

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Great power competitions are, indeed, a recurring phenomenon in world's history. In World War I, we witnessed competitions between major powers in the European region that were heavily characterized with military show-offs and material warfare (U.S. Office of the Historian). The armed hostilities continued in the World War II, but with new actors entering the field: the rising United States joining the Allied powers and Japan allying with the Axis bloc. The multilateral competition then subsided after the Allied powers took the winning side, but soon a bipolar competition arose between former allies, the United States and the Soviet Union, who were fighting for the ultimate hegemon status. Unlike the previous two world wars, it was not a direct display of military offensives, rather it was a somewhat open yet restricted rivalry waged on economic, political and propaganda fronts with limited recourse to weapons (National Security Archives). A series of internal turmoils that contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union, helped the United States to secure its winning place as the world's hegemon. Ever since, the world and the United States have enjoyed decades of peaceful unipolar leadership, with no apparent rivals strong enough to challenge their power - until a new force from the East slowly made their mark in the international system (National Security Archives).

The rise of the People's Republic of China did not go unnoticed. Scholars of all fields have paid attention to the increasing hard and soft power exercised by China, particularly its rapid economic dominion, which led to the debate whether China would threaten the leadership of the United States. However, it was not the international community that proclaim China and the U.S as the new 'rivals' - it was both the United States and China that brought forth the perception of great power competition (Lim, 2021). Under the constructivist school of thought, all norms, conventions and institutions that govern international relations, including anarchy and great power competition, are considered not inherent but a result of social constructs (Lim, 2021). Ideas, beliefs and identities were given meanings by society which ultimately led to the establishment of commonly-accepted knowledge and mutually-agreed norms that define reality. Alexander Wendt, a constructivist scholar, provided a perfect example to frame the theory: *five hundred British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than five North Korean ones, despite the material disparity, because of the different meanings and identities attached to both states* (Lim, 2021). Hence, it was not the international system nor the comparative numbers in military or economic capabilities that defined the great power competition between the United States and China, rather it was both states that constituted such identities.

Official government statements could be used as one of the instruments for states to portray their depictions on great power rivalry. The United States depicted their portrayal on China's rivalry during the introduction of the 2018 National Defense Strategy then-US Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, remarked how

“Great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of US’ national security” which indicated U.S’ take on a more competitive approach as a response to the increasingly assertive China (Lim, 2021). Meanwhile, the majority of Chinese statements and publications on the topic of U.S. foreign policy or Sino-American relations are often characterized by strikingly use of the term “strategic” (Deng, 2001). It seems there was a broad agreement among Chinese officials and scholars that the U.S.’ power in the international system started to decline compared to the ever-increasing Chinese influence which explains why the U.S. is determined to undermine China’s rise as an anxious response to their own decline (Hass, 2022). Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, in his end-of-year interview with Xinhua Media on January 2, 2021 concluded the nature of U.S-China relations based on the reflections over the previous year as *“run into unprecedented difficulties”* due to, fundamentally, serious misconceptions of U.S policymakers about China, seeing us as the biggest threat thus driving their continuous attempt to suppress China and *“start a new Cold War”* despite Chinese own policy towards the U.S is stable and consistent (Hass, 2022). Wang Yi added that this ‘containment’ attempt would not only seriously harm the interests of the two states but potentially cause severe disruptions to the world (Hass, 2022). From all of those statements above, we can then draw a conclusion that the social process of identity creation is heavily influenced by rhetoric and the spread of discourses. The United States in their speeches and official documents, frequently uses rivalry rhetoric to describe China as a “pacing threat” and “rival” which led to the establishment of competition as a norm and constructed an antagonistic great power

relationship (Hass, 2022). Therefore, in every great power competition, discourses are used by the involved states to frame the relationship as well as conjure up their image as the superior great power.

The discourse competition between the United States and China is also reflected during the occurrence of Covid-19 pandemic, one of the deadliest pandemics in human history with 601,189,4345 confirmed global cases reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) per September 2022 which included 6,475,346 deaths (WHO, 2022). At the beginning of 2020, the WHO had encouraged state leaders to take swift yet effective actions towards the quickly-worsening health cataclysm, stressing how the fate of the virus was in their hands, after mentioning the fact that the alarming levels of outbreak were contradictorily met with the alarming levels of inaction (Vinopal, 2021). The weeks following the WHO's announcement proved to be a crucial period as we watched how world leaders and their governments launched their response initiatives towards the pandemic. Interestingly, the rhetoric used by each state in conveying the level of threat to the mass public varied drastically. Denmark, for example, is one of the countries that conveyed the virus as a high urgency to their public and immediately announced a temporary border closure right on the day of WHO's announcement, calling it a necessary measure while acknowledging that it will have severe consequences on businesses and families (Vinopal, 2021). On the other hand, there were also countries like Brazil who downplayed the virus describing it as a merely "flu or cold virus" even after it being declared as a public health crisis (Vinopal, 2021).

