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THE US “STRATEGY OF DISRUPTION” AGAINST CHINA

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The US is widely recognised as the world's leading superpower due to its dominant economy, the most powerful military, the highest defence budget and pivotal role in global financial institutions.¹ However, China's rapid rise as the world's second-largest economy with substantial exports, heavy investments in Asia, Africa and Latin America and a 'win-win strategy' under a peaceful coexistence approach to bolster its global presence has put the US in a challenging situation and complicating their bilateral relations.² Although the US has an advantage over China economically, militarily and technologically, China's growing dominance in international markets, military presence in the South China Sea, and technological advancements are worrisome for the US.

To maintain its competitive edge, the US has adopted a passive-aggressive stance towards China. In his recent speech at the NATO Summit 2021, President Biden emphasised the importance of not working with 'autocratic powers' such as China and Russia, which pose multifaceted threats.³ The US has labelled China a 'revisionist power,' its 'strategic competitor' and the 'biggest geopolitical concern,' according to the National Security Strategy of 2022.⁴ The US remains vigilant to counter China's influence and maintains a competitive edge while collaborating with its allies on common causes, technology, economy and defence. Coalitions like QUAD and AUKUS are being formed to work towards such objectives.⁵

In essence, the US has adopted a multifaceted strategy to **DISRUPT** China's increasing economic, technological and diplomatic outreach. The **STRATEGY OF DISRUPTION** refers to various tactics, procedures and actions defined by a state in the international arena to address potential risks and threats to its national interests posed by rivals. This strategy is implemented to restrict the adversary's ability and capacity to expand its influence, slow down the pace of success, and discourage aggressive behaviour.



The 'US Strategy of Disruption' against China manifests through diplomatic, technological, military and economic means. This strategy may be because the US does not possess, anymore, the wherewithal and strategic liberty of action to **COMPETE and WIN** against China in the evolving world order. In fact, the Chinese strategy has used the existing international political and economic structures and mechanisms, such as the UN and WTO, evolved post-World War II to its advantage, outmanoeuvring the US on the global stage. As a result, the US appears to be changing the game's rules to maintain its dominance by reverting to old tactics like unilateralism, geopolitics and protectionism instead of multilateralism, geoeconomics and free trade.

Diplomatically, the US is trying to limit China's actions across various fronts. China has been accused of engaging in illicit trade practices, violating human rights, stealing intellectual property, and having territorial ambitions, which the US continues to condemn.⁶ The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, which the US has implemented, has identified China as the only country seeking regional hegemony and utilising 'predatory economic' strategies to pressure others.⁷ Additionally, the US is attempting to restrict China's involvement in multilateral organisations such as the UN, WTO and WHO.⁸ The US collaborates with ASEAN states in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Myanmar, Laos,

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and Vietnam to counteract China's growing influence. To ensure its economic security, presence and influence, the US has lifted sanctions from ASEAN states, especially Myanmar, to allow US companies to access the region's abundant resources.⁹

The US has largely ignored China's efforts to resolve significant contentious issues through peace initiatives. China has recently brokered a Saudi-Iran rapprochement, proposed a peace plan for Ukraine, and put forth another initiative to resolve the Palestinian issue. However, the US has downplayed or given no reaction to these peace initiatives taken by China. The US seems concerned about China's growing diplomatic influence, particularly after establishing its economic prowess. At the G-7 Summit in Hiroshima on May 21, 2023, President Biden announced plans to send more weapons and ammunition to the Ukraine war while inviting the President of Ukraine as a special guest and speaker at the 3-day summit.

US has adopted "Strategy of Disruption", because it does not possess, anymore, the wherewithal and strategic liberty of action to COMPETE and WIN against China in the emerging global order.

In the technology domain, the US perceives China's technological progress, specifically in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and 5G wireless networks, as a strategic threat.¹⁰ As a result, the US has launched a campaign to criticise and diminish China's technological advancements, claiming that China has used them for malicious purposes, such as espionage and cyber-attacks, which endanger US national security. However, the truth is that the US is striving to maintain its economic competitiveness and protect its companies from competition, even from countries considered allies, to sustain its dominance. The US has banned Chinese tech firms, including Hikvision, Megvii, Sense Time, Huawei, ZTE and TikTok, from doing business with US companies, arguing that they could be coerced into providing covert information about their customers as they are affiliated with the Chinese government.¹¹ The Trump administration also prohibited 800 Chinese drones from being used to monitor US government facilities, citing national security concerns.¹² The technology industry for semiconductors and chips is facing intense scrutiny in the US as measures are being implemented to limit China's manufacturing capabilities. Taiwan's TSMC and South Korea manufacture 92% of the highest-performing chips,¹³ while the US drastically reduced chip production from 37% in 1990 to 10%.¹⁴ To increase its output of chip technology, the US

has restricted China's manufacturing capabilities of NAND-type flash memory with over 128 layers and logic circuits with technology generations below 14-16 nm to produce advanced semiconductors.¹⁵ Other countries such as Japan, the Netherlands, the EU and Germany have also implemented similar restrictions on Chinese semiconductor exports.¹⁶

