which China could legitimize its oppressive policies.

The United States required China's assistance in providing international support for its counterterrorism strategy, particularly in the United Nations Security Council (Moore, 2010, p. 134). The policy of war on terror has absorbed the energies of the more hawkish members of the Bush administration, causing it to postpone dealing with China until a future time (Moore, 2010, p. 134). Human rights criticisms against China softened after 9/11 and the Bush administration began to use more moderate expressions (deLisle, 2011).

The focus of the United States on international issues such as the war on terror, Iraq, and North Korea has created a positive climate in its relations with China (Pekcan, 2019, p. 82). In the National Security Strategy of the Bush administration in 2002, it was stated that the United States welcomed a strong, peaceful, and prosperous China (Kang, 2007, p. 190). In 2005, then US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick called for China to be a "responsible stakeholder" in international relations (Kang, 2007, p. 191). China was encouraged to take a role as a "responsible stakeholder" with the United States in resolving global issues (Sutter, 2020, p. 217). The Bush administration, which had tried to contain China in the early stages of its rule, was now trying to give China a new international role.

The main reason for China's solidarity was the opportunity to profit by assuming the role of a good global actor and establishing friendly relations with the United States (Roy, 2017, p. 323). The Chinese government's backing for the US war on terrorism has helped to restore stability in the relationship (Liu, 2017, p. 5). After 9/11, Sino-American relations had been at their most stable since the decade-long decline and frequent fluctuation that began with the events of June 1989 (Shambaugh, 2017, p. 197). China's support of the US war on terror had certainly created a new stability in bilateral ties.

International strategies such as "peaceful rise" and "harmonious world" developed by China in the 2000s also laid the ground for the development of China–US relations (Moore, 2010, p. 131). Economic growth and empowerment was China's main interest. Chinese leaders wished China to become one of the world's great powers. They saw economic power as the basis of military power and great power. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) knew that in order to stay in power, it had to raise the income level of the Chinese people. The legitimacy of the CCP is largely based on its ability to sustain the economic development of Chinese society (Moore, 2010, p. 134). Exports were at the core of the Chinese growth model. The United States was China's number one export market (Moore, 2010, p. 134).

In order to sustain economic development, the existence of a peaceful order in the international arena was of great importance for China. China was trying to establish good relations not only with the United States but also with other countries. Conceptions of "peaceful rise" and "harmonious world" were based on the thesis that China's rise would not pose a threat to other countries.

Jiang Zemin, who was the president of China in the 1990s, was pursuing an "America first" policy. During this period, China gave more priority and importance to its relations with the United States. China's relations with other countries were of secondary importance. A series of changes occurred in China's foreign policy orientation under Hu Jintao, who became the Chinese president in 2004. China's foreign policy rhetoric has changed. Hu Jintao began to invest more in relations with other countries rather than prioritizing the United States. It can be said that the tendency of US president Bush to act unilaterally and the invasion of Iraq were effective in this change in China's foreign policy (Moore, 2010, p. 130). Although China still attaches great importance to its relations with the United States in the 2000s, it has also sought to diversify its relations. China has begun to attach increasing importance to its relations with other countries and regions.

The US–China relations were in the best shape since the normalization of relations between the two countries, due to both sides' cooperative efforts (Jia, 2008, p. 52). After September 2001, it was seen that the engagement in China–US relations strengthened and cooperation deepened. This has led some US ruling elites to voice the "G-2" proposal, which evokes the cooperation of the world's two

leading powers in tackling global issues. During the 2000s, there was pragmatism and positive engagement in the relations between the two countries, as the Chinese and American governments were preoccupied with pressing domestic problems and different priorities in foreign policy (Sutter, 2020, p. 218).

### **Rivalry Again in the US–China Relations**

The long-term differences between the two countries did not disappear despite the pragmatic engagement after the 9/11 attacks (Sutter, 2020, p. 218). By the 2010s, the global landscape was changing. China was rapidly modernizing its military capabilities. China's rising power capabilities led to a more assertive foreign policy (Koehler, 2013, p. 91).

