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## *The "strategic stalemate" between the United States and China*

... the tirade about whether his plane should have been shot down and even the possibility of occupying Taiwan by force, would lead to a conflagration that Beijing wants to avoid at all costs, because the success of its thinking and philosophy is based on winning by the superiority of its soft power, as drawn from the teachings of Confucius.



After Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, many opinions were aroused about what China could and should do in response. The previous week we reviewed some actions that readers sent me as a conclusion of their own reflections. Many of them were confrontational and catastrophic in nature, assuming the need for a response from China that would have led to

a war, even of a nuclear nature. Such opinions did not seem to consider the impact that such an event would have on the entire planet. Some reasoning, recklessly - from my point of view - assured that if there was no harsh response (understood as one of a warlike nature) it would manifest weakness on the part of China.

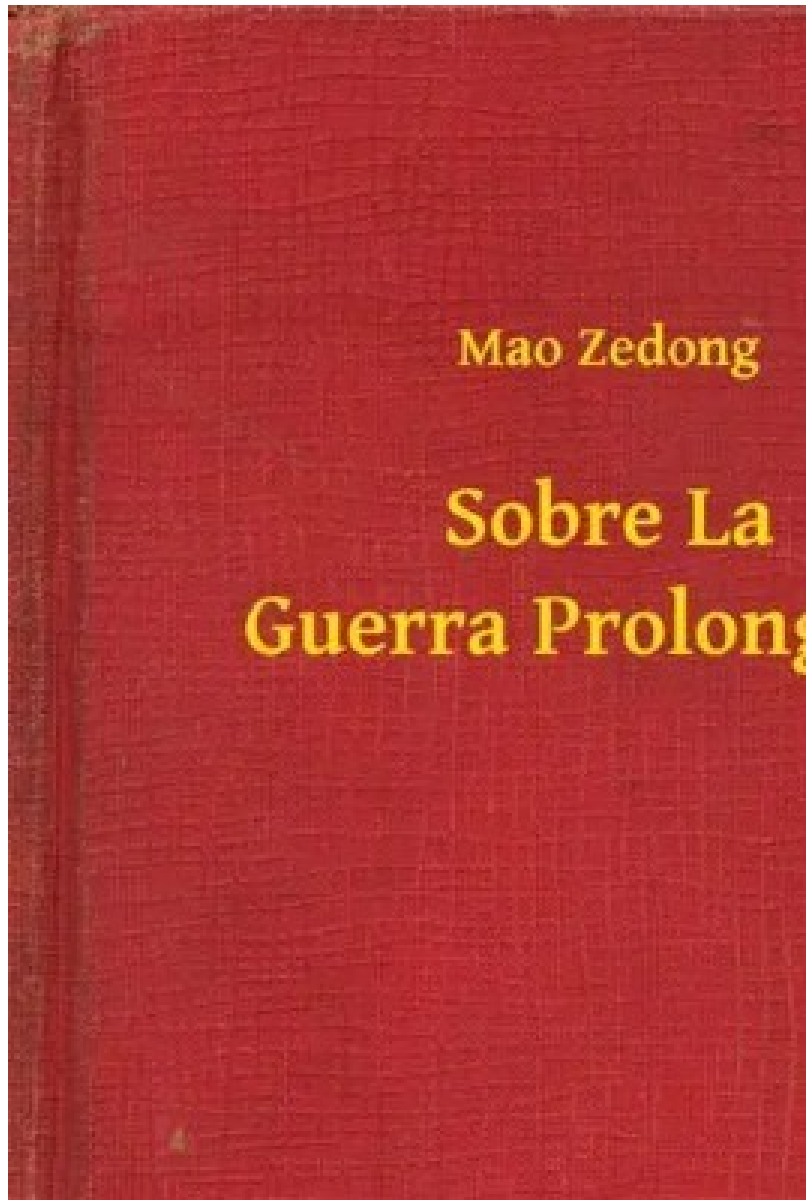


Tratando de anteponerme a este probable punto de vista escribí “No obstante, para los que suponían que la respuesta china iba a ser el derribo del avión de Pelosi, la invasión con una fuerza naval al territorio de Taiwán, o la devastación de la isla con una lluvia de misiles hipersónicos, hay que decir que no saben nada de China, de su filosofía, de su historia, ni de su práctica política y diplomática”.

However, this concern motivated mine so I set out to investigate in order to publicize what the Chinese themselves think in structural terms about their strategic confrontation with the United States. For this reason, I will release the most important aspects of a long article recently written by Dr. Huang Renwei, vice president [of the Institute of International Relations of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences](#) entitled "Why did China's dispute against American hegemonic power enter a phase of strategic stagnation?"

In general, the text defines that phase of strategic stagnation between China and the United States as an intermediate between the phases of "intensification and cushioning of the battle." According to the author, this stage will last about 30 years depending on the conditions that China is able to create to achieve its goal of becoming a modern power, the changing balance of power between the United States and China and how much the changes of government in the United States and the adjustment they can make of their policy towards China influence.

