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## Is the 21<sup>st</sup> century a New Warring States Period (*Xin Zhanguo*)?

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### 1.0 Introduction

There is a significant ontological debate among international relations theorists about the emerging geopolitical order in the 21st century. One perspective posits that the 21st century will be marked by a New Cold War, characterized by renewed geopolitical rivalry, particularly between the US and China. This view suggests a return to a bipolar world order, with both superpowers vying for global influence through military buildup, economic competition, and ideological confrontation. Another possibility being explored is the return of identity wars, as described by political scientist Samuel Huntington in his "Clash of Civilizations" thesis.

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This perspective suggests that post-Cold War conflicts will primarily stem from cultural and civilizational differences, rather than ideological or geopolitical competition. However, this paper going beyond Eurocentricism takes an unconventional approach and proposes a hypothetical question: Could the 21st century be seen as a new Warring States Period (*Xin Zhanguo*)?

To explore the hypothesis presented in the introduction, the article is organized as follows: the second section outlines the methodology for comparing the two cases. The third and fourth sections provide detailed examinations of each of the two selected cases. The fifth section offers a cross-sectional comparison and analyses the potential reemergence of a variant of the Warring States Period (WSP) in the 21st century. Finally, the article concludes with its findings.

## **2.0 Methodology**

In this study, I conduct a comparative analysis of two cases: the Warring States Period (479-221 BC) and 21st-century geopolitics (2000-present). To draw meaningful parallels, I focus on four key themes: Proxy Wars, Multipolar World Order, Strategic Alliances, and Military Innovations. These themes reveal striking similarities and notable differences between the two periods.

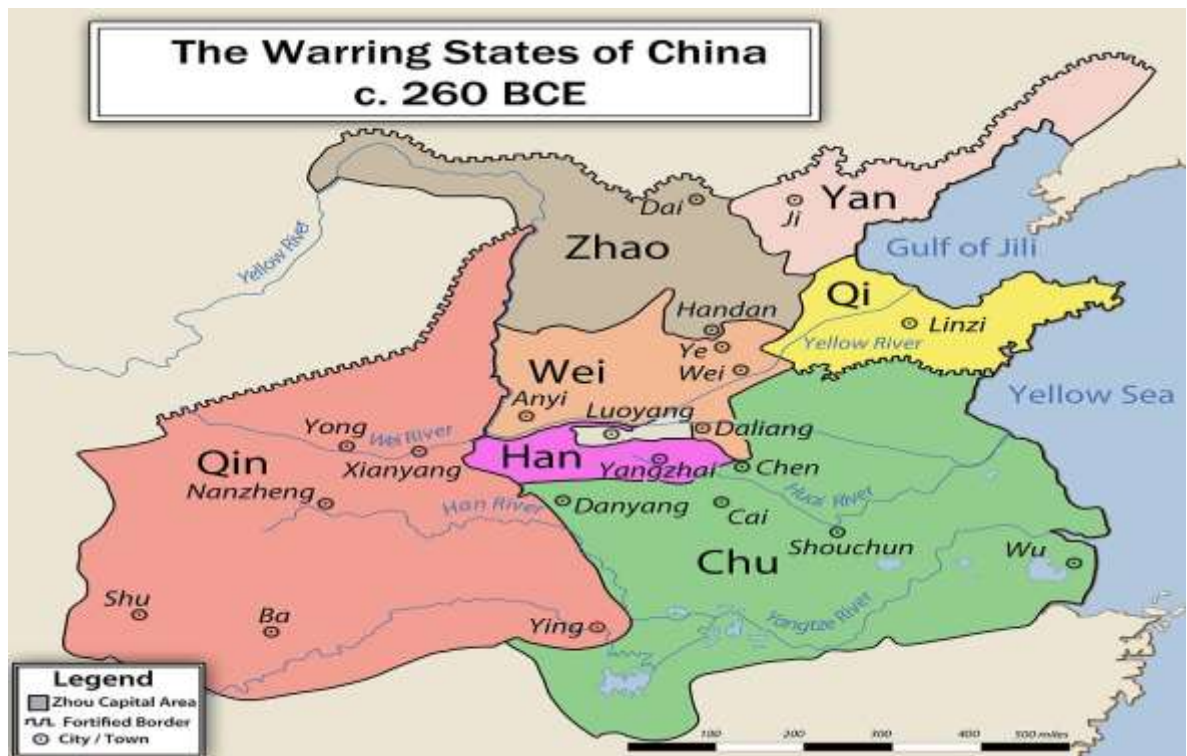
The WSP was characterized by incessant proxy wars, where dominant states employed smaller states to conduct their battles. This is analogous to contemporary proxy conflicts in regions such as the Middle East, South Asia, the South China Sea, and the Ukrainian War. Both periods are marked by multipolarity, with multiple powers vying for supremacy. In the WSP, states like Qin, Chu, and Zhao competed for dominance, much like today's global powers, including the US, China, India, and Russia. Strategic alliances were pivotal for survival and hegemony in both eras. Ancient states formed temporary coalitions, paralleling modern alliances such as the Indo-US and Russia-China partnerships, as well as frameworks like the Quad and AUKUS. Military innovations played transformative roles in both periods, from the