The US former president Barack Obama, who came to power after the 2008 economic crisis, sought to maintain stability in relations between the two countries. China, which was not affected by the economic crisis as much as Western countries, began to adopt a more assertive foreign policy. The Obama administration sought to respond to this new stance of China by having a broad engagement with the Asia-Pacific region (Sutter, 2020, p. 218). Within the framework of policies called “rebalancing” or “pivot to Asia,” the United States tried to give its main priority in the international arena to Asia-Pacific, which is the fastest-growing region in the world economy (Nye, 2021).

The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq delayed US attempts to limit China's power and influence for at least a decade. When the Bush administration came to power, this strategy was at the top of its agenda. However, the implementation of this strategy was only possible when the Obama administration declared its “pivot to Asia” policy in 2011 (Lieven, 2021, p. 20). As a result of its war on terror policy, the United States was stuck in the Middle East and could not focus enough on the economic development of East Asia.

Although China–US relations had been good after the 9/11 attacks, it started to become tense toward the end of the 2000s. Cooperation in bilateral relations gave way to competition over time. However, it can be said that both countries avoided fierce competition until the presidential term of Donald Trump. There was a significant break in bilateral relations during the Trump era.

The Trump administration, more than any other US administration since the normalization of China–US relations in the 1970s, signaled a radical shift in US policy toward China. China was viewed by the Trump administration as a malicious competitor rather than a committed partner (Sutter, 2020, p. 219). The rivalry between the United States and China has evolved into a very tense period, reaching its culminating point with policies called “trade wars.”

During the 2000 election campaign, presidential candidate George W. Bush harshly criticized President Bill Clinton's use of the notion of a “strategic partnership” against China and suggested that China be viewed as a “strategic competitor.” It took almost two decades for the United States to rename China a “strategic competitor” and to be seen as the most important strategic challenger. President Biden calls today's US–China relations “extreme competition” (Sun, 2021, pp. 25–26). The days when the United States saw China as a “responsible stakeholder” and China saw America as a useful “partner” are in the past (Cox, 2021, p. 11). Now, both countries refer to the other with hostile images (Cox, 2021, p. 11).

If 9/11 is not considered the death knell for America's greatness, it will undoubtedly be seen as a catalyst for the country's decline (Walt, 2021). By the 2000s, the center of gravity in the world economy and trade began to shift from the West to the Asia-Pacific region. Despite this, the United States had only paid sporadic attention to East Asia, particularly in times of crisis (Thacker-Kumar & Campbell, 2006, p. 99).

The 9/11 attack created a dramatic shift in the US national security strategy, plunging the country into the swamp of the war on terror. For nearly two decades, the war on terror has been a central theme of US national security strategy. The fight against terrorism remained a priority until the US strategic priorities were reviewed by the Trump and Biden administrations. In the process that became more evident with Trump and continues with Biden, the struggle for great power, especially China, has once again become the main priority of the United States, replacing the war on terror (Sun, 2021, p. 25). It can be said that there is a general consensus among the US ruling elite to adopt a more competitive and tough stance toward China. This harsh attitude is now seen as a non-partisan issue. There is a general opinion between Democrats and Republicans on this issue, except for minor differences.

The rise of China and the need for a strong military response to it have become the main agenda of the budget discussions in Washington (Hartung, 2021, p. 19). The justification for keeping US military spending high after the war on terror began to be the rise of China (Hartung, 2021, p. 18). China has become the new justification for keeping the Pentagon's budget high as usual (Hartung, 2021, p. 18).

Today, the vast majority of China's behavior is interpreted as a hindrance to the United States and the West-centered global order (Thies, 2016, p. 106). As its capabilities increase in absolute and relative terms, China rejects and changes the roles assigned to itself by the United States. China's relations with the United States become more conflicted and hostile as it moves away from its expected role (Thies, 2016, p. 106).

The dominance of competition in US–China relations has also changed the approach of the US to the Uyghur issue. In 2020, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement was removed from the list of terrorist organizations of the United States (Sun, 2021, p. 26). The removal of the organization from the terrorist list was another indication of the changing of America's policy toward China. Today, the Uyghur issue and China's policies in Xinjiang are closely followed by the international community.

