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SUPERPOWER IN PROGRESS

An Ideal-Type Analysis of China's Global Status

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China has been growing at a rapid pace, with their GDP beginning to rival the global hegemon of the past three decades, the United States of America. Many scholars have begun to debate whether we are heading towards a bipolar world order with the U.S on one side and China on the other, or if China's growth and advancement will begin to plateau and allow the U.S to maintain global dominance. These debates are framed around the keyword "superpower", and the question of whether or not China has reached this status or is about to do so. However, the definition of the word and the parameters for measuring superpower status remain unclear. The scholarship remains divided on what truly constitutes a superpower and on whether China currently qualifies.

To address this gap, this thesis develops an ideal-type model that defines superpower status along four distinct dimensions: military power, economic power, diplomatic influence and soft power, and long-term resilience. China's performance in each of these dimensions is empirically analysed and systematically compared to that of the United States, the benchmark for a superpower. The analysis reveals that while China fulfils several criteria, particularly in the economic domain, it does not yet meet the full spectrum of superpower characteristics. This thesis therefore argues that superpower status is a spectrum, identifying China as a "superpower in progress". The findings contribute to both clarifying the classification of global powers and the broader understanding of todays evolving international order.

Keywords: Superpower, Ideal-Type Analysis, Soft Power, Hegemony, Unipolarity, Bipolarity

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1. Introduction

After three decades of a unipolar world order led by the United States of America as the global hegemon, tides are shifting. With virtually uninterrupted economic growth since the liberalization reforms of 1989, in combination with the formation of new diplomatic pacts like BRICS and foreign aid measures such as the belt-and-road initiative; Chinas international influence has steadily grown to massive proportions. Today China has developed a "*network of economic relations with both industrial economies and those constituting the semi-periphery and periphery of the world system*" (Bernal-Meza, 2016 p. 27).

While China has experienced unprecedented economic growth and expanded its global influence, some argue that it still lacks key characteristics of a true superpower, such as global military dominance or a leading role in technological advancements (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016), Others contend that China is in an inevitable trajectory toward being the next global superpower, challenging or even surpassing the United States (Subramanian, 2011).

This study will apply an ideal-type analysis to define the essential characteristics of a superpower and evaluate whether China meets these criteria. By constructing a theoretical model of a superpower and comparing it to China's current status, this paper seeks to provide a structured evaluation of China's role in the international system and thus answer the question: "*Is China a superpower?"*. This will be done by first examining what the previous literature says about China's global status and the term superpower, then synthesizing each scholarly perspective into a single ideal-type model. After this, China will be empirically analysed in comparison to the U.S (an undisputed superpower) to see how well it measures up to the ideal-type criteria. The findings could contribute to the broader debate on global power shifts and the evolving structure of world politics.

2. Purpose

This study has two goals. First, to theoretically construct a comprehensive and measurable concept of "superpower". Second, to empirically conduct an ideal-type analysis in order to assess China's power status. By doing this, the thesis contributes to the broader discourse on power in international relations and offers insights into the

evolving global order. The findings may help refine theoretical models of superpower status and provide a framework for assessing other rising powers in the future.

3. Literature Review

This thesis engages with debates in international relations about how power is defined and measured in the global system, focusing specifically on the concept of the "superpower." While there is extensive scholarship on China's rise, much of it evaluates isolated aspects of its power; economic, military or soft power, without a clear or consistent framework for what it means to be a superpower. The term itself is often used interchangeably with "great power" or "hegemon," which creates confusion and limits analytical precision (Nye, 2011;Mearsheimer, 2001;Kennedy, 1987).

This literature review first examines how China has been assessed by the scholarship in regard to whether it is a superpower. Afterwards, the review will examine how the concept of a "superpower" is defined in the broader IR literature. The aim is to identify disagreements or possible gaps in the current scholarship and show how this thesis contributes by developing a structured and clearer model of superpower status.

3.1 Is China a Superpower?

The question of whether China has achieved superpower status has been widely debated in academic literature, with scholars offering competing perspectives on the nature of global power and China's trajectory. As China's global profile has expanded over the last two decades, so too has academic interest in examining the extent and character of its rise. There is now extensive literature on China's economic transformation (Naughton, 2007; Subramanian, 2011), military modernization (Mearsheimer, 2001; Fravel, 2019), diplomatic strategy (Ikenberry, 2008; Mastro, 2019), technological ambitions (Zhao and Zhang, 2022; Atkinson, 2024), and efforts at soft power expansion (Nye, 2004; Shambaugh, 2015).

Some of this literature is framed through debates about the potential end of American unipolarity (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016) or the emergence of a new bipolar or multipolar order. Some argue that China's rise is inevitable, while others contend that

economic growth alone is insufficient to challenge the entrenched dominance of the United States.

3.1.1 China’s Economic Power

One of the more contested areas in the literature concerns the sufficiency of economic growth alone in elevating a state to superpower status. Economically speaking, Subramanian (2011) asserts that China’s dominance is a near certainty, predicting that by 2030, China will surpass the United States in GDP, trade volume, and financial influence. He argues that economic power is the most significant determinant of global dominance, as it enables a country to shape international markets, dictate trade relationships, and exert financial leverage over other states.

However, other scholars dispute the notion that economic power alone determines superpower status. Brooks & Wohlforth (2016) argue that while China has made substantial economic gains, it lacks the technological and institutional foundations necessary to convert economic strength into comprehensive global dominance. They contend that the United States maintains key advantages in innovation, military reach, and leadership within global institutions, which will allow it to sustain its position as the world’s preeminent power.

Although they posit that Chinas lack of technological innovation is among its main obstacles to reaching superpower status, it is important to note that in the 9 years since their article was published, China has been aggressively investing in their tech sector (Tang & Woo, 2025), and with the release of the Chinese AI company DeepSeek’s latest R1 AI model, US tech stock collapsed dramatically (Booth 2025), possibly hinting that China is more competitive in technological innovation than previously thought.

3.1.2 The relevance of Chinese tech investment

Chinese tech investment appears to have become a major priority for the Communist party in recent years. Academic studies highlight that China’s investments into R&D have increased significantly, with an average annual growth rate of 17% in basic research during 2016–2020 **(**Zhao and Zhang, 2022 p. 17). China's strategic use of high-tech “development zones” (areas where the government tries to encourage investment and development by offering financial advantages), state subsidies to tech companies, and

long-term industrial policy has accelerated their innovation capacity in advanced sectors like semiconductors, 5G, AI and green energy (Atkinson, 2024). According to studies that are more recent than Brooks & Wohlforth (2016), "*China has become a serious competitor in the foundational technologies of the 21st century*" (Atkinson, 2024).

These investments are relevant to China's capacity for innovation and the resilience of its model of governance. But more importantly, these investments could, according to Atkinson (2024) ensure China's economic competitiveness in the long-term as AI and software begin to make up a larger share of the global marketplace. Therefore, the argument that China cannot become a true superpower due to a lack of technological innovation may no longer be applicable.

