Research Article

The Interaction between Global Privilege and the Discursive Construction of the 'China Threat' in the 'New Cold War'

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Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado[1]

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between privilege understood within a global frame and the discursive construction of the 'China threat' in the context of the 'New Cold War'. Drawing on discourse theory and privilege studies, it investigates how the hegemonic discursive construction of China as a threat interacts with the material conditions of 'global privilege' in a diversity of spheres (political, military, economic, technological, cultural and academic). The article contends that the 'China threat' narrative is markedly informed by the global privilege, coupled with the fear of losing it, enjoyed by the countries of the 'Global North', particularly the United States. These findings have significant implications for our comprehension of how discursive practices impact our understanding of global affairs. They underscore the necessity for self-reflection on privilege, a critical examination of unequal international relations and the importance of empathising with those perceived as the 'enemy' to foster peaceful coexistence.

Keywords

China threat, discourse theory, New Cold War, global privilege, culture of peace

Introduction

This article draws on discourse theory and privilege studies to examine the relationship between privilege understood within a global frame and the discursive construction of the 'China threat' in the current geopolitical landscape marked by a hegemonic struggle between China and its allies on one side and the

[1] Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy

Corresponding author:
Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado, Marie Sklodowska-Curie Cofund Fellow, Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy.
E-mail: juan.ruizcasado@unive.it

'Global North' on the other. The ensuing tensions, which have led to a growing usage of the term 'New Cold War' (e.g., Brossat & Ruiz Casado, 2023; Karaganov, 2018; Zhao, 2019), can accurately be described as a multidimensional confrontation envisaged in terms of 'emotional attachment, security concerns and economic interests' (Chen, 2013, p. 247).

Within the literature that explores whether the ascent of China poses a threat, a wide range of viewpoints can be observed (see Gries, 2005; Roy, 1996). At one pole are those perspectives that see the conflict as one between 'democracy' and 'autocracy', in which a Machiavellian and intrinsically aggressive China threatens to replace the United States first regionally and then globally so that it must be contained for the sake of democratic values (e.g., Doshi, 2021; Jacques, 2012; Schoen & Kaylan, 2014). Conversely, others contend that the perception of China as a menace is rather the consequence of the decline of the centuries-old global dominance of the 'West' concurrent with a conspicuous effort to uphold it (see Karaganov, 2018, p. 85; Zhao, 2019, p. 371). Crucially, scholars have emphasised the importance of avoiding hyperbole surrounding the articulation of China as a threat, noting that hyped narratives can become a self-fulfilling prophecy leading to increased antagonism, emboldening hardliners and isolating moderate voices (e.g., Al-Rodhan, 2007; Pan, 2004; Yuan & Fu, 2020).

Hence, even though the 'China threat' narrative has received wide attention, the divergent and conflicting perceptions it elicits warrant an examination of how these differences are related to the presence of privilege understood within a global frame. As an initial step, it is crucial to recognise that the narrative that aims to attribute intrinsically malevolent and menacing attributes to China's ascent has achieved hegemony in the globally privileged 'Global North', especially in the United States (see Brossat & Ruiz Casado, 2023). Within that context, this article systematically investigates how this hegemonic discursive construction of China as an 'enemy' and a 'threat' interacts with the material conditions of 'global privilege' in a diversity of spheres (political, military, economic, technological, cultural and academic).

The article is divided into two parts. The first part establishes the theoretical framework, drawing on discourse theory and privilege studies, and defines key concepts for the subsequent analysis, especially 'Global North' and 'global privilege'. The second part illustrates the dynamics by which the global privilege of 'Global North' countries, and particularly the United States, interacts with the hegemonic discursive articulation of China as a threatening enemy across various domains. In conclusion, the article contends that the current hegemonic consensus in the 'Global North' about the 'China threat' is not just the result of a neutral analysis of reality but rather a discursive construction remarkably informed by global privilege and practices that aim to maintain such privilege, particularly the United States. These findings, in conjunction with the interdisciplinary methodology employed, have profound implications for our comprehension of the complexities inherent in global affairs. They underscore the necessity for self-reflection on privilege, a critical examination of unequal international relations and the importance of empathising with those perceived as the 'enemy' in order to foster peaceful coexistence.

Theoretical Framework and Main Concepts

The analysis builds upon discourse theory and its constructivist, non-essentialist and non-reductionist premises. Additionally, it employs discourse-theoretical concepts such as hegemony, articulation, frontiers or contingency to guide the analysis. The discourse-theoretical approach, originally advocated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001), is especially appropriate to study hegemonic struggle because it seeks to uncover the hidden assumptions, values and power relations that are embedded in political imaginaries constructed by competing discourses. It emphasises the importance of examining how discursive practices in search of 'hegemony' link heterogeneous subject positions into a common subjectivity by articulating privileged signifiers—such as 'democracy', and 'the rules-based international order' in this study—the meaning of which is transformed in the process. Moreover, for such a process of articulation of subject positions to take place, a phenomenon of construction of 'frontiers' is also required. For the articulation of a group of equals, a 'We', to be genuinely felt by heterogeneous social groups, it must be discursively constructed as an identity at risk due to the existence of a challenging or menacing 'Other'. Put differently, only when an 'outsider' precludes or jeopardises the constitution of 'our' identity, can we become conscious of the need to unite vis-à-vis that shared opponent—in the case that concerns us here, 'China'. Lastly, a political project becomes 'contingently' hegemonic when it succeeds in 'partially' universalising 'its particular set of political demands and values' as the socially accepted common sense (Howarth, 2004, p. 269).