In recent years, the perception that China is an equal competitor that can replace the United States with its economic growth has become quite widespread (Sutter, 2020, p. 219). This perception causes Sino–US relations to become more and more tense. Today,

bilateral relations have evolved into a competitive relationship with almost all dimensions. Although the relations between the two countries have almost always been a combination of cooperation and competition, now the areas of competition have largely left behind the areas of cooperation. The rivalry between the two countries is felt in the economic, diplomatic, military-strategic, technological, political, civil society, in some ways education and research, regional and increasingly global spheres. This broadly competitive nature of relations will continue to characterize US–China relations. This competitive situation in bilateral relations is now seen as the “new normal” (Shambaugh, 2020, p. 352).

In the National Security Strategy of 2018, the biggest threat to the security and global influence of the United States was stated as “great power competition” (Hartung, 2021, p. 19). Today, the primary national security concern of the United States is no longer terrorism, but rather a great power struggle. The rivalry between the United States and China is ultimately about which country offers a better way for development. Economically and militarily, the United States is still the most powerful actor. However, its international legitimacy and prestige as a leading country in democracy have been severely damaged by human rights violations and its own political inadequacies in a war on terror that has been unwinnable for two decades since 9/11 (Sky, 2021, p. 6).

The policies implemented by the United States at home and abroad after 9/11 caused the spread of authoritarianism on a global scale rather than democracy. Regime change attempts from outside have not led to liberal democracies in Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead, authoritarianism has risen. Contrary to expectations, China did not integrate into the US-based international order. Moreover, China offers an alternative model of prosperity and power. The “Chinese model” of authoritarian state capitalism, in which it is possible to open up to the global economy without political liberalization, has become an attractive model for autocrats everywhere (Sky, 2021, pp. 5–6).

Although 9/11 and the war on terror led to the most important change in US foreign policy in the post–Cold War era, it was the rise of China that would lead to a much more significant change in the long run. China still lags behind the United States in per capita income, military power, and soft power. However, it is seen that China specializes in many economic areas. China is closing the gap with the United States in many other areas. The United States is faced with a more powerful and richer China, which is expected to become the world’s largest economy in the near future and is rapidly modernizing its military power (deLisle, 2011).

It can be said that there is some kind of connection between 9/11 and the most significant development in the next two decades, China’s ever-growing presence on the world stage. Undoubtedly, without the attack, there would have been a rise in China’s power and status. But America’s war on terror has made the United States ready for all kinds of concessions in order to build bridges with potential rivals like China. At the time, this could have been seen as a necessary and reasonable policy. However, the US obsession with endless wars in the Middle East has allowed China to steadily progress toward becoming a great power without any hindrance (Cox, 2021, p. 10). The 9/11 attacks and the war on terror created a very favorable international environment for China to continue its economic development.

The distraction of the United States by 9/11 delayed the recognition of China as a primary threat to the United States. The fact that China is no longer seen as an emerging power that needs to be curbed has given China more time to focus on economic development (Sun, 2021, p. 25). The policies implemented by the United States after 9/11 accelerated the change in the international balance of power (Bacevich, 2021, p. 33; Sun, 2021, p. 25). America’s abuse of military power has accelerated the emergence of a multipolar world (Bacevich, 2021, p. 32).

The main goal of China is to create a peaceful environment conducive to its economic development. Chinese policymakers have seen the first two decades of the twenty-first century as a “strategic opportunity” for China to grow its economy (Liu, 2017, p. 16). The focus of the United States on the war on terror after 9/11 facilitated China’s reach toward its strategic goal of becoming a great power.

The 9/11 attack and the war on terror have diminished the ability of the United States to respond effectively to China’s extraordinary rise. The developments that took place after 9/11 have distracted the attention of US leaders and policymakers, preventing them from focusing sufficiently on the problems that will be created by the rise of China (deLisle, 2011). The high cost of the war on terror has consumed US resources, reducing the resources that the United States will allocate to dealing with China’s economic and military rise and its repercussions (deLisle, 2011).