3.1.3 Military power projection

From a military perspective, realist scholars such as John Mearsheimer (2001) argue that global military power is the defining characteristic of a superpower. A country must be capable of projecting force across multiple regions and deterring potential challengers. While China has invested heavily in modernizing its military, scholars remain divided over whether it has achieved the level of strategic capability necessary to rival the United States. Mastro (2019) describes China as a "stealth superpower," one that avoids direct military confrontation with the United States while gradually expanding its influence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Rather than replicating the U.S. model of global military bases and alliances, China is displacing American influence through economic partnerships and strategic diplomacy.

Despite these advancements, Brooks & Wohlforth (2016) argue that China has not yet reached the threshold of military dominance required for superpower status. They emphasize the overwhelming strategic advantages the United States possesses, including superior military infrastructure, a global network of allies, and command over crucial global commons such as sea lanes, cyber capabilities, and aerospace power.

3.1.4 Diplomacy and soft power projection

In addition to economic and military factors, scholars such as Joseph Nye (2011) highlight the importance of soft power, which is defined as the ability to shape global norms, values, and cultural preferences. While China has invested in cultural diplomacy

through Confucius Institutes, global media expansion, and educational outreach, its ideological model has not gained the same level of international appeal as Western liberal democracy.

Mastro (2019) argues that China's strategy differs from previous superpowers in that it does not seek to impose its ideology but instead uses economic incentives and diplomatic influence to gain leverage over other states. It is also important to note that China's role in global diplomacy may be shifting in a way the currently available scholarly literature cannot account for. This is an important note, as at the time of writing this thesis, major shifts in the global order are happening. The US under the second Trump administration is antagonizing long standing allies, whilst China is working on deepening trade relations with said allies such as the EU (Lee & Li, 2025).

3.1.5 Long-term resilience, systemic constraints and summary

A more recent area of focus considers long-term sustainability or resilience as a critical requirement for enduring superpower status. Brooks & Wohlforth (2016) highlight several structural challenges that could limit China's long-term rise, including demographic decline, internal political constraints, and economic imbalances. They argue that while China is experiencing rapid growth, its centralized political system and lack of strong alliances may hinder its ability to sustain superpower status in the long run. In contrast, the United States benefits from institutional resilience and a vast network of allies, which serve as stabilizing factors even in times of economic or political uncertainty. There are also studies on the CCP regimes legitimacy. Most of the time, the Chinese public has perceived their governance with high legitimacy due to consistent economic growth. However, with growth slowing down in recent years, there is a debate to be had that Chinese social cohesion could weaken (Zeng, 2014).

However, as previously mentioned, China's relatively recent investments in technological innovation could contribute to the enhancement of productivity and military capability, as well as secure a long-term competitive advantage. This contributes to the longevity and resilience of China's growth. Besides, China's current governing model appears to be one of the main reasons they can rapidly create economic development zones and refocus their investments (Atkinson 2024), with clear long term plans in a way a western electoral democracy cant.

To summarize, the literature on China's status presents a complex and fragmented view. While some argue that China's economic growth signals inevitable superpower status, others contend that this alone is insufficient without corresponding technological, institutional, and military strength. Recent investments in innovation suggest progress, but China's global military reach and ideological appeal remain limited. Scholars also debate China's long-term resilience, mentioning both structural vulnerabilities and adaptive strategies as important features. This fragmentation underscores the need for a clearer framework to assess whether China meets the threshold for superpower status.

3.2 Superpower status according to the literature

The literature on China appears divided on whether it is a superpower or not, partially because it seems scholars disagree on what factors most contribute to a countries superpower status. So, what does the word "superpower" mean and how it will be applied in the context of this analysis?

First coined by William T.R. Fox (1944), the term was initially meant to describe the post-war capabilities of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the British Empire. These states were distinguished by their ability to project power globally through military strength, economic reach, and political influence. Over time, however, the superpower category has become more ambiguous. Although frequently used in scholarly and policy discourse, the term lacks a universally applied definition. As previously mentioned, it is often conflated with the words "great power" or "hegemon" and is applied inconsistently across different case studies (Nye, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2001; Kennedy, 1987).

Loosely related to this debate is the actual distinction between "great powers" and "superpowers." While both categories refer to states with substantial influence, great powers typically exert regional dominance, whereas superpowers wield comprehensive global influence across multiple "domains" (Nye, 2011; Buzan & Waever, 2003). The European Union, for example, could be considered an economic great power, yet it lacks unified military capability or cohesive foreign policy to qualify as a superpower. This comparison reinforces the need for a definition that includes scope, scale, and versatility of influence across issue areas (Buzan & Waever, 2003).

Different academics have emphasized the different "domains" of superpower status. Scholars such as Mearsheimer (2001) and Buzan & Waever (2003) argue that the ability to project military power across multiple regions and deter major threats is the defining feature of a superpower. Economic power is also widely recognized as central to superpower status. According to Kennedy (1987), long-term military capabilities are ultimately sustained by economic productivity and innovation. Subramanian (2011) builds on this idea, arguing that a superpower must be an economic hegemon capable of shaping global markets, providing public goods, and leveraging creditor power to influence other states. Yet others expand the definition to include other, less obvious factors. Nye (2004; 2011) emphasizes the importance of soft power, cultural appeal, political values, and diplomacy as distinct but essential modes of influence. Ikenberry (2011) adds that leadership in international institutions and the ability to set global rules and norms are key features of superpower status.

In summary, while early definitions of the term superpower emphasized military and economic dominance, later scholarship has expanded to include soft power, institutional leadership, and technological innovation. However, there is no consensus on which dimensions are essential or how they should be weighted.

3.3 Identifying the limitations

Despite the richness of the literature mentioned above, some important gaps and limitations remain. First, the concept of "superpower" itself is contentious. Definitions vary significantly, with many studies treating the term as synonymous with "great power" or "hegemon," while disagreeing on which specific conditions are necessary and sufficient for distinguishing a superpower from other powerful states (Nye, 2011; Kennedy, 1987).

Second, much of the scholarship is fragmented. Analysts tend to focus on isolated areas like economic strength, military capability, or soft power without synthesizing these different areas into a coherent model.

Third, the analytical models in the literature are heavily shaped by comparisons to the historical experience of the United States or the United Kingdom, which risks projecting western centric assumptions onto China's development and ignores the possibility that

China's rise is unlike what we've seen before. This, in combination with the fact that a lot of the literature is before the 2020's, whilst China continues to rapidly change means that the current literature cannot accurately account for China's global status today.

3.4 This thesis' contribution

This thesis addresses these problems by offering a new contribution in both theory and method. It constructs an ideal-type model of the superpower based on clearly defined, non-overlapping dimensions drawn from existing literature: military power, economic power, soft power, as well as long-term resilience. These dimensions are not treated as interchangeable but as analytically distinct and jointly necessary conditions for achieving superpower status.