development of iron weapons and crossbows in ancient China to the advancements in drones and AI-driven technologies in contemporary times.

By analyzing these themes, this study elucidates the enduring patterns and evolving dynamics of power and conflict across vastly different historical contexts.

### **3.0 Case 1: Warring States Period in ancient China**

The Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE) was pivotal in Chinese history, marking the end of the Zhou dynasty. This era was characterized by intense military conflict, political maneuvering, and significant reforms in governance and military strategies. Seven major states—Qin, Chu, Zhao, Wei, Han, Yan, and Qi—competed for dominance, leading to frequent battles and shifting alliances (**See Map 1**). Centralized power began to take shape with states implementing bureaucratic reforms. Influential philosophers like Shang Yang, Mencius, and Xunzi rose, impacting Chinese thought and culture. Advancements in technology, agriculture, and military tactics, including iron weapons and cavalry, marked the period. The era concluded with Qin unifying China under the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE, laying the foundation for the imperial system.



**Map 1: The Seven Great Powers of the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) in Ancient China**

*a) Multipolar Geopolitical Order*

The WSP was dominated by seven evenly matched powers—Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao, Wei, and Qin—each wielding its own sphere of influence and competing for wealth, power, and supremacy. The era was marked by ever-shifting alliances, as states frequently formed and dissolved coalitions to counterbalance their rivals, reflecting the fluid nature of power dynamics in a multipolar system. Intense economic and military competition drove states to heavily invest in military innovations and economic development. The adoption of iron weapons and crossbows, along with large-scale infrastructure projects like the Zhengguo Canal, were pivotal in maintaining and expanding power. The WSP witnessed approximately 358 wars, resulting in an estimated 340,000 casualties, with armies consisting of 200,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalries. These great powers embraced the slogan 'Rich Country, Strong Army,' emphasizing economic prosperity and military strength as essential for state power.

***b) Ever-Shifting Alliances in Warring States Period:***

The Warring States Period (475-221 BCE) in ancient China was a time of significant political fragmentation and conflict, characterized by the fluidity of alliances based on realpolitik.

**Table 1 : Multiple Great Powers in Warring States Period**

<b>Great_Powers</b>	<b>Key Characteristics</b>	<b>Rivals</b>	<b>Alliances</b>
Qi	Wealth, naval power	Wei, Qin	Chu, Yan
Chu	Large territory, resources	Qin, Qi	Han, Yan
Yan	Military strength	Zhao, Qin	Qi, Chu
Han	Strategic location	Qin, Wei	Chu, Qi
Zhao	Martial prowess	Qin, Yan	Wei, Chu
Wei	Strong military, central position	Qin, Zhao	Yan, Qi
Qin	Military innovation, strategic reforms	All states	Wei, Zhao