Importantly, this study adopts a discourse-theoretical methodological approach that also takes into consideration the 'real' world, relating discursive practices with the material conditions where these emerge (a theoretical exploration of the connections between discourse and privilege, see De Cleen & Ruiz Casado, 2023; see also Carpentier, 2017). Privilege is not just an abstract notion but is manifested in concrete systems and structures in the physical world. Nevertheless, the specific characterisation of its materiality is contingent upon discourse and depends on the meanings attributed to the signifier 'privilege'. Privileges can be articulated as 'normal', representing a natural status quo to be maintained, or as 'exceptional' and 'unfair' social constructs necessitating change. This novel interdisciplinary approach that combines the study of hegemonic struggle with the analysis of privilege in a global context allows for a more thorough examination of the discursive practices that construct China as an 'enemy' and a 'threat' in comparatively privileged countries.

Defining the 'Global North'

Referring to terms such as the 'Global North', the 'West' or the 'free world' carries connotations that are not aprioristically fixed, but rather created through performative articulatory practices. Abstractions such as the 'Global North' and the 'Global South' are commonly employed to refer to the 'rich states, or the North,

and poor states, or the South' (Thompson & Reuveny, 2010, p. 35). However, the above-mentioned definition would fail to fully encompass the complexity of the notions, as the 'Global North' does not apply to high GDP per capita nations such as Qatar, Bermuda, or Brunei. Instead, the designation of the 'Global North' is not based on geographical or economic criteria alone, but rather reflects a multifaceted categorisation that encompasses economic, cultural and ideological factors. Therefore, membership to the 'Global North' does not rely uniquely on economic might, but implicitly requires countries enjoying a high level of human development and stable democratic institutions.

The idea of the 'Global North' must be contrasted with the notion of the 'West'. The signifier 'West' identifies a cultural and political grouping of nations that have their origins in Western Europe and are majoritarian Christian, white, wealthy and self-identify as the bulwark of liberal democracy and its values (i.e. the countries of the European Union, Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and arguably also Israel). While the 'West' is at the core of what we understand as the 'Global North', the latter encompasses a wider range of countries, including those in Asia that exhibit high human development but are not fully 'Western' in cultural terms. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and the Republic of China (Taiwan), thus, are today also part of the 'Global North' even when they certainly are not a part of the 'West'. Regardless, primarily due to the substantial US influence following the Second World War, these countries have undergone a process of partial 'westernisation', adopting some of its cultural practices, political frameworks and specific values.

It is important to note that these discursively constructed notions are guide terms 'of a contingent nature' rather than fixed categories. For instance, whereas Japan, South Korea, Israel, Taiwan and Singapore have joined the 'Global North' in the last decades, Russia and other former Soviet republics left it after the Soviet Union dissolved (see Thompson & Reuveny, 2010). Moreover, the classification of certain countries into one group or another can vary depending on the specific criteria employed for assessment and the relative importance attributed to each factor in the analysis. For example, the democratic quality and the GDP per capita of Uruguay and Chile are much higher than those of Ukraine, but it is not uncommon to see the former evaluated as part of the 'Global South' and the latter as part of the 'Global North'—for this article, they are all part of the 'Global South'.

Defining Global Privilege

The sociological category of 'privilege' can be defined as the unearned advantages and dominance systemically conferred on members of certain socially constructed groups, resulting in structural inequalities and the oppression of other groups (Black & Stone, 2005; McIntosh, 1989; Pease, 2010). While studies on privilege have traditionally focused on gender and ethnic advantage, contemporary analysis often includes varying dimensions of unequal power dynamics and privilege, including sexuality, socioeconomic status, age, differing degrees of ableness or

religious affiliation, among others. These dimensions of privilege intersect in diverse ways and can reinforce each other, establishing different degrees of privilege or underprivilege, which makes it challenging to unambiguously categorise most individuals (Kimmel & Ferber, 2017; Pease, 2010).

Importantly, scholars in the field have mechanically tended to limit the examination of privilege to the country level, and it is only recently that some authors have broadened the focus to include international institutions and the inequalities between countries (see Choules, 2006; Fraser, 2009; Nair, 2022; Norgaard, 2012; Pease, 2010). The argument, thus, is that 'the recognition of privilege must be understood within an international or global frame' (Pease, 2010, p. 41). This approach asserts that the singular emphasis on addressing privilege within the confines of the state hinders the realisation of justice and equality across states. Therefore, a fundamental underlying issue is the ontological conception of democracy and justice: In the contemporary hegemonic narrative, the conjuncture of inequality between countries has been largely naturalised, and 'democratic equality' tends to become 'applied only among fellow citizens' within the borders of the state (Fraser, 2009, p. 2).