By applying this framework to China's present position in each domain, this study provides a more balanced assessment of whether China meets the criteria of superpower status, or if it remains a powerful but merely regional power. This contribution clarifies the meaning of a "superpower," produces a more methodologically clear evaluation of China's global role and offers a reusable analytical framework for comparing other emerging powers.

4. Theory

Given the definitional ambiguity and lack of consensus in the literature, this thesis does not borrow any single existing definition of superpower. Instead, it contributes a theoretical innovation by constructing an ideal-type model derived from the major scholarly perspectives reviewed above (Esaiasson et al., 2024, p. 314).

4.1 Defining a superpower

For this thesis, a superpower is defined as *a state capable of exerting significant global influence across several dimensions, specifically global military power, economic power, soft power, and long-term resilience*. This definition integrates the perspective of multiple scholarly sources, including:

- Mearsheimer (2001) whose perspective emphasizes that a superpower must have substantial global military capabilities and the willingness to use them assertively to shape international relations according to its strategic interests.

- Subramanian (2011), who asserts that economic power is integral to superpower status, as economic resources underpin a state's ability to exercise global influence beyond its own borders, particularly through financial leverage and international trade relations.
- Nye (2004), who argues that military and economic resources alone are insufficient, and that a true superpower must also possess the capacity to shape global preferences and values through its cultural appeal and diplomatic credibility.
- Brooks & Wohlforth (2016) who argue that a states long-term resilience is fundamental, and that the longevity of a states economic power and overall resilience depends on maintaining a technological edge.
- And Buzan & Waever (2003), who differentiate between regional power dynamics and global power projection.

Examples of past superpowers include the United States and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War era. These two superpowers projected great military and economic strength through the development of nuclear weaponry and the space race, whilst also demonstrating great soft power projection through dividing the world into the NATO and Warsaw pact blocs respectively. In the end, the institutional resilience of the United States outlasted that of the Soviet Union.

4.2 Distinguishing great power, superpower and hegemon.

A great power wields significant influence primarily within regional boundaries or specific sectors. An example of this is, as previously mentioned, the EU. The EU could arguably be classified as a great power due to its substantial influence within the European regional economic and security system. Its trade and regulation policy also grants it some global influence. However, due to the EU’s lack of a unified military or cohesive foreign policy, it cannot begin to reach superpower status. Similarly, Germany or France by themselves could be classified as great powers as they have substantial influence within Europe’s economic dynamics and a great deal of cultural projection. However, they lack several factors necessary to be economically or militarily influential on a global scale (Buzan & Waever, 2003).

A superpower maintains extensive global influence across the multiple dimensions mentioned in 4.1 and can, through these dimensions, impact global affairs independently of a coalition. However, a superpower lacks unilateral dominance in all of these areas. The existence of more than one superpower negates unipolarity, if a state can be credibly challenged on any of the power dimensions that have been established, it can still be a superpower, but it cannot be a hegemon.

A hegemon is typically defined as a state capable of establishing and enforcing rules of the international system unilaterally, often through dominance in military, economic, and ideological arenas that arguably cannot be sufficiently challenged by any other world power (Kennedy, 1987; Nye, 2011). After the cold war the US became the world's sole superpower and thus, the global hegemon. This means that a hegemon can be defined as the only superpower in the world at a given time.

On the following page is a conceptual ladder clarifying the concepts shared and distinguishing attributes:

Level	Core Characteristics	Shared With Lower Levels
Great Power	Regional dominance or sectoral influence. Strong military or economic base. Plays a role in shaping international outcomes (e.g., in institutions or alliances). Recognition by peers as a major actor	Core state power (military, economy, diplomacy), but on a limited or regional scale
Superpower	Global reach across military, economic, and diplomatic spheres. High capacity to project power worldwide. Significant influence in international institutions. Ability to act independently of coalitions	All characteristics of a great power, but with global rather than regional impact + ability to impact global affairs independently of coalitions.
Hegemon	Uncontested global dominance across all key dimensions (military, economic, political, ideological). Ability to unilaterally shape international rules, norms and institutions. No credible peer challenger	All characteristics of a superpower and great power, but with uncontested dominance in all of them.

4.3 Superpower dimensions: dependency and distinction.

Ideal-type analysis demands distinct, non-overlapping dimensions, however, the chosen dimensions: military power, economic power, soft power, and long-term resilience are interdependent. Military power often relies heavily on economic resources (Kennedy, 1987; Subramanian, 2011) yet remains analytically distinguishable through its explicit focus on strategic and global effectiveness. Soft power, though influenced by economic strength, uniquely concerns cultural and diplomatic factors (Nye, 2004).

Resilience, while also indirectly shaped by the other dimensions, is distinct in that it refers to a state's long-term capacity to endure internal and external shifts, maintain stability, and adapt over time. A state could, for example, be militarily or economically strong yet suffer from institutional fragility or demographic decline that undermines its long-term global influence. Thus, while the resilience dimension overlaps in outcomes with other dimensions, it captures a deeper structural capability not captured by power projection alone.

4.4 Measurement of Superpower Dimensions

Each dimension will be defined by the following criteria, based on a synthesis of previous literature on what defines a superpower, as well as independent reasoning.

- **Global military power:** Comparative military spending, global operational capability, strategic deterrence, and ability to challenge the current hegemon, specifically benchmarked against the United States (Mearsheimer, 2001; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016).
- **Economic power:** Measured by GDP size, creditor status, global trade influence, and technological innovation leadership, with relative power indicated by capacity to substantially shape international policy (Subramanian, 2011). Technological innovation is categorized here as it directly contributes to economic output, competitiveness, and trade leverage. However, it is important to note that innovation also indirectly supports long-term resilience by enhancing a state's ability to adapt to systemic challenges and maintain sustained growth.
- **Diplomatic influence and Soft power:** Assessed by influence in international institutions, strategic diplomatic alliances, favourability worldwide, and roles within

global governance frameworks such as the UN and WTO (Ikenberry, 2008; Nye, 2004).

- **Long-term resilience:** Evaluated through indicators of internal and external adaptability, demographic robustness, adaptability to systemic challenges, and institutional durability (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016; Drezner, 2014).

4.5 Ideal-type table

The following table presents the ideal-type model of a superpower, constructed from a synthesis of previous literature and theoretical perspectives. Each row defines the ideal characteristics a state must exhibit in each dimension to qualify as a superpower. This model forms the benchmark for evaluating whether China meets the conceptual threshold of superpower status.