Seven major states—Qin, Chu, Zhao, Wei, Han, Yan, and Qi—were in constant competition for dominance, and their alliances shifted frequently as they sought to gain strategic advantages. During this period, realpolitik, or pragmatic and strategic decision-making, was the guiding principle. States formed and dissolved alliances based on immediate military and economic benefits rather than ideological similarities. For instance, the famous "vertical" and "horizontal" alliances were strategies to counteract the dominance of stronger states. The "vertical" alliances (*he zong*) aimed to unite against a common powerful state, while "horizontal" alliances (*lian heng*) were made with the strongest state to benefit from its protection or resources.

These alliances were highly fluid, as states continuously reassessed their positions and interests. For example, the state of Wei initially allied with the powerful state of Qi but later shifted its allegiance to Qin when it became clear that Qin had the upper hand. This pragmatic approach ensured that alliances were temporary and adaptable, reflecting the dynamic nature of the period

**c) Proxy Wars**

One of the most significant aspects of contemporary geopolitics is the use of proxy wars by major powers (See Table 2.). Remarkably, this was also a dominant trend during the WSP in ancient China. To illustrate, out of the total of 7 great powers of the WSP Chinese historians identify states such as Qin, Chu, Qi, and Wei as stronger than the remaining three. Each of these four great powers had its rivals. For instance, Qin was one of the most powerful states and had several rivals, including Chu, Zhao, and Wei. Chu faced rivalry from both Qin and Qi. Similarly, Qi was threatened by Qin and Wei, and Wei had conflicts with Qin and Qi. Thus, the WSP marked not only by direct military conflicts but also by the extensive use of proxy wars among the seven major states. Each state strategically employed smaller states and intermediaries to weaken their rivals and gain an upper hand in the broader struggle for dominance. This approach allowed them to conserve resources and avoid direct confrontation, while still advancing their strategic interests.

**Table 2: Proxy Wars during the Warring States Period**

<b>Conflict</b>	<b>Highlights</b>
Qin vs. Chu	Qin used the state of Han as a proxy to weaken Chu by supporting Han with military aid and resources,
Qin vs. Zhao	Qin employed Yan state as a proxy to destabilise Zhao by providing Yan with troops and strategic advice,.
Chu vs. Qi	Chu used the state of Song as a proxy to counter Qi by providing military support to Song
Wei vs.	Wei used the state of Zheng as a proxy to challenge Q by supporting Zheng with military aid and resources,

Qi	
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***d) Military Innovations***

The WSP was a time of significant military innovation as states sought to gain an edge over their rivals. The constant threats to survival led to many military reforms. To illustrate Shang Yang, also known as Wei Yang, (see **Figure 1**) was a pivotal reformer whose contributions significantly strengthened the military state of Qin during the WSP.

**Table 3: Military Innovations in Warring States Period**

<b>Invention</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Iron Weapons	Swords, spears, crossbows	Increased strength and durability
Crossbow	Trigger mechanism, large-scale deployment	Revolutionized infantry tactics
Chariots	Armored chariots, mounted archers	Provided mobile firepower
Infantry Tactics	Phalanx formation, conscription	Boosted defensive and offensive capabilities
Fortifications	Walls, moats, watchtowers	Enhanced territorial protection
Military Manuals	The Art of War, Wuzi	Provided strategic insights

He replaced the feudal system with a centralized administration, appointing centrally appointed governors to oversee different regions. This streamlined governance and improved efficiency. He introduced compulsory military service, ensuring a steady supply of soldiers and creating a large, well-trained army. Interestingly both PRC and Taiwan have a system of compulsory military service. In PRC all citizens aged 18-22 are required to serve in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for a period of 2 years and Taiwan has recently extended its compulsory military service from four months to one year, starting in 2024 in the wake of growing threats from the PRC. The

conscription program is male-only, although women can serve in the active-duty military. An overview of all the major military innovations during the WSP is given in the **Table 3** below.