The most apparent outcome of taking this approach is to highlight the significant privileges that individuals enjoy by being citizens of countries located in the 'Global North' when compared to those residing in the 'Global South'. Some instances of these birthright benefits include a more valuable passport enabling better mobility, access to greater economic opportunities or better-quality education and healthcare. But relations of inequality are infinitely more complex when we consider not just differences 'within' countries but also *between* countries. For instance, sociological 'elites' in the 'Global South' might enjoy privileges equivalent to those 'elites' of the 'Global North', yet still feel underprivileged as members of a subordinate country within a global frame.

By contrast, although certain groups in dominant countries may experience diverse forms of oppression, they may not recognise their own privilege in a global context or may even choose to consciously use it to the detriment of others (Black & Stone, 2005, pp. 245–246; Pease, 2010, p. 22). Even in states characterised by high levels of inequality in the 'Global North', individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds may knowingly or unknowingly reinforce the systems of privilege that sustain their country's role in global domination. This can occur through apparently innocuous actions such as military enlistment, tax payment, government service or voting for populist leaders who pledge to restore the country's former glory in terms of global clout. These actions, whether intentional or unintentional, can thus serve to perpetuate or even intensify the historical advantages of dominant societies by making them ingrained, structural and invisible.

To start, the performative repetition of discourses that endorse the existing state of affairs 'ingrains' unequal power dynamics of domination and subordination so deeply in society's beliefs that they become normalised as the 'universal good'. As time progresses, the advantages of certain groups become structural by being incorporated into the fundamental structures of (global) society, including laws, policies and socio-cultural customs that are passed down through generations. Now transformed into privileges, these unearned advantages become essentially invisible to society at large, to the extent that even those adversely affected

may not always recognise or acknowledge them. Consequently, if privileges cannot be perceived, the likelihood of them being challenged by counter-hegemonic discourses becomes ever slimmer. But if they do become challenged, the existence of these systems of privilege significantly influences how external 'Others' can become perceived as a threat to the status quo and entrenched privileges of dominant groups.

When systemic shifts and the ascent of emerging countries threaten what individuals in comparatively privileged societies view as their entitlements, it can lead to tensions and conflict. These dynamics can be then exploited and reinforced by certain politicians, who often build their success on constructing alleged 'enemies', while aiming to bolster the comparatively privileged position of the ingroup and mobilise support for policies aimed at curtailing the growth or influence of challenger groups (see De Cleen & Ruiz Casado, 2023). As an example, some politicians in the United States draw upon and expand the public perception disseminated by those who persistently warn of a looming danger to the 'rules-based international order' emanating from China and, at the same time, fatalistically predict the inevitable downfall of the 'West' (Cox, 2017, p. 16). This oversimplistic but unrelenting narrative unavoidably nurtures feelings of general insecurity and animosity towards China regardless of material realities.

In the particular case of the United States, it has been argued that the construction of a national identity founded on 'exceptionalism' has historically entailed the construction of an antagonistic otherness envisaged as a threat jeopardising it, such as the Soviet 'Red Scare', the 'rogue states', international terrorism or the 'China threat' today (Pan, 2004). As a way of illustration, during the 'Cold War', the discursive construction of the 'myth of America' in the face of the Soviet 'red threat' led the United States to envisage itself as a 'manly, racially superior and providentially destined 'beacon of liberty', a country which possesses a special right to exert power in the world' (Hixson, 2008, p. 1).

The contemporary narrative of the 'China threat' bears resemblance to the rhetoric of the 'Cold War' in its dichotomic and stereotypical manner to discursively articulate the 'us' and the 'enemy'. The major shortcoming of this Manichean approach to China is that it is often burdened by 'analytical frameworks which utilize essentialist Western truths to address infinitely more complex global geopolitical issues' (Peters et al., 2020, p. 7). In particular, as we will observe in the following section, the far-reaching effects of global privilege further enable the construction of the 'China threat' to be articulated 'independent of historically contingent contexts or dynamic international interactions' (Pan, 2004, p. 314).

The 'China Threat' Narrative Concerning Global Privilege

This section investigates the inconsistencies and contradictions stemming from the self-centric and often self-serving discourse originating in the 'Global North' about China, which importantly relies on global privilege to successfully

crystallise and legitimate their worldview as the hegemonic one. Such global privilege is especially conspicuous in several spheres that are prone to discursive struggle. These domains encompass political, military, economic, technological, cultural and academic realms (with the latter being a subset of cultural privilege). Finally, the connection between ethnic (white) privilege and global privilege will be examined.

Global Privilege in the Political Sphere

The prevalent hegemonic narrative crystallised today in the 'Global North' is one in which the nodal point 'democracy', as well as some adjacent signifiers such as the 'free world' or the 'rules-based international order', can make an internally divided 'us' to be united in our heterogeneity. But for this to work, simultaneously, the signifier 'China', in the company of other signifiers such as 'autocracy', 'dictatorship' or 'communism', has become the elected 'common enemy' that diminishes our differences in the face of a common struggle against it. This is perfectly illustrated by the June 2022 NATO Declaration in which China was acknowledged for the first time as a systemic competitor 'who challenge[s] our interests, security, and values and seek to undermine the rules-based international order' (Madrid Summit Declaration, 2022).