Superpower Dimension	Ideal-Type Characteristics
Military Power	1. Modernized offensive and defensive capability 2. Global military presence 3. Sustained combat capability against the hegemon.
Economic Power	1. Large share of global GDP and trade 2. Technological leadership 3. Capacity to influence global markets and set financial rules.
Diplomatic Influence & Soft power reach	1. Leadership in international institutions, 2. Global diplomatic network 3. Ability to shape norms and perspectives.
Long-term Resilience	1. Institutional and political adaptability 2. Demographic sustainability 3. Regime legitimacy

The use of an ideal-type model establishes analytically distinct and non-overlapping dimensions, which avoids conceptual conflation and allows for a transparent, structured comparison between theory and reality. It provides a benchmark that does not describe any one empirical case perfectly, but against which cases can be systematically evaluated. In doing so, it makes the concept of "superpower" not only more analytically precise but also more useful for comparative research. The model developed here is grounded in existing scholarship yet extends it by integrating military, economic, diplomatic, and resilience-based dimensions into a single framework. This structure fits in with Gerring (1999)'s criteria for conceptual "goodness", especially the need for clear differentiation from similar concepts. According to Gerring, a good concept is clearly "distinguished from other most-similar concepts". Although the model does sacrifice some "parsimony" (simplicity) it still offers a comprehensive and operational tool for comparing global powers like China to the superpower ideal (Gerring, 1999 p. 367).

5. Methodology

This section outlines how the research question posed in the intro section of this thesis will be answered. It presents the chosen research design, discusses the type of data used and how it was gathered, and explains the method of analysis. Justifications for each methodological choice are grounded in method literature.

In order to determine whether China meets the criteria of superpower status, the analysis will employ a structured comparison with the United States, the current global hegemon and the most commonly accepted benchmark for superpower capabilities.

5.1 Research design

The thesis employs a comparative case study design, focusing on China as the primary case and using the United States as the primary benchmark. While China is the main subject of the analysis, the U.S functions as the global reference point for what constitutes superpower status in empirical terms. According to Yin (2014 p. 40-50), a single-case design is particularly suitable when examining a unique case that offers critical insights into a theoretical concept, which in this case is superpower status.

5.2 Data sources, choice and gathering methods

Data gathering is primarily document-based, involving systematic review and synthesis of existing scholarly literature, official publications, and credible analytical reports. This method is appropriate due to its effectiveness in managing complex, qualitative data. The limitation includes potential source bias and retrospective analysis challenges.

Secondary academic literature, official state documents, independent policy analyses, and credible media reports constitute the data sources. These are chosen to ensure comprehensive coverage of China's capabilities and strategic intentions from multiple perspectives, counteracting potential biases inherent in official governmental reports. Esaiasson et al. (2024 p. 314) emphasize sorting through diverse sources in qualitative analyses in order to answer the question of a thesis as thoroughly as possible.

As mentioned above, a possible drawback of this method is that the intent behind Chinese tech investments, military incursions etc., are not likely to be made clear or presented in an "honest" manner by Chinese official state media/government websites. Likewise, as the U.S defense departments reports on matters of Chinese military capabilities are presented to congress, they could be either under-or-overestimating China in order to convince congress to allocate more funds towards the DoD.

In essence, this thesis is an idea-centered study (Esaiasson et al 2024 p. 327) studying the meaning and application of the term "superpower" and how China fits into it. While the literature on the word superpower itself does not necessarily require a critical analysis of possible biases, text on how China measures up to the dimensions of the superpower ideal-type will originate from sources with potential biases. For example, reporting on Chinas growth and strategy could be affected by both positive and negative biases. The idea is to circumnavigate this drawback through independent reasoning, comparing the data at hand with data from other sources, and relying on what results have been gathered by previous research papers (ibid)

5.3 Methods of data analysis

Empirical findings are systematically compared against an ideal-type constructed through the theoretical framework in section 4. The table on the next pages outlines how each dimension of the ideal-type will be operationalized and measured in relation to China's empirical performance. Each criterion, GDP, global reach etc, will be in relation to the benchmark set by the current undisputed superpower: The United States.

Empirical findings are systematically compared against an ideal-type constructed through the theoretical framework within a structured table (Esaiasson et al., 2024, p. 313). This analytical method is particularly suitable for clarifying multidimensional concepts like superpower status. The ideal-type analysis facilitates explicit identification of gaps between theoretical expectations and empirical realities, enabling nuanced conclusions.

Superpower Dimension	Ideal-type Characteristics	Measurement Criteria	Data sources
Military power	1. Modernized offensive and defensive capability. 2. Global military presence. 3. Sustained combat capability against the hegemon.	1. Military budget sufficient to credibly challenge U.S, modernized military technologies. 2. Military bases across the globe. 3. Strategic capability and combat readiness.	1. SIPRI database, U.S. DoD report on China, PLA white papers. 2. U.S. DoD reports, PLA white papers, expert analyses from literature. 3. Same as 2.
Economic power	1. Large share of global GDP and trade. 2. Technological leadership. 3. Capacity to influence global markets and set financial rules.	1. Share of global GDP and trade competitive with hegemon. 2. High degree of innovation in relation to U.S. 3. High degree of economic influence (via	1. World Bank, IMF, World Economics. 2. Global Innovation Index. 3. Evaluation by economists, World bank, BRI statistics.

		creditor status yuan usage etc.)	
Diplomatic influence and soft power reach	1. Leadership in international institutions. 2. Global diplomatic network. 3. Ability to shape norms and perspectives.	1. Active chairing, veto power, and coalition leadership in international organisations. 2. High number of embassies and diplomatic missions. 3. Well regarded internationally relative to U.S.	1. International partnerships, BRI documentation. 2. CI:s, Lowy institute ranking. 3. Pew surveys of favorability/trust, freedom house reports.
Long-term resilience	1. Institutional and political adaptability. 2. Demographic sustainability. 3. Regime legitimacy.	1. Quick adaptability and effective governance 2. Births above replacement. 3. Positive domestic perception of regime.	1. World Bank Governance Indicators, official Chinese policy documentation. 2. UN population projections. 3. Freedom House, OECD reports.

Note: SIPRI = Stockholm International Peace Research Institute; PLA = Peoples Liberation Army (Chinese military); DoD = Department of Defense (U.S military); IMF = International Monetary Fund; OECD = Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development; BRI = Belt-and-road initiative; CI = Confucius institutes

6. Analysis

This section evaluates China's current status as a potential superpower by applying the ideal-type framework outlined in the previous chapter. The analysis is structured around four clearly defined dimensions: (1) Military Power, (2) Economic Power, (3) Soft Power and (4) Long-term Resilience.

Each dimension is analyzed individually using empirical data derived from official and reliable sources, these sources will insure a balanced and comprehensive look into how China's current capabilities fit into the previously described superpower criteria using the United States as a benchmark for what constitutes "superpower level".

The results of the analysis are summarized in the Ideal-Type Analysis Table, presented at the end of this section. This table provides a structured overview indicating clearly whether China fulfills, partially fulfills, or does not fulfill each dimension of the ideal-type superpower criteria. These summarized results will serve as the basis for the subsequent discussion and final conclusions regarding China's global status.

6.1 China's Military Power

This dimension evaluates China's military capacity according to the previously established ideal-type criteria of a superpower's ability to project and sustain global military power, as well as its ability to challenge the global hegemon (the United States) in a war of attrition, according to the ideal-type model from section 4.5, superpower-level military power is defined as:

1. Modernized offensive and defensive capability
2. Global military presence
3. Sustained combat capability against the hegemon.