**Figure 1:** Legalist Reformer Shang Yang (390-338 BC)

Sun Tzu Authored "The Art of War," a military treatise emphasizing strategy, deception, and intelligence. Advocated for flexibility, adaptability, and avoiding unnecessary conflict. Emphasized the importance of morale, leadership, and strategic planning. Impact: Sun Tzu's principles influenced military strategies across various states, promoting innovative tactics and approaches to warfare.

#### **4.0 Case 2: The international order (2000-till Present)**

Since the turn of the century, the international order has undergone significant transformations, signalling a decline in the US-led world order established post-World War II. International Relations theorists such as Kenneth Waltz have predicted the eventual multipolarization of the global order. Interestingly many Chinese scholars also concurred with this view. The pattern of the decline of the US power in unilaterally dictating the global affairs is evident if one were to look back at some of the US foreign policy decisions since the Biden presidency in 2021. Four such cases are listed below,

- i. The US's ignominious exit from Afghanistan in 2021 created doubts among US allies about its will to fight conventional wars



- ii. The US military might could not deter the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- iii. India did not comply with the US request to reduce oil purchases from Russia, and PM Modi met Putin in Moscow on the same day NATO was celebrating its anniversary in Washington.
- iv. Israel is taking all measures for its security in its continuing war with Iran despite US urges for restraint.

#### ***a) Multipolar geopolitical order***

Many experts now argue that the era of US unipolarity is a relic of the past following the COVID-19 pandemic. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukrainian War, and the 10/7 attacks on Israel by Hamas have only accelerated the emergence of a multipolar world based on great powers like US, China, India and Russia.

The term "great power" is somewhat fuzzy. Great powers are sometimes defined as countries with global interests and sufficient power to defend them or as those that influence the dominant "international order." Besides, the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows that although only two great power wars broke out in this century however, they were catastrophic in nature. Political scientist John Mearsheimer uses military capability to identify great powers, writing that "to qualify as a great power, a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world." The 2021 report by the Founders Pledge's Carnegie-Qinghua Centre for Global Policy, entitled "Great Power Conflicts," explores the dynamics of a multipolar world with the United States, China, Russia, and India as the key players. The report defines a multipolar world as one marked by a balance of power where no single nation can unilaterally dictate global affairs. The criteria for selecting these powers included: 1. Military Power, 2. Economic Power, 3. Political Influence, and 4. Technological Advancement. Based

on these parameters, the report predicts a multipolar world in the 21st century with the United States, China, Russia, and India as the four great powers.

Regarding the inclusion of Russia in this league, the authors of the Founders Pledge report refer to its vast nuclear arsenal. The ongoing Ukrainian and Iran-Israel crises post-10/7 exemplify this multipolar reality, which some analysts describe as a proxy war between China and the United States

**Tabel 4: Great Powers of the Contemporary World**

<b>Great Power</b>	<b>Economic Power</b>	<b>Military Strength</b>	<b>Rivals</b>
United States	Largest economy by nominal GDP	World's most powerful military	China, Russia
China	2 <sup>nd</sup> largest economy by nominal GDP	Rapidly modernizing military	United States, India
India	5 <sup>th</sup> -largest economy by nominal GDP	One of the largest militaries	China, Pakistan
Russia	11 <sup>th</sup> largest economy by nominal GDP	2 <sup>nd</sup> largest nuclear power	United States, NATO

***b) Ever-Shifting Strategic Alliances in Contemporary Geopolitics***

In contemporary geopolitics, like the Warring States period, alliances involving the four great powers are highly fluid and ever-shifting, driven by realpolitik principles. A prime example is the Indo-US ties. Despite being democracies, both countries had closer ties with each other’s arch-rivals during the Cold War. However, since the turn of the century, India has conducted numerous military exercises like Yudh Abhyas and Malabar Exercise with the US. Both countries are part of the Quad, seen as the Asian NATO. The US continues to be India's major defense partner after Russia.