The 'rules-based international order' is one of the discursive elements that have gained prominence in the 'New Cold War' narrative. Importantly, it encompasses institutions remarkably designed by the United States after the Second World War with the implicit goal of cementing its dominant position within this order and the disproportionate prosperity it allowed to the country, which came to be perceived as a 'birthright' (see Sargent, 2018, p. 9). The pre-eminence of the United States and the 'Global North' more generally within these institutions confers them an undeniable structural advantage, effectively entrenching the power dynamics and inequalities that resulted from a history of colonialism and (neo)imperialist exploitation. As human-made entities, these institutions are not perfect: They could become more democratic, less dominated by the United States and other countries of the 'Global North', and less influenced by the interests of specific groups and ideologies. However, as it stands today, the privileged political position of the United States within this contingent 'international order' enables the country to portray its actions as the unassailable common good, providing it with the unique liberty to act without facing punitive repercussions—this is most noticeable in cases like the invasion of Iraq and the prevalent absence of international sanctions or accusations of war crimes or human rights abuses against the United States and their allies, such as Israel.

Furthermore, as Yuan and Fu (2020) contend, whenever any country is perceived as a potential risk to its hegemonic position, the United States will relentlessly cling to its perceived superiority to construct the 'Other' as a tailored 'threat', regardless of the nature of the challenge posed by the rival, be it an ideological rival like the Soviet Union, an economic competitor like China, or a democratic ally like Japan. China's increasing power collides with the sustainability of

political advantages for the United States and, by extension, the 'Global North'. As stated in the 2017 National Security Strategy document, the predicament is that China is 'contesting [America's] geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favour' (The White House, 2017, p. 27). This implicitly indicates a preference for preserving US global privileges in the political arena and a viewpoint that China lacks legitimacy in challenging the system that relegates it to a subordinate position. The crystallisation of this discourse, therefore, serves as a trigger for anti-China antagonism to emerge and attract broad political support among heterogeneous groups within these societies that feel their shared privileges are at risk.

By contrast, for many authors, the real peril to the 'international order' does not come from China, but from populists in the 'Global North' and their revisionist policies in terms of free trade, free movement and threats to—or unilateral rupture with—international treaties and organisations (see Zakaria, 2020). Beyond the pessimistic or catastrophist interpretation of China's impact on the 'international order', there are voices that even elevate a positive note, claiming that 'while the West and the United States may bemoan their decline in leadership, the new global order will be more democratic, more horizontal and less vertical in its organization' (Warner, 2023). A unipolar US-dominated international system leads to the hoarding of political privileges, invisibilising double standards and promoting the absence of empathy with the 'Other', which in turn contributes to the intensification of conflicts.

While the countries of the 'Global North' may have cause to designate themselves as democratic within their territorial boundaries, this designation does not automatically extend to their conduct in democratic terms in the international arena. The reluctance to accept relations of equality between countries in the global sphere, thus, can be perceived as going against the very democratic values the 'Global North' contends to portray and, instead, might denote a suspicious interest in employing 'democracy' as a tool to maintain dominance. This attitude has moved many in China and beyond to consider that such a 'rules-based international order' is just whatever suits the interests of the United States at a given time. Therefore, if the 'rules-based international order' is instrumentalised to maintain unequal power dynamics, challenging it could be seen as a legitimate path by those in a position of subordination. According to this view, the old international order dominated by some privileged countries 'cannot be sustained' (Zakaria, 2020, p. 62).

Last but not least, the Manichean and determinist worldview of 'democracy' versus 'autocracy' currently depicted by the hegemonic narrative does not take into account the contingency of political regimes. To begin with, the hegemonic 'culture of enmity' presently active in many democracies tends to narrow the scope of pluralism by censoring conciliatory approaches as shows of weakness or even betrayal (see Brossat & Ruiz Casado, 2023). Secondly, the fact that the United States—and other countries in the 'Global North'—is today a liberal democracy does not mean it will always be, as the election of politicians such as Donald Trump and his controversial exit demonstrated. Indeed, countries like the United States have commonly been accused of acting as an empire and abusing its

power in the name of 'democracy' (see Hixson, 2008; Immerwahr, 2019). Considering the potential occurrence of this scenario, we should interrogate the discourse that portrays a unipolar world dominated by the politically privileged 'Global North' as normatively good, at least striving to empathise—even if not agreeing on many points—with those antagonised by such political imaginary.

Global Privilege in the Military Sphere

Deep-rooted privileges confer upon the 'Global North' military advantages that are used to protect its interests globally while placing adversaries in a dire position. Individuals residing in the United States benefit from the geographical privilege of being protected by two vast oceans and the world's most powerful military, providing both a level of security that is enviable and an unmatched ability to act against countries that dare to challenge their interests. It should be noted that the United States has deployed its armed forces 211 times in 67 countries since 1945 and maintains around 800 overseas military bases around the world today, many of them around China (Immerwahr, 2019).