The major countries did not escape from criticism as well, with China treated as the scapegoat, and worsened with how its state officials delayed handing out information about the disease in January 2020 preventing WHO's ability to launch effective immediate responses (Press, 2020) However, the country was impressively quick to handle the virus domestically by promptly locking down Wuhan and, subsequently, the entire province of Hubei as early as January 23, 2020 (Peng et.al., 2020). To stop the virus transmission and saving the lives of people who got infected, China adopted a nationwide directive strategy controlled by the central government that included the establishment of "Fangcang" hospitals, free testing (IgM-IgG serology, gene sequencing and nucleic acid), free treatment and transfer of resources to the infection epicenter in Hubei province (Peng et.al., 2020).

The same cannot be said with the United States. The world's attention was of course fixated on the hegemon. As the de facto leader, the U.S. was expected to take the reins of leadership in the Covid-19 global management and provide an exceptional example. Instead, President Donald Trump joined the club of leaders who downplayed the severity of the outbreak, similarly calling it as just a mere flu and repeatedly mentioned how "*It's going to disappear. One day, it's like a miracle, it will disappear*" Trump did not embrace a strict mask policy at the initial stage of the pandemic, often appearing in public without wearing one and only after months when the virus spread wide that he finally acknowledged the importance of wearing masks (Vinopal, 2021). He was not a big fan of the idea of imposing national lockdown and reportedly disregarded any advice from the country's top disease experts, going further with publicly promoting treatments such as

hydroxychloroquine calling it effective even though it has never been verified by the experts (Vinopal, 2021). The world watched in astonishment as the American public was divided more than ever in the national pandemic response, continuously arguing over everything from masks to vaccines, homeschooling to quarantining with reasonings varied from being skeptics on the severity of the disease or outright refusal to give up their personal freedoms (Green, 2021). The Pew Research Center explained the divisions can be broken down over predictable lines, mostly involving political affiliates and age (Green, 2021). Regardless of the positive and negative reactions, the people were deeply frustrated on how the president handled the pandemic - and so did the world.

The manner in which both countries played out their responses to this outbreak contributed to the global perceptions of the great power competition; particularly in the confidence towards U.S' performance and liberal leadership. It was no secret that throughout the pandemic a partisan divide had occurred on deciding what is the appropriate government response to the public health crisis in which half more likely believing stricter policies would be more efficient in curbing the virus while the rest favored less stringent policies. However, when we look at the casualties numbers and government incentives, one might frown upon how the Chinese socialist government seemed to have handled it better than the hegemon. This perception can be seen from a global poll conducted by the Alliance of Democracies Foundation that showed how 60% of respondents think that China's response to Covid-19 is better than the United States (Strauss, 2020). If we look at the number further, around 11 months after the outbreak in Wuhan the official GDP

of China is reported to have continued, even up 4.9% for the third quarter from a year earlier while the total reported death toll is below 5,000 (Shalal & Crossley, 2020). At the same time, there were a total of 221,000 people dead from Covid-19 in the U.S., in which the blame can be put to the delayed federal response, unending disagreements over mask-wearing and lockdowns, and continued holding many public events that did not properly follow public health guidelines (Shalal & Crossley, 2020).

Even the Chinese authorities acknowledged the world's opinions were tipping over in their favor, with Politburo member and top diplomat Yang Jiechi observing that "Reform of international order has sped up with China taken the lead in controlling the epidemic on a global scale which increased all parties' expectations and reliance on our country" which supported by Chen Yixin, a secretary general of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (the top oversight body for China's domestic security) with statements: "*The rise of China is a major variable [in the world today]... the rise of the East and decline of the West has become a trend; changes of the international landscape are in our favor*" (Hass, 2022).

On the other hand, The United States did not falter on the positive global perception towards the Chinese remarkable Covid-19 management. Rather, they pushed out various counter-narratives, such as demanding for China's accountability on the virus origin and blaming their mismanagement at the initial appearance of the virus which could have prevented a global outbreak. Similar to how the Chinese government did not respond to WHO's call for a report on the

virus origin in early 2020, the United States also called out their lack of transparency of their “successful” Covid-19 management (Fiddler, 2020). In retaliation, the Chinese government criticized how the U.S. had chosen to unnecessarily politicized the pandemic through information war and spreading, instead of focusing on improving their own Covid-19 management failure. China even suggested that the virus did not originate from Wuhan, instead slipped out of a lab at the U.S Army’s Fort Detrick base in Maryland in 2019 (Crossley & Martina, 2021). Even now, we continue to witness the clash of perceptions and discourse war between these two great powers.