India-Russia ties, despite a deep Cold War legacy, have shown fissures in recent years. High-level bilateral interactions declined, with concerns about future defense

cooperation as India diversified its defense procurement sources, reducing reliance on Russian military hardware. The growing Russia-China partnership raised concerns in New Delhi about Moscow's neutrality in future conflicts involving India and China. India's economic engagement with Russia also saw a reduction. However, PM Modi's visit to Moscow and India's pro-Moscow stance during the Ukrainian war indicated a strategic realignment.

India-China relations, despite a long-standing border dispute, saw growing economic ties with significant bilateral trade. Regular high-level strategic dialogues and summits were held to discuss mutual interests. Both countries participated in multilateral forums like BRICS and SCO, showcasing cooperation on global issues. However, the Galwan Valley clash in June 2020 led to a prolonged military standoff, highlighting the unpredictability of this partnership.

The deepening China-Russia is the fourth case in point. This new United Front is seen as a response to Western pressures, particularly from the US, which has led to a convergence of interests in opposing NATO and other Western institutions. However, this alignment is driven more by strategic necessity than by a genuine reconciliation of their deep-rooted historical grievances

### ***c) Proxy Wars***

A proxy war is a conflict where two or more major powers or states support opposing sides, typically through providing military, financial, or logistical assistance, rather than engaging directly themselves. These wars allow powerful nations to influence outcomes and pursue strategic interests without the risks and costs associated with direct military confrontation.

### ***South China Sea: US vs. China***

The South China Sea is a major flashpoint, featuring a proxy conflict between the US and China. The US supports regional allies like the Philippines and Taiwan, while China reinforces its claims through artificial islands and maritime militias. Tensions escalated when a US Navy destroyer sailed near the disputed Paracel Islands,

prompting China to threaten "serious consequences." In September 2024, the US deployed a medium-range missile system in the northern Philippines, capable of targeting the entire South China Sea and parts of mainland China. Concurrently, large-scale war drills by US and Philippine forces, supported by an Australian surveillance aircraft, involved sinking a mock enemy ship. China's aggressive response included a Chinese Coast Guard ship firing a water cannon at a Philippine Navy vessel.

### *Ukrainian War*

The Russia-Ukraine conflict is a proxy war involving the US and a Russia-China alliance. The US supports Ukraine with military aid, intelligence, and economic sanctions against Russia. In September 2024, Ukraine used drone swarm technology to target over 200 military facilities in Russia, showcasing US support. Russia receives significant backing from China, including economic and political support and critical military components. The conflict has seen numerous escalations, with both sides employing advanced military technologies. The US and its allies have intercepted Russian missiles over Ukraine, risking direct involvement.

### *Middle East and South Asia:*

The conflicts between Israel, Hamas, and Hezbollah exemplify proxy wars. The US and Iran, backed by Russia, use local groups to further their geopolitical interests. The conflict between Israel and Hamas escalated after the October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas, leading to a devastating Israeli military campaign in Gaza. The US provides substantial military and financial support to Israel, while Iran supports Hamas and Hezbollah with financial aid, weapons, and training. In South Asia, Pakistan supports terrorist organizations to destabilize India, mirroring Iran's tactics in the Middle East. Such proxy wars heighten regional tensions and risk escalating into broader conflicts, reflecting a dangerous pattern in contemporary geopolitics.

## **5.0 Cross-section Comparison**

To fully understand the nuances between these two cases, namely, the WSP and the contemporary geopolitical order we begin with a comprehensive cross-sectional analysis.

### ***Multipolar geopolitical order***

Commenting on the nature of multipolarity, E.H. Carr, in his work "Twenty Years' Crisis," argued that multipolar world orders are inherently unstable, as the issue of power among great powers often leads to major conflicts, such as World War I and World War II. The Chinese historians have documented seven great powers during the WSP, namely, Qin, Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao and Wei. However, this paper talks of four great powers—US, China, Russia and India in the contemporary geopolitical order. In the WSP the seven great powers competed for power, wealth, and influence leading to constant warfare and shifting alliances. This pattern has also begun to emerge in the contemporary world. Whether through economic competition in the form of trade wars or initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or ongoing geopolitical rivalries. In both the cases one could observe that no strategic certitude prevailed as no single power could unilaterally dictate global affairs.