However, global privilege enables the discursive normalisation of the military dominance of the United States and its allies at the same time that it overplays the Chinese military might, which in turn justifies asking for larger military spending in the 'Global North'. As an illustration, while advocating for the urgent necessity to counter Russia and China's alleged military threat with the creation of a coalition of the 'Global North' and NATO, Daalder and Lindsay (2022, p. 124) paradoxically celebrate that although these countries are only home to 15% of the world's population, they enjoy 60% of global wealth and military power; whereas 'China and Russia together are more populous but constitute barely 20 percent of the world's economic output and just 17 percent of its military spending'. In light of these material realities, the 'China threat' discourse appears as a speculative, sensationalised, misleading and counterproductive construction based on 'painting an all-powerful, threatening China bent on the destruction of the United States' and/or its allies (Al-Rodhan, 2007, pp. 62–63). These articulatory practices are, thus, crucial to reinforce the perceptions of fear and distrust against a discursively envisaged 'enemy' altogether that, consciously or unconsciously, obscure the privileges and domination of those allegedly threatened by it.

The self-centred perspective of the dominant group distorts power dynamics and creates a one-sided assumption that the only irrational or menacing actions are those of the 'Other'. Following this logic, the moral supremacy of the dominant group grants legitimacy for democracies to go to war 'against the evil dictatorships, projecting onto them their own repression and expansionism in the way of the truly self-righteous' (Galtung, 1996, p. 57). In this regard, successive US administrations established *Pax Americana* as 'a more hierarchical, and more militarized, system of international order' (Sargent, 2018, p. 10). A militarised system in which foreign threats are often exaggerated as a means to justify geopolitical dominance and the further militarisation of areas of interest. However, China has not gone to war since 1979, a 'record of non-intervention unique among the

world's great powers' (Zakaria, 2020, p. 56). It appears that fear of China stems from prejudice, suspicion or self-projection onto the 'Other' while concealing the current realities of domination/subordination and reinforcing a narrative that portrays the 'Other' as a threat to be contained and controlled by all means.

The overwhelming military presence of the 'Global North' in the vicinity of China is articulated by hegemonic discourse as benevolent and altruistic, whilst its contestation is hyped as a hazard instead of as a natural and even reasonable consequence of China's regional growth and concerns for its national security. While global privilege allows the United States to perceive itself as entitled to implement the 'Monroe doctrine' to constrain the influence of other powers in the Americas, it simultaneously denies a similar prerogative to the second world power in its backyard, crucially in the context of Taiwan, from 1949 to the present day. The reactions of China in the face of this military encroachment are, thus, successfully dismissed by the hegemonic narrative as illegitimate and dangerous to the 'rules-based international order'.

Consequently, instead of establishing a 'balance of power', characterised by mutual vulnerability, this discursive strategy seeks to maintain US strategic primacy and absolute military superiority because, as a paper declassified by the National Security Council in 2021 claimed, 'loss of US pre-eminence in the Indo-Pacific would weaken our ability to achieve US interests globally' (see Jackson, 2023, pp. 166–167, 195). In a world where global power is progressively dispersed among various states, the United States refuses to accept a loss of its global privilege as a military hegemon and clings to an international order that was established at a time when the world was markedly different (see Sargent, 2018, p. 15). Crucially, the search for military primacy even in the Taiwan Strait, right at the doorstep of China, further exacerbates Beijing's mistrust and resentment, ultimately contributing to a military escalation and heightening the likelihood of a future war.

The emerging 'New Cold War' is, therefore, not so much an ideological confrontation as it is a geopolitical one that 'can be understood as a struggle by one power to overturn an unfavourable distribution of power assets that the other power inherited as a result of victory in a major war' (Harris & Marinova, 2022, p. 350). Certainly, this does not imply that China is normatively a benign force or does not have the potential to cause harm. Instead, the issue is that the global privilege of the 'Global North' induces it to feel entitled to control East Asia militarily, so that any potential scenario in which China becomes the hegemonic country in its region is discursively articulated as a normatively unacceptable and perilous situation that justifies any measure adopted to prevent it.

Global Privilege in the Economic and Technological Spheres

Global privilege normalises the pre-eminent economic and technological advantages of the 'Global North' and derides the attempts by subordinate countries to attain similar levels of well-being and development, often invisibilising relations of domination/subordination. For instance, China has been criticised in recent

times by US politicians for not being 'reciprocal', arguing that tariffs and trade balances between the countries should be equivalent to be fair. However, reciprocity between developed and developing countries would eliminate affirmative actions that pursue to reduce structural inequalities. What is more, the signifier 'reciprocity' becomes articulated during the Trump administration 'referring to its inverse', to mean 'one-way obligations of others to the US for Asia's history of supposed economic unfairness toward it' (Jackson, 2023, p. 189). But Beijing's economic policies, in terms of tariffs, subsidies or forced technology transfers for companies who want to invest in its market, could be considered usual for a country at its stage of development. China actually enforces these practices less than some of America's best friends in the 'Global South'; and the countries of the 'Global North' often have done—and still do—similar things when they were industrialising (see Beinart, 2019; Zakaria, 2020, pp. 57–58). Insisting that developing nations adhere to reciprocal standards in a conjuncture marked by domination is not a fair demand but, instead, a discourse that entrenches the presence of structural privilege within the system.