6.1.1 Military Budget and Modernization

China's military investment has surged over the past three decades. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China allocated $296 billion to

defense in 2023, marking its 29th consecutive year of military expenditure growth and positioning it as the second-largest military spender globally, behind only the United States, which spent approximately $916 billion in the same year (Nan et al., 2024). While this reflects China’s growing prioritization of military capabilities, the spending gap remains substantial.

Simultaneously, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has invested heavily in modernizing its hardware and doctrine. According to the PLA White Papers and corroborated by the 2024 U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) report, China has developed: latest generation stealth fighters, advanced hypersonic missiles, “electromagnetic catapult-equipped aircraft carriers”, heavy transport aircraft and aerial refueling capabilities for extended operations and a rapidly growing strategic missile force under the Rocket Force (PLARF), bolstering the Chinese nuclear deterrence (U.S DoD, 2024 p. 63; Ministry of National Defense of the PRC, 2019)

These advancements could be, according to the DoD, supporting a shift from territorial defense to a move toward regional, and eventually overseas offensive capability as the DoD speculates that the missile technology being explored by the PLARF could threaten targets such as Alaska and Hawaii (DoD, 2024 p. 63).

6.1.2 Global Military Presence

Global military power is not just raw firepower but also the ability to sustain military operations over vast distances. In this respect, China's current capabilities remain limited. While the United States operates hundreds of overseas military bases, China's only formal base is located in Djibouti.

However, the 2024 DoD report notes that the PRC is “very likely already considering and planning for additional military logistics facilities” to support power projection. Countries under consideration include Pakistan, Cambodia, Kenya, Equatorial Guinea, UAE, Cuba, and Papua New Guinea, among others (U.S. DoD 2024, p. 134–135). The report also confirms chinese access to Cambodia’s Ream naval base, where PLAN warships docked in 2023.

These developments demonstrate a strategic intent to build a global logistics network, which, if realized, could significantly improve the PLA’s capacity for global military operations. However, most of these bases are still in negotiation or early construction stages and lack the

institutional, operational capabilities and vast global alliances that make up a large part of U.S. military presence.

6.1.3 Strategic capabilities

China has made substantial progress in transitioning from a traditionally land-based, defensive military to a force capable of joint, integrated operations across multiple domains. However, this evolution is still in development. According to the 2024 U.S. DoD report, the PLA continues to restructure its command system to facilitate joint operations, particularly through the Joint Staff Department, established under the Central Military Commission (CMC) as part of reforms from 2015 (U.S. DoD 2024, p. 45–47).

The report notes that the PLA is still "learning by doing" and that many units lack live joint training experiences essential for real-world coordination between air, naval, cyber, space, and ground forces (U.S. DoD 2024, p. 70). This is echoed by scholars such as Fravel (2019), who argue that China's military doctrine remains largely aspirational in the joint domain, with insufficient empirical evidence that the PLA can currently execute high-stakes, multi-theater operations on par with the U.S. military.

The absence of recent combat experience is another critical limitation. Unlike the U.S. military, which has engaged in multiple military operations since the 1990s, the PLA has not fought a major conflict since the three week long 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. As Saunders & Scobell (2021) point out, this lack of battlefield testing significantly limits the PLA's capacity to evaluate its strategy and capabilities under pressure.

Moreover, while the PLA has made notable investments in warfighting technologies, including artificial intelligence, electronic warfare, and space-based systems, it is still developing how they should effectively integrate these capabilities within a proper and cohesive operational strategy (Bitzinger 2020).

6.1.4 Sustained combat capability against the hegemon.

According to the ideal-type framework, a superpower must possess the capacity to credibly challenge the hegemon in a war of attrition. As of writing this thesis, this remains unlikely for China. While the PLA could impose substantial regional costs and deter aggression in East Asia, its ability to sustain combat across a global conflict, particularly against a power with

the massive alliance structure of the United States, is limited. The 2024 DoD report confirms that the PLA is focusing on expanding operations and modernizing forces, yet highlights continued deficiencies in long-distance logistics, joint warfare, and combat readiness (U.S. DoD 2024).

PLA sources acknowledge persistent doctrinal gaps, known as the "Five Incapables": command judgment, planning, coordination, response, and implementation. While China is improving global deployments, these remain largely non-combat and untested in full-scale joint scenarios (U.S. DoD 2024, p. 36, 45, 70–72).

Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) argue that the U.S. retains entrenched advantages in global force projection, strategic depth, and alliance systems. Mastro (2019) similarly characterizes China as a “stealth superpower,” deliberately avoiding military confrontation and focusing on regional deterrence. China’s official defense strategy further complicates assessments of its superpower trajectory**.** According to the PRC’s 2019 white paper, China maintains a military policy that is explicitly defensive in nature, emphasizing the country’s “path of peaceful development,” its rejection of military alliances, and its opposition to hegemonism and expansionism (Ministry of National Defense 2019). The document states that while China aims to build “world-class forces by mid-century,” it also commits to “never seeking hegemony, expansion, or spheres of influence,” citing historical experiences of foreign aggression and its cultural tradition of “peace and harmony.”

This policy stance reinforces Mastro’s (2019) concept of China as a “stealth superpower” one that deliberately avoids the appearance of overt global military ambition, instead focusing on regional deterrence, domestic stability, and protection of economic interests abroad.

While strategic intent may evolve over time, incorporating China's self-stated defense philosophy could help with understanding the limits of its current military strategy, especially in light of its restrained overseas basing, limited combat experience, hesitance to form military alliances and so on. This appears to support the possible conclusion that China does not currently aim to challenge the United States in a direct, global military confrontation, at least not in the short-term. However, as these are the publicly available white papers, the commitment to rejecting hegemony and superpower ambitions could just be an obfuscation. The PRC could easily justify an expanded global military presence as a measure that would be undertaken in the name of national security or global peacekeeping. Considering the many

long range military tech investments and the DoD report noting that a process to establish several new military bases has already begun, there is no reason to believe that China genuinely has no superpower ambitions.

However, China's underdeveloped global infrastructure, absence of formal military alliances, and lack of recent practice in modern military engagement significantly constrain its warfighting capability in a hypothetical prolonged, global conflict, and point to a state whose military capability does not entirely reach superpower levels. That said, China's trajectory, if current trends continue, could allow it to close this gap in the coming decades.

6.1.5 Ideal-type dimension assessment

China's military capabilities are quite advanced, particularly in terms of modern hardware and strategic doctrine. However, its limited global reach, lack of a full logistics network, and inability to currently match the U.S. in a protracted global conflict suggest that it does not fully meet the criteria of global military power outlined in the ideal-type framework.

Conclusion: China does not fulfill the criterion of Global Military Power.

6.2 Economic Power

This dimension evaluates whether China meets the ideal-type criteria for economic power associated with superpower status. According to the theoretical model, a superpower should possess:

1. Large share of global GDP and trade
2. Technological leadership
3. Capacity to influence global markets and set financial rules.