### ***Proxy Wars***

Both the Warring States Period (WSP) in ancient China and contemporary geopolitics exhibit similar patterns of using proxies to safeguard wealth and power. During the WSP, powerful states like Qin, Chu, and Wei leveraged smaller states as proxies to undermine rivals and expand influence. For instance, Qin used the state of Han to weaken Chu, providing military support and resources. Similarly, Chu supported Song to counter Qi, turning Song into a vassal state to diminish Qi's power. In contemporary geopolitics, major powers employ similar strategies. The United States supports regional allies like the Philippines and Taiwan to counter China's influence in the South China Sea. The deployment of the Typhon missile launcher system in the northern Philippines underscores this proxy strategy. China, in response, uses its maritime militias and artificial islands to assert control. The Russia-Ukraine conflict further illustrates this pattern. The US supports Ukraine with military aid and

advanced weaponry to counter Russian aggression, while China provides economic and political backing to Russia, reinforcing their alliance. Additionally, the US and Iran's involvement in the Israel-Hamas conflict showcases the use of proxies to exert influence without direct confrontation.

### *Ever-shifting strategic alliances*

With regard to the strategic alliances, we can see that in both the cases the partnerships and alliances are highly fluid totally based on national interests rather than based on some signed. To illustrate during the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE), alliances were highly fluid, shifting frequently as states pursued their own national interests. Treaties were often disregarded when strategic advantages were at stake. For example, Qin and Wei initially formed an alliance to counter Chu's power. However, when Qin saw an opportunity to expand its territory, it turned against Wei, leading to the Battle of Hexi in 293 BCE, where Qin emerged victorious. This era epitomized realpolitik, where states prioritized immediate gains over long-term commitments, resulting in an ever-changing landscape of alliances and hostilities.

This pattern of unpredictability in strategic partnerships and alliances prevails today also. For example, India and the USSR were formed a security partnership against China during the Cold war. However, as India strengthened ties with the US since the turn of the century, Moscow started sending diplomatic signals to New Delhi by forming closer relations with Beijing and even started wooing Islamabad.

Similarly, the early 2000s also saw talks of “new type of great power relations “or G2 partnership between the US and China, promoted by thinkers like Zbigniew Brzezinski, which suggested a cooperative US-China dynamic. Yet, this potential alliance has now devolved into predictions of a great power war, between the US and China underscoring the volatile nature of their relationship.

Finally, India and China, despite long-standing border issues, experienced a phase of relative peace post-Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit. However, the Galwan Valley clashes in 2020 sharply reversed this trend, exemplifying how quickly strategic relationships

can sour in the face of national interests. These examples underscore a world where shifting alliances based on national interests dominate the geopolitical landscape, reflecting a consistent engagement in realpolitik strategies by these major powers.

### ***Military Innovations***

Both periods reflect how the pursuit of military superiority drives technological innovation, fundamentally altering warfare. The essence remains: ‘innovate or be left behind’ OR ‘Power flows from a nation’s capacity to innovate’. Comparing the two eras highlights similar patterns: massive resources directed towards military R&D, significant funds allocated to develop and deploy new technologies, and innovations arising to counter new threats. Both eras experienced substantial technological leaps to gain a strategic edge. The use of new metal iron rather than bronze in warfare during the WSP was a major breakthrough, enabling the mass production of stronger weapons and armor, leading to larger and more powerful armies. Although not an exact parallel, a comparison can be drawn between this WSP technology and AI today. AI is transforming military capabilities with autonomous drones, predictive analytics, and enhanced decision-making processes. Furthermore, the introduction of iron weapons during the WSP led to shifts in power among states, as those adopting the technology gained significant advantages. Similarly, nations leading in AI development, like the US and China, are experiencing shifts in geopolitical power due to technological superiority. China produces a significant number of AI research papers. According to the Stanford University Artificial Intelligence Index Report 2023, China has surpassed the US in the number of AI-related research publications. China leads in the number of AI-related patents filed. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) reported that China filed more AI-related patents than any other country in recent years.