On the one hand, free international trade has been historically unfair to developing countries by extracting cheap labour and resources while keeping technology and wealth in the rich countries (Stiglitz, 2018, p. 137). Because developing countries need to protect their emerging industries with the hope that they will survive international competition against the 'Global North', WTO Agreements contain special and differential treatment provisions which offer developing countries special rights. China benefited from entering the WTO in 2001 because it gained the status of 'most favoured nation' and, thereby, immunity from unilateral US actions to limit its imports (Dittmer, 2017, p. 678). On the other hand, the discursive strategy that accuses China of the economic hardships of the 'Global North' is often divorced from this context of global privilege and inequality, obscuring the interpretation of facts. For instance, critiques of China's currency manipulation overlook how this issue materialises as the result of the material privilege enjoyed by the US setting the dollar as the dominant currency in international trade to the detriment of others (Piketty, 2014, p. 156; Sargent, 2018, p. 17).

The 'Global North' is facing a growing challenge to its historical economic dominance. Yet that fear is at odds with the fact that while China's GDP may be enormous due to the country's size, its ranking in the Human Development Index (including factors such as GNI per capita, life expectancy or education) is still far below the levels of developed countries in the 'Global North', ranking 79th in the world in 2021 (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Therefore, the attempt to constrain China's development through trade or chip (i.e., economic and technological) 'wars' masks, among other arguably legitimate reasons, an underlying desire to maintain or even increase unequal relations of privilege/underprivilege.

In this vein, the acceptance of China as a producer of basic technological products was implicitly conditioned on the US maintaining technological superiority in the fields that they considered strategic. When China challenged that privileged position, the discourse of the US government constructed it as the 'enemy'

jeopardising 'our' national security, thus legitimating any measures that prevent the foreseen loss of technological primacy. The core issue invisibilised by global privilege and its associated entitlements, therefore, is not merely that China is using 'unfair' tactics or is a threat to 'democracy', but that it is challenging deep-rooted privileges in the economic and technological arenas. As Chandran Nair notes, the assumption is that 'the rise of others is a gift from the West, and accordingly they must never challenge its supremacy' (Nair, 2023). This discourse also frequently portrays the 'Global North' as if it had generously allowed China to join the global economy, a favour China is accused of misusing. Yet, it disregards how highly privileged countries and groups within the 'Global North' have gained immense benefits in the process.

Through protectionist and coercive measures such as banning Chinese technology, constricting regulations on Chinese investment, as well as imposing sanctions on companies using US knowledge, equipment or experts to make advanced computer chips bound for China, the 'Global North' as weaponised interdependence and instrumentalised their privileged economic and technological clout against China (see Farrel & Newman, 2019). During the current 'chip war', the United States has demonstrated both its ability to employ economic coercion through sanctions and its privileged position in influencing other countries to comply with such sanctions (see Drezner, 2021). Moreover, it is key to consider how the current implementation of sanctions—considered by China as 'bullying'—and the threat of additional ones have a substantial impact on China's strategic behaviour and its challenge to the 'rules-based international order' in the name of its national security. In the words of Farrel and Newman, 'the more that privileged states look to take advantage of their privilege, the more that other states and nonstate actors will take action that might potentially weaken or even undermine the interdependent features of the preexisting system' (2019, p. 76).

Finally, the image of China has been discursively hyped by the 'Global North' as a source of espionage, hacking and intellectual theft, while analogous actions by the United States are sidelined, banished or whitewashed (Hersh, 2010). For example, China certainly spies and hacks American companies, but this is also something that the United States does in China and elsewhere (see Beinart, 2019). The roots of these double standards are grounded in the feeling of supremacy emanating from global privilege. These set up a Manichean division of the world where 'the West is portrayed as productive, hard-working, mature, honest and progressive and the East is constructed as the opposite of these values' (Pease, 2020, p. 45). Similarly, the myth of meritocracy presupposes that 'poor' countries are in that condition due to the lack of effort and skill. Building upon these ideas, the argument is that if China is experiencing rapid success, it must be doing so through dishonest means. For instance, during the 1980s and 1990s, the belief in deserved superiority 'made it difficult for the United States to justify its failure in economic competition with Japan other than by acknowledging Japan's superiority' (Yuan & Fu, 2020, p. 21). Subsequently, Japan was bashed using similar arguments as those used to lambaste China today, when '[c]riticism of Japan's economic and industrial espionage was constant in the US mass media and in Congress hearings' (p. 21). This should not lead us to dismiss the moral condemnation of

the illegal or coercive actions implemented by the Chinese government, which are indeed abundant. Rather, it serves to highlight the need to react in equal terms to actions contrary to international law, regardless of who commits them.

Global Privilege in the Cultural Domain

Culture operates as an invisible force shaping our worldview. On the one hand, through tools of soft power such as cinema, music, literature, sports or international news media, the dominant societies of the 'Global North' enjoy the privilege of becoming idealised while the 'Other' is unconsciously normalised as different, inferior or even dangerous. On the other hand, these structural advantages exert sufficient influence to convince individuals within marginalised communities to support the supremacy of the 'Global North' and internalise their own subjugation (Pease, 2010, p. 5). Ultimately, global privilege in the cultural sphere, rooted in past colonisation and imperialism, contributes to the creation of double standards and the perpetuation of domination through the supremacist perception that it is acceptable for the 'Global North' to intervene in lesser countries (Hixson, 2008, pp. 1–13; Pease, 2010, pp. 41–44).