6.2.1 Share of global GDP and trade

At the time of writing this thesis, China remains the world's second-largest economy, with a nominal GDP of approximately $18 trillion, representing ≈19% of global output, compared to the US $27 trillion representing ≈26% of global output (World Bank, 2024;World Economics 2024). In purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, China has already surpassed the United States (IMF 2024).

China also ranks first in merchandise exports, driven by its dominant status when it comes to global manufacturing, electronics, and intermediate goods production. As Baldwin (2024) of the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) put it: "*The US is the world's sole military superpower. It spends more on its military than the ten next highest spending countries combined. China is now the world's sole manufacturing superpower. Its production exceeds that of the nine next largest manufacturers combined*." China accounts for over 35% of global manufacturing, meaning that over a third of the worlds manufactured goods (apparel, textiles, food & beverages, tools, vehicles, electronics etc) originate there (Baldwin 2024;OECD 2023).

Furthermore, China's makes a "*vastly diverse range of goods*" meaning they produce both low-end labor-intensive goods like textiles and garments and high-end products such as electronics and transport equipment. As of 2015, China produced about half of the world's crude steel, coal, and cement, and over a quarter of global motor vehicles. It also leads in the production of ships, high-speed trains, industrial robots, and numerous consumer and industrial electronics. (OECD 2018). Meaning China leads in producing a vast variety of goods and has been a leader in this sector for over a decade. The real predictor of the longevity of their economic power will be how strongly they can continue to assert themselves in the tech sector.

6.2.2 Technological Innovation

China has made rapid progress in high-tech sectors, positioning itself as a global competitor in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, 5G telecommunications, green energy, and semiconductors (Atkinson 2024). According to the Global Innovation Index (2024), China ranks 1st among upper middle-income countries and 11th globally, compared to the US' 3rd, and leading firms like Huawei, BYD, and CATL are advancing Chinese technological standards abroad.

Moreover, China leads in green innovation, now one of the world's largest investors and exporters of solar panels, EV batteries, and wind turbines, technologies that are central to the infrastructure of future global economies. (Atkinson 2024;Global Innovation Index 2024)

However, the U.S. maintains its edge in foundational research and core high-end R&D sectors, supported by a stronger university-industry pipeline and more successful integration of global talent (Atkinson 2024).

6.2.3 Capacity to influence global markets and set financial rules

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a key instrument of economic power projection. As of 2024, over 50 countries have participated in BRI sponsored exhibitions, with cumulative investments exceeding $1 trillion (Belt and Road Portal 2024; Green Finance & Development Center, 2024). Through this initiative, China provides loans, builds infrastructure, and fosters long-term dependency, particularly in developing regions (Rolland, 2020).

Beyond the BRI, China has accumulated trillions in foreign reserves. Their position as a massive creditor and overall net supplier of capital to the world, especially to major debtor economies like the US, gives them leverage over the global financial system. Unlike the U.S., which absorbed approximately 50% of the world's net capital flows in 2010, China has accumulated trillions in foreign reserves, giving it the capacity to finance other nations' debts during times of crisis and use this as leverage to extract concessions, examples of this are China's offers to purchase Greek, Portuguese, and Spanish debt during the Eurozone crisis and its conditioning of financial relationships in exchange for diplomatic concessions in Africa and Latin America (Subramanian 2011).

Furthermore, China has taken active steps to shape global trade and finance through institutions like BRICS, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China is already leveraging its status as a globally significant trade partner and their supply of capital to promote the use of the yuan in regional trade and push back against dollar-based financial systems (Subramanian 2011).

Despite these efforts, China has not yet succeeded in displacing Western institutional dominance entirely, efforts to internationalize the renminbi (yuan) have achieved only modest results. The IMF and World Bank, along with the U.S. dollar's global reserve status, continue to anchor the international financial architecture (Ibid).

6.2.5 Ideal-type dimension assessment

China’s economic power fulfills most characteristics of superpower status: It commands a major share of global output and trade, it is central to global supply chains and innovation and it possesses significant creditor power. Through their economic power, China has begun working on shaping the development of global finance and trying to steer it in their favor. However, challenges such as lacking R&D capabilities, the limited global role of the yuan, and modest influence in economic rule-setting still constrain its full ascendancy.

Conclusion: China fulfills the criterion of Economic Power, though not without constraints.

6.3 Diplomatic power and soft-power reach

This dimension evaluates China's overall capacity to influence international affairs through diplomacy, institutional leadership, and cultural attractiveness. While political and diplomatic influence refers primarily to strategic actions by states in international organizations and diplomatic relationships, soft power is more about a state's cultural, ideological, and societal attractiveness. Although somewhat distinct, these two forms of power often reinforce each other, jointly contributing to a state’s comprehensive influence in global politics (Nye, 2004; Ikenberry, 2008).

According to the ideal-type model, a superpower should exhibit a

1. Leadership in international institutions
2. Global diplomatic network
3. Ability to shape norms and perspectives

6.3.1 Leadership in international institutions

China holds a central role within major global institutions, notably as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and as a major member of organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Health Organization (WHO).

China’s diplomatic network, the world's largest in terms of embassies and consulates, surpassing even the US, shows its growing geopolitical influence and leadership (Lowy

Institute, 2023). Nonetheless, Beijing’s diplomacy faces structural limitations. It often relies on transactional relationships rather than deep alliances, and it lacks formal military alliances altogether (Subramanian 2011;U.S DoD 2024).

However, recent geopolitical developments, particularly the second Trump administration’s rhetorical and economic hostility toward traditional U.S. allies, present additional diplomatic openings for China. Trump's administration has adopted a confrontational approach toward traditional allies. The US has threatened trade conflicts, withdrawal from multilateral agreements, and diplomatic confrontations with European Union member states, Canada, and Japan. Such diplomatic friction has created space for China to present itself as a more predictable and cooperative global partner.

For example, in April 2025, China successfully engaged with the European Union, negotiating the lifting of select sanctions and resuming critical trade talks, particularly around the electric vehicle sector (Lee & Li, 2025). This success signals China's growing capability to exploit diplomatic opportunities that arise from American unpredictability, potentially reshaping alliances and strategic orientations in favor of greater Sino-European cooperation.

6.3.2 Global diplomatic network and perspective-shaping ability

While political and diplomatic influence captures a state's ability to shape global institutions and policy, soft power refers to the capacity to attract and inspire. According to Nye (2004), soft power stems from a country’s cultural appeal, values, and foreign policy legitimacy.

China’s global media strategy is one of the avenues that they use to promote a positive image of the nation. Through channels like Xinhua, China seeks to offer alternative narratives to Western-dominated global media. However, it is through content-sharing agreements and partnerships with mainstream media in other countries that China is able to reach a large global audience.