Additionally, new war doctrines emerged in both eras. For example, the concept of 'Unrestricted Warfare is a military strategy concept introduced by two Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, in their

1999 book of the same name. The doctrine emphasizes that there are no rules in warfare, and nothing is forbidden.

## **6.0 Could the 21st century be seen as a new Warring States Period?**

An exact repetition of the WSP in the 21st century is unlikely due to technological advancements, international institutions, and the interconnected global economy. Nuclear deterrence significantly safeguards against a recurrence of WSP dynamics. The presence of nuclear weapons fundamentally changes the strategic landscape, with Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) effectively deterring major powers from direct conflict, unlike the frequent large-scale wars during the WSP. However, this reduced likelihood of direct great power wars may increase proxy wars, a trend already evident in contemporary geopolitics, such as in Ukraine, the South China Sea, and the Middle East. These proxy wars risk dragging great powers into conflict. Furthermore, nuclear deterrence theory is primarily designed to prevent conventional wars. However, non-traditional security threats, such as *9/11*, *12/13* or *10/7*, demonstrate that nuclear weapons do not deter non-state actors like terrorist groups.

Besides, despite some notable differences between two cases, the recurrence of certain patterns cannot be ruled out. For example, we might see a system resembling the Five Hegemons of the WSP in the 21st century. George Modelski in his book, *Long Cycles in World Politics* “posited that a single dominant state (a hegemon) is necessary for global stability and order. World politics operates in long cycles of 70-100 years, during which a hegemon rises, maintains dominance, and eventually declines, leading to instability and the rise of a new hegemon. During the era of the Five Hegemons, this pattern played out, though the life cycle of each hegemon was shorter, often not lasting beyond a single generation.

In today's multipolar world, a power shift is occurring between the United States and China. China has already surpassed the US in purchasing power parity (PPP) and is



projected to overtake it in nominal terms by 2030. Experts, including Elon Musk, predict China's economy could double the size of the US by mid-century. Additionally, China is expected to match or surpass US military capabilities by 2050, positioning it as the next global hegemon.

However, there are some experts who foresee another possible power transition in this century and this time between China and an emerging India. India's demographic advantage, democratic system, culture of innovation, and multi-aligned foreign policy will drive its rise. Additionally, India's geography is strategically favorable compared to China's. While China is bordered by Russia to the north and Japan to the east, with the US presence in the South China Sea, India abuts the Indian Ocean, offering significant strategic advantages. US naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan stressed that "whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

In the end this comparative study has yielded several key insights. Firstly, the study validates Mearsheimer's theory that states are primarily concerned with their survival and, when they perceive threats to their security, they adopt realist strategies to ensure their safety rather than any formal treaty commitments. Secondly the exact repeat of the WSP is not possible. However, the repeat of some variant of this era cannot be totally ruled out. So, the pattern of inter-state relations during the Era of Five Hegemons in the WSP warrants closer dissection due to its striking parallels with the contemporary geopolitical order. A deeper understanding of this era could help mitigate the dangers of hegemonic wars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thirdly, unless a catastrophic nuclear war akin to World War II breaks out, the current multipolar geopolitical order could endure far longer than the bipolarity of the Cold War and the subsequent 'Unipolar Moment. Fourthly the US 'Unipolar Moment' might be the last time when a single power could amass enough power to unilaterally dictate global affairs. Lastly, the incidence of proxy wars is expected to increase as nuclear

weapons continue to deter direct great power conflicts. However, these proxy wars carry the inherent risk of escalating and involving great powers directly.

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