Considering that most individuals in the 'West' have limited first-hand exposure to China (and that China has limited soft power to effectively communicate its viewpoints to them, let alone persuade them), their perception of the country is unavoidably mediated by cultural mechanisms that leave them prone to cognitive bias. Since the inception of the 'China threat' narrative, and according to Denny Roy (1996, p. 758), the 'alarmist edge of much of this commentary was based (sometimes explicitly, sometimes not) on antipathy toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime'. Cultural creators embedded in the hegemonic anti-China imaginary of the 'Global North' deliberately or inadvertently contribute to the hyped construction of the evil 'enemy' and the normative assumptions of what 'China' is.

For instance, contemporary narratives in Western cultural production widely portray the country as 'China the thief' and 'China the manipulator' (Yuan & Fu, 2020, p. 30). Similarly, most 'Western' journalists, no matter how hard they try to attain objectivity, are still deeply embedded in a hegemonic imaginary where the West is the best, even after living for many years in China (Plate, 2023). Chinese viewpoints are commonly doubted as 'propaganda' or spurned as 'Chinese talking points', pre-emptively rejecting whatever plausibility or rationality they might possess—while suggesting that 'our side' sticks to the 'truth' and does not engage in propaganda or participates in cognitive warfare. This complicates the veracity of information, as mainstream media tends to give credibility to anti-CCP and pro-Western sources, often without questioning their legitimacy, while alternative sources tend to be aprioristically dismissed (see Ruiz Casado, 2023). The influence of this soft power bestows upon the 'Global North' the global privilege of controlling and moulding the discourse concerning China, emphasising the negative aspects and downplaying any contextualisation that may not be in line with the objectives of the 'Global North'.

Global Privilege in Academia

As a subset of the cultural domain, global privilege in the academic field deserves a separate mention. Bob Pease's work criticises North American scholars in the field of privilege studies for not naming and interrogating their own privilege emanating 'from living in one of the most powerful, developed and affluent countries in the world' (2010, p. 40). For instance, English being the hegemonic language in academia is a form of privilege that bestows advantages upon the scholars from some countries (and, therefore, their viewpoints) simply by virtue of birth, while simultaneously limiting the visibility and opportunities of non-English speakers. Furthermore, individuals born into financially privileged environments have the opportunity to receive English training or attend schools considered more prestigious. This implies that the bulk of academic publications come from comparatively privileged groups, shaping knowledge production with a bias from its inception (see Nair, 2022, pp. 83–96; Pease, 2010, pp. 51, 58–59).

Research has shown that the impact of privilege in academic inquiry is apparent in both the researcher's 'assumptions and narratives' used to interpret their field experiences, as well as in the relationship established between the researcher and their object of study (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). Pease (2010, p. 43) similarly argues that 'western social sciences are so embedded within Eurocentric assumptions that most social scientists are unaware of their European bias'. Consequently, the deeply ingrained theses of the dominant groups within the academia lead many scholars to aprioristically neglect and dismiss the arguments of the 'Other'. The tendency towards biased judgements can be particularly damaging when examining topics that touch upon the researcher's own privileges, and where the researcher may have a vested interest in obtaining a particular outcome (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 226). As a way of illustration, a study by Hermann Kurthen (2020, p. 1) demonstrated that no matter the ideological leaning of the 37 US foreign policy experts he interviewed, all of them coincided with the imperative of 'safeguarding US global leadership, maintaining alliances, securing US prosperity, orienting at values, and believing in a mission'.

In this regard, Chengxin Pan (2004) has criticised 'China scholars' in the 'West' and their supposed neutrality in studying the country, as well as their dichotomous normative assumptions about China and the United States. For Jon Solomon (2023), the field of area studies, created at US universities during a specific historical context of ideological struggle (the 'Cold War'), has participated in the geopolitical tactics and strategies of the United States in its quest for unipolarity and global hegemony, establishing the methodologies, protocols, language, structures and expectations that practitioners in the field adhere to in their pursuit of validation from their peers.

The academic system, the experts and the knowledge are all imbued by the partisan worldview of the dominant group, which in turn grants it both a privileged position and legitimacy. Also, the institutions of education in countries of the 'Global South' have largely originated with the support of universities in the 'Global North' or experts educated in them. Accordingly, even Chinese scholars educated in US universities (or Chinese universities under Western models of

knowledge) can come to justify the hegemony of the 'Global North' and interiorise the position of subordination of China as normal.

In this context, it is often ignored how scholars that go against the hegemonic understanding of China encounter barriers and pressure in the 'Global North'. First, in the 'New Cold War' environment of hostility towards China, it becomes possible that scholars showing equidistance or defending certain Chinese perspectives become stigmatised by peers as siding with the 'enemy', in a logic that curtails pluralism and induces self-censorship. A second point is that scholars who challenge the prevailing view of the 'China threat' may encounter unfair obstacles in getting their work published, not necessarily because of lack of merit but rather because their arguments contradict the entrenched biases of editors and reviewers. The academic privilege of the 'Global North', thus, contributes to hampering the decolonisation of knowledge, normalising existing relations of domination/subordination and legitimising the 'China threat' rhetoric through scholarly work.