In the effort to explain this interesting idea that points to the strategic character of the confrontation between the two powers, Dr. Huang explains that the concept of "strategic containment phase" was coined by Mao Zedong in his work "[On Protracted War](#)", published in Japan during the War of Resistance. At that time, Mao defined three stages for such a war: Japan's strategic offensive, China's strategic confrontation (or strategic stalemate) with Japan, and China's strategic counteroffensive.



On the basis of this conception, the author develops his hypothesis, but warns that compared to that conflict, there are three main differences with the strategic rivalry between China and the United States today: the first is that this new competition does not occur in a framework of war. Second, it states that the third stage will not be marked by a strategic counteroffensive, because China does not have the goal of completely defeating

the United States. The third difference is that after a long period of strategic stagnation, China-US relations "will enter a state of coexistence and co-government."

The Chinese researcher believes that the stage of "strategic stagnation" has three characteristics: the relative balance of power between the two sides, the difficulty of either side defeating the other, and the uncertainty between what victory and defeat could mean. All this since both sides have a strong confidence in their ability to resist and sustain the strategic stalemate: "The United States is confident that it will maintain world hegemony for more than 50 years, and China is confident that it will achieve the great rejuvenation of the nation by 2050..."

This phase of strategic stagnation is characterized by the [duality of Chinese and American power structures](#).) This is because the United States has remained relatively strong during its long decline, while China has remained weak during its rise, which is changing. This characteristic has made the main foundation that is lived is that of a stage of unprecedented changes that will be transformed over time.

For the United States, duality means a widening gap between its hegemonic power and its objectives, since when in the bipolar world the United States and the Soviet Union were superpowers, their world hegemony was incomplete. After the end of the Cold War and the demise of the USSR, the United States became the world's sole superpower, establishing a unipolar hegemony that it could not sustain as manifested with the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and the crisis in Ukraine.



Nonetheless, in this period of long American decline, Washington remains the most powerful country in the world based on its considerable financial control, increased

scientific and technological innovation, superior military strike power, and ability to influence public opinion in the world. In this sense, it must be considered that "decline of hegemony" is not the same as "weakening of the global national power" of the United States. Moreover, the current international system inherited from the Second World War continues to be influenced in a decisive way by the United States, although it is now attempting to alter that situation, establishing what it calls the "rules-based international order" that is nothing more than a new American imposition.

At this point, the also director of the Pudong Institute for the Economy of the United States says that other variables must be considered, if the confrontation between the emerging powers and the defenders is inevitable in the process of transferring power to the great powers. Likewise, if the reduction of the power gap between the rising powers and the defending ones will create limits and lead to a strategic confrontation. In other words, it should be noted that in 2001, China's economy was 10% of the United States while this year it will reach 77%. That number will continue to rise without the United States being able to prevent China from catching up with and surpassing it.

Another thought-provoking variable is whether the structural contradictions between China and the United States can be transformed into confrontational relations under certain conditions, or cooperative relations under others. China and the United States have a high degree of interdependence and coincidence of interests, and neither can completely abandon the complementary relationship with the other and implement so-called "decoupling."

From my point of view this last assertion embodies a dialectical contradiction, since it does not seem possible that in the future there can be "cooperative relations" between the United States and China because this implies an antagonistic confrontation between socialism and capitalism, if it is true that as it has been enunciated a thousand times and will be reiterated at the next XX Congress of the Communist Party of China, the country is moving towards socialism. This issue is ignored in Dr. Huang's analysis.

In a new aspect of the matter, it is also analyzed what the duration of this phase of strategic stagnation may be. The Chinese academic believes that will depend on the speed of the change in the balance of power between the two sides. This power refers to a global competitiveness that encompasses all factors, including economic, military, diplomatic, political and public opinion in which scientific and technological competitiveness

becomes a decisive element in establishing itself as a contemporary global national power, so the speed of China's technological development will determine the duration of this phase. In four areas: science and technology, military, finance and soft power, the United States remains dominant and although the difference with China is narrowing, it remains significant despite the fact that by 2035, China is expected to approach the level of the United States in basic technological areas on its way to meeting the strategic goals set for the centenary of its founding in 2049.

This is the framework that allows us to understand the general trend of relations between the United States and China in order to maintain strategic stability, considering – as said before – that each change of president in the United States will mean oscillations in politics between the two powers.

This context should lead China to exploit the success of these cyclical changes with the aim of winning the strategic initiative and taking advantage of this buffer period, avoiding a large-scale confrontation with the United States. Dr. Huang concludes by stating that: "... if we want to avoid a strategic confrontation between the United States and China over a period of 20 to 30 years, we have to take advantage [...] to digest the aftermath left by the previous period of intensification and prepare for the crisis that may arise in the next period..."



As can be seen, the matter is much more complex than the repercussions that Mrs. Pelosi's trip to Taiwan may generate, the diatribe about whether her plane should have been shot down and even the possibility of occupying Taiwan by force, an operation that in military terms should not be more inconvenient for China, but that would lead to a conflagration that Beijing wants to avoid at all costs, because the success of its thought and philosophy is based on winning by the superiority of its soft power, as drawn from the teachings of Confucius.

Sergio Rodríguez Gelfenstein for La Pluma, August 11, 2022

Edited by [María Piedad Ossaba](#)

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