Through content-sharing, Chinese state-sponsored media material (that is often not clearly labelled as being Chinese state-sponsored) has made its way into over 130 news outlets across 30 different countries. Besides inserted content, China has also made coproduction arrangements where the Chinese side “provides technical support and resources to aid reporting in or on China”. In exchange for this support, the Chinese get some editorial control over the final product. This is on top of arrangements that involve monetary compensation in exchange for positive coverage. These coproduction or paid report “deals” have been made in

16 of the 30 countries previously mentioned, including Romania and Kenya (Freedom house 2022)

However, China's biggest investment into soft power projection, would be their Confucius institutes (CI's). CIs are designed to promote Chinese language, values, and a positive image of the Chinese state. However, over the past decade, CIs have become increasingly controversial, particularly in Western democracies. More than 100 CIs have closed in the U.S. alone due to rising political scrutiny, legal constraints (such as the U.S. National Defense Authorization Acts), and public concerns over academic freedom, censorship, and state influence. Similar institutional closures or restrictions have occurred in the UK, Germany, Australia, India, and Japan. In response, China has attempted to decentralize the agencies responsible for CI's in order to distance them from direct state control and reduce the perception of government interference, but this had little effect in the West. However the CI network remains stable and has even grown in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, where political resistance to Chinese cultural initiatives is less pronounced and public opinion towards China remains relatively favorable whilst still less favorable than the US (Pew Research Center, 2023)

Despite its outreach investments, China has faced significant image challenges, particularly in liberal democracies. According to Pew Research Center (2023), in a study conducted in 24 countries comparing the favorability of the U.S versus China, of the 24 countries surveyed, a majority of the respondents in 9 of them only had a positive view of the U.S in several dimensions. On balance, overall views of the U.S are much more positive than views of China. The gap is notably smaller in the respondents from middle-income countries however. Also, seeing as how the survey is from 2023, during the Biden presidency, and before Trumps second term hostilities, it is possible that future surveys will be drastically more negative towards the U.S, as they were the last time Trump was president (Pew Research Center 2023).

6.3.3 Ideal-type dimension assessment

China's efforts to build soft power through cultural diplomacy have led to institutional expansion and regional influence, especially in the Global South. However, widespread institutional closures in the West and credibility issues have constrained China's ability to project a truly attractive global image. Thus, China only partially fulfills the criterion of Cultural and Soft Power Reach, with reach but limited resonance.

Conclusion: China partially fulfils the criterion of Diplomatic power and soft power reach

6.4 Long-term Resilience and Sustainability

This dimension assesses whether China possesses the structural, institutional, demographic, and strategic characteristics necessary to sustain superpower status over time. According to the ideal-type model, a resilient superpower should exhibit:

1. Stable and adaptable political institutions capable of managing internal and external shocks.
2. Demographic sustainability, including a stable working-age population and manageable aging trajectory.
3. Social cohesion and legitimacy, including the regime's ability to maintain long-term domestic stability.

6.4.1 Institutional adaptability

China's political model, centralized, authoritarian rule under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has demonstrated impressive policy adaptability. As this thesis has already mentioned, the Chinese state apparatus can rapidly implement long-term economic strategies, coordinate state-owned and private actors, and reorient investments into strategic sectors like AI, green tech, and semiconductors. This has allowed China to adapt relatively effectively to shifting global economic demands.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has undertaken significant institutional reforms aimed at enhancing centralized control and streamlining governance structures. This is exemplified by the 2023 “plan on reforming party and state institutions”. This plan introduced new bodies like the Central Financial Commission and the Central Science and Technology Commission to consolidate oversight in critical sectors (State Council of the PRC, 2023). Measures such as this signal a reassertion of Party leadership over areas once governed by technocratic or semi-autonomous actors, making it easier for the CCP to steer China’s modernization from the top down with immediate effect, something that economies without central planning cannot do. As previously mentioned in sections 3.3 and 6.2.2, Chinas institutions can rapidly adapt their structure in order to more effectively refocus their efforts on a given priority, such as high tech manufacturing in the cases mentioned.

Empirically speaking, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) puts China's Government Effectiveness score in 2023 at approximately the 73.6 percentile compared to the U.S 87.7, indicating a relatively high capacity for policy formulation and implementation. However, other governance dimensions present challenges, such as accountability: China scores low, reflecting limited political freedoms and citizen participation. China also scores low on rule of law and control of corruption indicating concerns about legal transparency and systemic corruption (World Bank 2023).

These mixed results highlight strengths in administrative capacity but also show meaningful issues in accountability and legal frameworks.

6.4.2 Demographic sustainability

Projections by the United Nations' 2024 World Population Prospects suggest that China's population could decline from 1.4 billion in 2024 to 1.3 billion by 2050, potentially falling below 800 million by 2100. This decline is attributed to low fertility rates, around 1.2, well below replacement. This leads to an aging population which poses significant challenges to labor force sustainability and economic growth, as this would drastically reduce the Chinese economies dynamism and internal market size. This demographic contraction is also compounded by a gender imbalance (United Nations 2024). These factors collectively threaten the sustainability of China's growth model.

6.4.3 Regime legitimacy

Historically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has derived its legitimacy from its ability to deliver consistent economic growth and improved living standards. However, recent economic challenges, including issues in the real estate sector, rising youth unemployment, and slowing GDP growth have begun to undermine this legitimacy.

A 2023 survey highlighted a shift in public perception from positive to negative, with many citizens attributing wealth disparities to non-merit-based factors such as unequal opportunities and connections, rather than individual effort. Furthermore, the growing income inequality between the urban and rural population could further erode Chinese citizens trust in their institutions and lowering Chinese social cohesion and also weakening the CCP's traditional legitimacy (Leahy, Waluszewski & Yu 2024;OECD 2004)

Finally, according to Freedom House (2024), China scores just 9 out of 100 on political rights and civil liberties compared to the U.S' 84, which places China among the least free countries globally. The report highlights expanding censorship, intensified surveillance, and growing restrictions on civil society. The state's control mechanisms have become central to maintaining political order, but they do so by suppressing dissent rather than cultivating consent, raising questions about long-term cohesion.

6.4.4 Ideal-type dimension assessment

While China possesses a capable administrative apparatus, economic flexibility and currently a seemingly high political legitimacy, its demographic fragility, overcentralized institutional model, and limited political freedoms for the average citizen could potentially constrain its long-term superpower viability.

Conclusion: China partially fulfills the criterion of Long-term Resilience and Sustainability.

6.5 Final ideal-type table

Dimension	Ideal-Type Criteria	China's Status	Assessment
1. Global Military Power	Capacity to project and sustain global force, challenge hegemon in a prolonged war	Significant regional strength and modernization, limited global reach, overseas basing, and combat experience	**Does not fulfill**
2. Economic Power	Dominant share of global GDP/trade, financial leverage, technological innovation, institutional influence	Leading in global trade and production, rising tech capacity and creditor status, limited rule-setting influence in global financial institutions	**Fulfills**
3. Political, Diplomatic, and Soft Power Influence	Global diplomatic leadership, institutional presence, normative legitimacy, cultural attraction	Extensive diplomatic network and alternative institutions, strong presence in Global South, limited ideological appeal and public trust in the West	**Partially fulfills**
4. Long-term Resilience and Sustainability	Effective governance, demographic viability, economic flexibility, legitimacy and cohesion	High administrative capacity, demographic decline, faltering political legitimacy, inequality and lowered social cohesion.	**Partially fulfills**

7. Conclusions

This final section summarizes the main findings of the thesis, answering the central research question: “is China a superpower?”. The final assessment is based on the dimension-by-dimension analysis presented in section 6 and the summary table presented at the end of that section.