Global Privilege in Connection with Ethnic (White) Privilege

The consolidation and institutionalisation of 'Western' 'white privilege' in the world scene tend to favour a biased perception of the discourses of these actors as 'true', and their actions as 'fairer'. The legitimacy of US global leadership is importantly rooted in white privilege in combination with other privileges. For example, white privilege in intersection with global privilege in the political domain contributes to the over-representation and authoritative perception of 'Western' countries in international organisations, increasing their clout to advance their political interests in these forums. Similarly, the perceived legitimacy of 'Western' culture in shaping global values is also bolstered by white privilege (see Nair, 2022; Pease, 2010).

White privilege has significant sway on global discourse and favours an idealised perception and increased confidence in the practices of 'whites' by societies in the 'Global South'. This privilege also induces a negativity bias against the non-white 'Other' and blinds those in dominance to the injustices and inequalities they help perpetuate among non-whites. These sorts of ethnic relations of privilege/underprivilege between the 'West' vis-à-vis China are not new, and authors have alerted of a 'history of anti-Asian bigotry' in the United States towards both Japan and China when they became a challenge to the country (e.g., Beinart, 2019; Yuan & Fu, 2020).

Nevertheless, and contrary to some approaches that over-emphasise the impact of white privilege (e.g., Nair, 2022), white privilege alone could not have the potential to make the antagonism against China ubiquitous among highly heterogeneous groups in the countries of the 'Global North', including non-white groups within societies like the United States, or majority non-white societies such as Japan, South Korea or Taiwan. Therefore, it is the combination of white privilege and the broader global privilege of the 'Global North' across various domains that enables this phenomenon. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that several countries in the 'Global South' are ethnically majority white—such as Argentina,

Uruguay, Georgia, Belarus or Russia—and do not exhibit the same level of antagonism towards China nor blindly support the theses of the 'Global North' in other instances.

Conclusions

The central argument of this article is that the current hegemonic consensus in the 'Global North' about the 'China threat' is not just the result of a neutral analysis of reality, but rather a discursive construction remarkably informed by global privilege and practices that aim to maintain such privilege. I have analysed the relation between the prevailing anti-China narrative and the entitlements and supremacism that stem from the global privilege enjoyed by the 'Global North', with a particular focus on the United States, across a diversity of domains (political, military, economic, technologic, cultural, and academic, as well as the relevance of 'white privilege'). Moreover, the feeling that those shared global privileges are jeopardised and, therefore, should be safeguarded, is a pivotal factor that enables the articulation of otherwise highly heterogeneous groups in the 'Global North' vis-à-vis the common 'enemy': China. Simultaneously, this contingently sedimented imaginary serves to legitimise the global privileges and consequent domination of the international order by the 'Global North' as a universal good that China is not entitled to challenge.

Much as it transpired during the 'Cold War' against the Soviet Union, Manichean paradigms tend to define and perpetuate a frivolous and distorted division between virtuous heroes and dreadful villains. This is an unsophisticated and dichotomous 'Schmittian' worldview defined by the 'culture of enmity', which can be described as a discursive framework fixated on purposively identifying and constructing insurmountable differences with a chosen 'Other' to ultimately legitimate its elimination (see Brossat & Ruiz Casado, 2023). Carl Schmitt argued that the essence of the political lies in the distinction between friend and enemy, which derives from the most extreme case of emergency, war, overriding all other distinctions (Marchart, 2007, p. 41). The consolidation of these radically antagonistic relations of exteriority establishes a framework of normative constraints that also limits dissenting voices and thus pluralism within the democracies of the 'Global North', hindering a balanced discussion and restricting the available policy alternatives—be it due to firm belief that anti-China policies are the only acceptable ones or that deviating from them would be met with opposition from the general public (e.g., for the reaction to the words of French President Macron after he visited China, see Rankin, 2023).

To clarify, this is not to say that China should be considered a benevolent power from a normative standpoint, but rather that current discursive practices tend to overplay the danger and depict it as unilateral and independent of any actions undertaken by the 'Global North'. The invisibility of global privilege limits the capacity to empathise with the foreign, subordinate 'Other', and precludes the understanding of how the hype of the 'China threat' can, as well, be seen as a menace by China. International relations between China and the

'Global North' do not solely depend on how the former decides to behave, but also on how the latter interprets and reacts to those actions, as well as how it engages with the material existence of relations of domination and subordination—which are a form of structural violence (see Galtung, 1996). By placing the discursive construction of the 'China threat' in connection with the materiality of privilege in a global context, this study has highlighted the importance of self-reflection on privilege, the critique of unequal international relations, and the need of empathy when it comes to evaluating the fears and needs of the 'Other'.

In addressing China's perspective, we must recognise that empathising with those who are perceived as 'enemies' is neither an easy nor a comfortable exercise. Nevertheless, to attain a more nuanced understanding of the confrontational dynamics currently shaping international politics and effectively address multifaceted conflicts such as the emerging 'New Cold War', it is required to regard the arguments and anxieties of the opposed camp engaging in open and honest debate. Recognising and critiquing our own positions of privilege and subsequent domination over the 'Other' are important initial steps towards that goal.

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ORCID iD

Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7809-8568

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