The developments experienced after 9/11 have reduced the possibility of the United States putting pressure on China to change its behavior. The attempts of United States to suspend international law from time to time and the human rights violations in its war on terror have prevented America from putting pressure on other countries about universal rights (deLisle, 2011). While the soft power of the United States was gradually eroding after 9/11, that of China was rising (deLisle, 2011). With 9/11, while the United States focused on the fight against terrorism, China continued to focus on economic development. China has become a more attractive actor for many countries that see economic development as their main priority.

As a result, the 9/11 attacks reshaped US foreign policy priorities, preventing the country from developing a stable policy toward the rise of China. The fact that 9/11 further bifurcated the political tendencies among the US ruling elite has also made it difficult to produce a continuous policy.

## Conclusion

In contrast to the United States, which is the world’s largest developed economy, China is the greatest emerging economy on the planet. Because of that the Sino-American relations are both vital and complicated. Before the 9/11 attacks, US–China relations had entered into a tense period. The “accidental” bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the US-led NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the allegations that China was trying to leak military information about the United States, the collision of a US reconnaissance plane with a Chinese jet plane in the South China Sea in April 2001, etc. all these events led to a period of intense competition

in the relations between the two countries. During the presidential campaign, George W. Bush criticized the Clinton administration's soft attitude toward China. When come to power, Bush declared that he would take a harsh stance against China. He had called China a "strategic competitor" rather than a "strategic partner."

The 9/11 attacks led to the beginning of a new era in US–China relations. 9/11 reshaped the US foreign policy priorities. China eventually came to be seen as a major actor to cooperate with rather than an adversary to compete with. China supported the US war on terror due to its own fears of terrorism. Supporting the war on terror provided China with an opportunity to restore its relations with the United States. The 9/11 attacks, as a critical juncture, had created stability in bilateral ties. Sino-American relations had been at their most stable for a decade during the 2000s.

During the 2000s, China–US relations gradually developed, and the cooperation between the two countries deepened. Therefore, some officials in the United States had called on China to play the role of a responsible stakeholder in the international system. China was expected to be more proactive in supporting international norms and institutions and to work cooperatively with other countries to address global challenges. Moreover, some scholars used the term "G-2" to refer to an alliance between the US and China, in which the two countries would work together to shape the international system.

Toward the 2010s, the United States began to see China as a competitor once more. The US former president Barack Obama started to shift America's economic and political focus to the Asia-Pacific region with his "pivot to Asia" policy. During the presidency of Donald Trump, relations between the two countries experienced their most tense years since diplomatic contacts began in the late 1970s. Trade wars can be described as the peak of the rivalry between the two countries.

Today, it can be said that there is serious competition in almost every aspect of bilateral relations. The rivalry between the two countries is increasingly felt on a regional and global scale. It is expected that the competitive nature of bilateral relations will continue to characterize US–China relations. There is a nonpartisan consensus to adopt a more competitive and tough stance toward China.

The 9/11 attack, as a critical juncture, caused a significant change in the perception of China in the US, albeit temporarily. Before the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration considered China a "strategic competitor." After 9/11, both countries developed a strategic cooperation relationship in the war on terror. It took almost two decades for the United States to see China as a strategic competitor again. However, during this 20-year period, a significant change took place in the balance of power between the two countries. In this period, while the international power and prestige of the United States eroded, China's gradually increased. While China has risen to a very strong position in the international system compared to 20 years ago, the United States is in a weaker position.

The 9/11 attack, as an unexpected event, prevented the United States from producing consistent policies against China for a long time. The high cost of the war on terror has prevented the United States from allocating enough resources to overcome the rise of China and its repercussions. The 9/11 event and its aftermath delayed the ability of the United States to see China as a strategic competitor and to assess China's rise as one of the major challenges in its foreign policy for a long time. The main priority given by the United States to short-term challenges such as 9/11 has led to its inability to respond to long-term challenges.

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