From those examples, we can conclude that great power competition is not only the matter of material and *realpolitik* battles, but it also takes form in discourses that both countries construct about themselves and against each other. Regardless of the data and the truth of their Covid-19 management, the goals of discourses were intended to counter one another through the emphasis of their own “achievements” and pointing out the flaws of the opposite party, an interesting depiction of information warfare within the scope of great power competition. In relation to the Covid-19 management discourses, this research noted that even though both countries pushed out different discourses, they were interestingly pursuing a similar goal: maintaining legitimacy, framing a positive image and boosting national reputation. The Covid-19 pandemic was politically transformed as another arena in the continuation of great power contestation. It is intriguingly became the battlefield of narratives between the two major powers, one that is heavily influenced by their nation’s ideological identity and often resulted in

throwing accusations in order to weaken the ideological values portrayed by the other. From here, we are able to pinpoint that even though they are pursuing similar end-goals, their metric of success in the Covid-19 management discourse is vastly different due to different national identities and values. Under constructivism, the assumption is a country cannot act contrary to its identity otherwise it will question the validity of their identity as well as their commitment to it (Theys, 2018). We might argue that in the U.S' perception, their Covid-19 management was not "failing" instead staying true to its liberal values, meanwhile China's quick response to Covid-19 was due to the urgent need to maintain their socialist government's performance-legitimacy. Therefore, this paper will focus on analyzing the meaning-making behind the U.S. and China's Covid-19 management approaches, finding out what kind of narratives that both great powers want to distribute within their discourses and how do these knowledge-shaping contribute to their great power competition goals. An important objective that this paper wishes to achieve is to highlight the non *real-politik* arena of great power contestation that is often neglected or rarely talked about due to over focus towards hard power within the study of International Relations.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the background above, we look further from seeing Covid-19 pandemic as merely a global health issue but an arena used for political purposes and discourse competitions. As today's current great powers, the U.S and China fought for a spotlight in pandemic management superiority considering they have very distinct approaches. Therefore, I suggest the following research questions:

- a) What are the differences and similarities of discourses on covid-19 responses between the U.S. and China?
- b) How do such discourses reflect the value and identity differences between the U.S. and China as today's great powers?

1.3 Research Objectives

The main purpose of this research proposal is to identify how the two current great powers, the United States and China, establish their pandemic management and use the momentum as an arena of political narrative battles. In addition, this research aims to further examine how these discourses were built under the influence of their identity and value as stated in their ideological beliefs and thus reflected as ideological contestation in purpose to enhance international credibility of their ideologies, image-building and maintaining legitimacy.

1.4 Significance of Research

The result of this research will provide a new sight in understanding the great power competition away from positivist view or material interests, but in the sphere of narrative-creation, deployment, the use of linguistic tools and discourses in conveying their capabilities. It also highlights the constructed nature of the great power competition itself as it is not a "natural" phenomenon rather the choice of rivals are entirely dependent on the state's selection and who they convey as a "rival". Furthermore, I hope my writing could contribute to the study of International Relations by giving importance to identity-construction and what factors contribute to the construction of that identity; how domestic and international norms heavily affect one's identity and their decision-making as well.

Lastly, this research will hopefully be useful for International Relations scholars to put more attention on the ever-changing dynamic of the international community and the nature of international relations.

1.5 Structure of Thesis

The first chapter consists of the general overview of the thesis that includes the background of the thesis' topic, the research questions this thesis will address, the objectives of this thesis, as well as the significance and purpose of this thesis.

The second chapter is the theoretical framework. It further explains the international relations theory and related concepts used as the foundational framework in analyzing the U.S and China's Covid-19 discourses. This chapter also summarizes peer-reviewed literatures in relation to the topic of the research.

The third chapter is the methodology as it provides an explanation on which research approach, research method and means of data collection will be used in the writing this thesis. Also, this chapter explains which data analysis technique will be mainly used in analyzing the collected data and information in answering the research question.

The main analysis will be divided into two chapters: The Fourth chapter compares the nature of the discourse competition and information warfare during the Covid-19 pandemic between the U.S and China while the Fifth chapter analyzes how their distinct ideological identities affect the creation of these discourses. The analysis will be based on the data and information that have been gathered as well as its correlations to the international relations theory and concept used. The

outcomes of the analysis are used to provide an answer to the research question of this thesis.

The sixth chapter, which is the conclusion, provides the summary and conclusion of the analysis from previous chapters.