The chapter then discusses the theoretical implications of the findings for the existing literature on global power, before concluding with a reflection on the broader political and societal relevance of China’s rise.

7.1 Summary of findings

This thesis set out to evaluate whether China qualifies as a superpower by applying a theoretically grounded ideal-type model consisting of four dimensions: global military power, economic power, diplomatic influence and soft power projection, and long-term resilience. China’s performance in each domain was assessed through a structured comparison with the United States; the dominant global superpower.

The findings indicate that while China does not meet the full conditions of superpower status, it partially or entirely fulfils most dimensions of a superpower. This positions China in a transitional space. Meaning China is no longer merely a regional actor, but not a comprehensive global superpower.

- **Military Power:** China possesses the world’s second-largest defense budget (although a distant second) and has made major strides in military modernization, including investments in strategic technologies such as long range weapons systems. But it lacks the global base network and combat-tested capacity of the United States. Conclusion**:** Does not fulfill the ideal-type criteria.
- **Economic Power:** China leads global manufacturing output, commands a dominant share of global trade, and has made rapid progress in technological innovation and creditor status. Compared to the regional influence of the EU for example, China’s economic power is more globally leveraged and strategically oriented.
  Conclusion: Fulfills the ideal-type criteria.

- **Political, Diplomatic, and Soft Power Influence:** China has built the world's largest diplomatic network and holds significant institutional influence in international organizations and forums. But its global image remains weaker than that of the United States (as of 2023), it could be reasonably argued that the gap between China and the U.S in terms of image has narrowed after the inauguration of Donald Trump.
  Conclusion: Partially fulfills the ideal-type criteria.
- **Long-term Resilience:** China demonstrates high administrative capacity, institutional adaptability, and centralized strategic planning. However, long-term demographic challenges, political constraints, and social inequality raise concerns about sustainability.
  Conclusion: Partially fulfills.

As summarized in the final ideal-type assessment table at the end of the previous section, China does not meet all the criteria for superpower status, but it does partially or fully fulfill most of them. It is therefore best characterized as a "superpower in progress", a state in transition that challenges the structure of the existing world order but has not yet achieved full-spectrum global parity with the United States.

7.2 Implications for the scholarly literature

This thesis contributes to debates in international relations by establishing a clear concept, updating some outdated empirical assumptions, and challenging dominant narratives about global order and hierarchy. First, by clarifying the concept of "superpower". The thesis provides a theoretically grounded, multidimensional model for assessing superpower status. This framework distinguishes clearly between great powers, superpowers, and hegemons, offering a clear structure for future comparative analysis.

Second, by reframing China's status. Contrary to perspectives that depict China as primarily a regional actor or a constrained economic giant, this study shows that China exhibits global influence. Many studies focus on single aspects of Chinese power (economy or military) without connecting them to a broader theory of superpower status. This thesis integrates those threads and tests them against a cohesive model.

Third, this thesis proves the erosion of U.S. hegemony. According to this thesis's framework established in section 4, a hegemon is a superpower that cannot be credibly challenged in any core dimension. China's rise, especially in the economic and technological domains has

demonstrated that this condition no longer holds for the United States. China now rivals the U.S. in global manufacturing capacity, creditor status, and technological innovation, and increasingly operates outside of U.S.-led financial systems.

China's role in weakening the U.S.-led sanctions regime on Russia for example, via increased bilateral trade, non-dollar settlements, and the export of dual-use goods has demonstrated how economic influence is being translated into strategic leverage (Ng & Ma 2024). Milestones like BYD surpassing Tesla and the launch of DeepSeek's R1 AI model, which impacted U.S. tech stock valuations, show that China is no longer a follower but a leader in sectors central to future global power. These developments illustrate how hegemonic dominance can erode dimension by dimension, even without a full superpower transition. The U.S. may remain a superpower, but not a hegemon in the strict sense, this means that the world is no longer unipolar, but not quite bipolar. China's rise, while incomplete, is sufficient to destabilize previous models of hegemonic stability. Future scholars should therefore conceptualize international order in more fluid and transitional terms, rather than fixed categories of unipolarity or bipolarity.

Finally, the thesis contributes to the literature by proposing a transitional category: The concept of a "superpower in progress" offers a useful analytical tool for capturing the ambiguous status of rising powers that do not fit neatly into existing categories. Superpower status should be treated as a multidimensional spectrum rather than a binary yes/no label. This novel approach could also be applied to future assessments of India, Brazil, or regional blocs like the EU.

7.3 Implications for broader society and politics

The findings of this thesis have significant real-world implications for international politics and the structure of the global order. For starters, unipolarity is ending. While the United States remains the most globally capable power, its dominance is now contested, particularly in the economic and diplomatic dimensions. This marks a transition toward post-unipolarity, where multiple states hold structural influence in specific domains. If Chinese military and soft power dimensions continue to evolve whilst the CCP regime maintains legitimacy, a fully bipolar order may replace the current U.S.-dominated order within a few years.

This means that it has been made clear that China is a global, not regional, actor. Their expansive diplomacy, economic leadership, and influence in international institutions show

that they cannot be confined to Asia or dismissed as merely a large regional power/great power. They play a central role in shaping global systems, from infrastructure to artificial intelligence to blunting the effects of sanctions imposed by the most powerful country in the world and its allies.

Besides this, China has also shown a new pathway to power. Their rise suggests that superpower status need not be built through colonial expansion or formal military alliances. Economic/trade diplomacy, technological leadership, and institutional flexibility can offer alternative routes to global influence. This challenges long-standing western assumptions about the nature of global leadership. The continued growth of an authoritarian socialist state with global ambitions challenges the assumption that liberal democracy is a prerequisite for global leadership. China's ability to wield power without adopting liberal norms could provoke debates about the normative foundations of international order, under the assumption that the current demographic and social cohesion issues are resolved.

This means that a strategic recalibration is required. Politicians, especially in the West, must reckon with a world where China cannot be ignored, outpaced, or sidelined. Future diplomacy must balance competition with cooperation, especially on shared challenges such as climate change, economic stability, and technological governance.

As China advances further, the potential for competition and strategic friction with the United States will grow. However, the interdependence between the two powers means that outright confrontation is neither inevitable nor desirable. Future international stability may hinge on managing this evolving power dynamic through diplomacy, norms, and institutional cooperation.

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AI declaration

ChatGPT was used to give inspiration for the thesis' title, sort the sources in alphabetical order and in APA-format, and help structure the conceptual ladder used in section 4.