Militarily, the US is increasing its military presence and influence in regions where China is also expanding its investment and military power, such as the Asia-Pacific, Middle East and Africa. China established its first military outpost in Djibouti in 2017 and naval bases in Equatorial Guinea, causing concern for the Biden administration.¹⁷ As a result, the US has increased engagement with African states, particularly Equatorial Guinea.¹⁸ The US has strengthened security ties with Australia, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore through regular military exercises under the Indo-Pacific Strategy 2020.¹⁹ The US announced in 2020 that it would deploy 60% of its warships in the Asia-Pacific, making it more responsive to China's growing influence.²⁰ Moreover, the US provided Taiwan with advanced military equipment in 2021 to resist China's aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea.²¹ The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was established among Australia, India, the US and Japan to counter China's global reach as part of the US Strategy of Disruption.²² In addition, the US is constructing four new military bases in the northern Philippines, which may provoke China as it would provide US forces with a strategically located staging ground close to southern China and Taiwan.²³

On the economic front, the US is reevaluating its economic strategies due to China's significant economic growth and potential threat to US interests. In 2018-2019, President Trump used Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 to impose trade tariffs on China totalling \$200 billion.²⁴ These tariffs aimed to hinder China's industrial growth and resulted in a trade war between the two countries. As a result, China's imports to the US decreased from 22% to 18%.²⁵ The US has also enacted the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act 2022, prohibiting imports from Xinjiang due to alleged forced labour practices.²⁶ Additionally, the US is working on controlling major Chinese supply chains crucial for producing renewable energy sources as part of its transition from fossil fuels.²⁷ Even though the disruption of the low-cost supply chain from China will cause short-term economic pain, but protection against China's inevitable disruptions of future US consumption is a priority for the US.²⁸ The US has organised a Global Summit on Supply Chain Resilience in 2021 and is working on a free trade and investment agreement to encourage its partners to collaborate against China.²⁹

Similarly, in South Asia, the US is working on diplomatic efforts to undermine the CPEC project, claiming that China is trapping Pakistan and other countries in debt (generally termed as a 'debt trap') to gain economic dominance. India also opposes the CPEC project, as its successful completion will strengthen China's position in the region. This could also lead to Pakistan becoming a strong economic player, undermining India's hegemonic designs in the region and the US's global position. Recent political and economic turmoil in Sri Lanka and Pakistan and instability in Iran and Afghanistan can be viewed in the larger context of the US Strategy of Disruption.

In Africa, China has become a top trading partner of several African countries, with trade amounting to \$254 billion in 2021.³⁰ However, the US has disapproved of China's investments in manufacturing, telecommunication, agro-processing and infrastructure projects across African nations, particularly South Africa.³¹ China is often accused of imposing debt traps on African states through loans. The US has emphasised its Africa Strategy to safeguard African open societies from China and Russia's harmful activities.³²

On the domestic front, looking at China's economic growth pattern before COVID and its economic performance afterwards, it appears that the US Strategy of Disruption is succeeding in some measures also. In 2019, China's growth rate was 5.95%, but in 2020 it slowed to 2.24%. Although it experienced a brief boost of 8.45% in 2021, it dropped to 3% in 2022³³ - significantly lower than its annual growth rate of 10% since 1978.³⁴ This economic downturn will likely highlight the development gap between China's western and eastern regions.

Thus, the question remains as to what the likely end-state of the US Strategy of Disruption against China would be. Does the US expect that this passive or defensive strategic

approach would stop the Chinese rise? Keeping in mind that any strategy has a temporal limit, **it appears that the US is utilising its Strategy of Disruption to impede, slow down and disrupt Chinese economic rise to eventually gain a window of opportunity for exploiting China's internal fault lines to create 'Implosion' within China, like Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, etc.** These politico-socio-economic fault lines exist as alleged and so-called narratives of human rights violations in Xinjiang, disaffection within Hong Kong, security irritants over Taiwan, autocratic political structures, etc. Subsequently, by taking advantage of the US' widespread military presence in areas and regions surrounding China, the US can always exert military pressure on China by involving it in military conflicts in the South China Sea, Taiwan, Korean Peninsula, India, etc.

There is no gainsaying that China is fully aware of the US policies and has shown abundant patience in addressing issues with the US quietly and tactfully. President Xi has urged cooperation over competition, while Chinese officials have responded to the American allegations of human rights violations in equally strong tones. China may also be pursuing its counterstrategy against the US but with no visible hype. Nonetheless, the US Strategy of Disruption is fast advancing distrust and regional conflicts. If China manages to ward off US attempts to exploit its internal fault lines and instead be able to cause socio-economic and political problems within the US and its geographical neighbourhood, it may continue with its global rise, which seems quite evident. In any case, **in this era of geopolitical uncertainty, it is always helpful to see and analyse almost all conflicts and happenings with the help of the 'US-China Rivalry Lens' to get a more precise and more transparent understanding of the evolving geostrategic chess board.**

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