

**BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES**



**COVID-19 AS A SOURCE OF GEO-POLITICAL TENSION: A CASE OF US AND
CHINA**

By

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Peace and Governance in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the Master of Science in International Relations Degree

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Bindura, Zimbabwe

November, 2023

ABSTRACT

This study examined how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated geopolitical tensions between the US and China through a review of media and scholarly literature. Limited research explored viral outbreaks as geopolitical triggers. Significant gaps existed in granular analysis of COVID-19's impact on the bilateral relationship across domains. The study used an exploratory multiple case study design, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. A purposive sample of 30 experts representing different professional roles was interviewed. Interviews explored evolving policy approaches, narratives and implications. The study found nationalistic rhetoric amidst each nation's public health and economic crises intensified strategic competition as both pursued relative gains. Zero-sum narratives increased global mistrust. Despite economic interdependence constraining direct sanctions, US-China ties deteriorated multilaterally amid vaccine diplomacy and WHO reform debates. Future joint gains incentivising cooperation were limited by distrust. The pandemic accelerated geopolitical tensions by amplifying pre-existing suspicions. Simultaneously, both countries embarked on vaccine diplomacy campaigns in Africa, Latin America and Asia which some experts warned could further politicise what should be a humanitarian endeavour. While mutual economic interests suggest rebuilding cooperation is necessary, COVID-19 accelerated an escalating strategic competition characterised by deep mistrust. Rising national populism and propaganda campaigns diminished room for consensus, underscoring the pandemic's consequences well beyond health outcomes alone. With trust deficient, restoring collaboration on this and future global health challenges appears increasingly challenging amid growing US-China rivalry. Cooperation deficiencies undermined coordinated global responses and damaged trust needed to combat shared future threats. Institutional reforms and issue-specific cooperation may bridge bilateral differences if leadership reduces politicisation of crises transcending borders. To realise cooperation potentials, both nations must curb nationalist rhetoric and invest in restoring pragmatic communication through reformed multilateral health mechanisms. Prioritising shared interests over zero-sum positioning bolsters stability despite strategic rivalry marking US-China relations.

DECLARATION

This project is my original work attained through the research, learning and with the full support from my project supervisor.

SIGN..... DATE.....

DECLARATION BY THE SUPERVISOR

This project has been submitted for examination my approval as a university supervisor.

NAME OF SUPERVISOR

Sign

Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to the ALMIGHTY GOD for making this thesis a possibility, thank you Heavenly Father. Special thanks to my dear wife Omie for her indispensable role in supporting me unconditionally under various circumstances during my studies. I also give special tribute to my parents. I pay tribute to my special supervisor for provided guidance throughout the project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

But thou, O LORD, art my shield for me; my Glory the lifter up of my head. (Psalms 3 vs 3). First and foremost, I would like to thank the LORD the Almighty God for taking me this far in my life and giving me this supernatural knowledge, strength and good health to complete my thesis guided by Psalms 18 verse 2. I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my esteemed supervisor for the excellent cooperation and supportive supervision of my thesis. You did render a lot of support with the time you took to reading and giving advice is highly appreciated. I thank you immensely, and may the Almighty God bless you. You taught me lessons that I never find in any text and shall remain indelible in my mind. Special mention to my late granny whose words of encouragement will never be blotted out of my spirit. To my wife Omie and children Joshua, Isheunesu and Salem, I thank you for your tremendous support, both moral and spiritual support especially when hope seem endangered, you were a source of inspiration. I love you all and may God bless you as well. In the same spirit, I want to thank my mother Jane for her prayers that shaped my spirit to remain resolute till this far end, I'm really grateful. I'm also grateful to my friends, your moral support you gave me was unrivalled. Many thanks to my classmates whom I had fun with throughout the whole process, I will miss you all. Finally, I'm grateful to the Prayer-Group at Budiriro Park, the collaborative prayers had made this project a possibility.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BRICS+	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa plus grouping
CCP	Chinese Community Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
G7	Group of Seven
IHR	International Health Regulations
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PRC	People's Republic of China
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 Background of the study

The international system is characterised by three Cs which are competition, conflict and competition. The advent of Covid-19 exacerbated conflicts between the United States of America and China. The available literature in international affairs did little to pay attention on the pandemic outbreak as a factor that can affect the relations between super powers and their foreign policies. The rivalry between Washington and Beijing deteriorated and both great powers fell in a blame game trap with the established power accusing the rising “Asian Dragon” being responsible for the outbreak while the later pointing finger to Washington for unleashing the virus in some sort of biological warfare. According to Bahi (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has a geopolitical component in addition to being a health problem. Lin (2021) opines that the pandemic has amplified ideological differences and strategic competition between the U.S. and China.

Christiansen (2020) claims that while there is no direct evidence suggesting that the coronavirus was released intentionally by the Chinese government, the Trump administration’s allegations that the Chinese government mishandled the early outbreak in Wuhan. This has left some of the people globally with an impression that the Asian Dragon was responsible for the world health tragedy. Christiansen (2020) argues that, the U.S and China were vying for control of how the international order; with both states intended to capitalise on the pandemic to boost their international profile at the world stage. China did not want to miss the opportunity to challenge the U.S hegemony while Washington wanted to maintain its dominance in all facets. Pre-existing tensions increased due of the pandemic, and a slowdown is not in the cards. Covid-19 is one such constitutive events in the world that left U.S exposed (Christiansen, 2020). As an illustration Donald Trump made a speech in the Republican National Convention he said, “I will hold them (China) fully accountable for the tragedy that they caused all over the world. In recent months our nation and the world has been hit by a once in a century pandemic that China allowed to spread around the globe.” In light of this statement considering the afflictions and tribulations brought by the corona virus and the human toll, the Trump’s utterances made the people around

the world to attribute the tragedy solely to the Chinese government and will be more likely to support the aggressive policies and Beijing and urging the world governments to hold the Asian Dragon accountable.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a huge disruption to the supply chain. According to Soman, (2022), the health crisis disrupted the provision of global public goods, exacerbated competitive dynamics between the U.S and China, and introduced instability into the global order. Both the U.S and China attempted to take advantage of the situation to raise their worldwide reputation, in keeping with the geopolitical zero-sum mentality (Bahi, 2021). Hass, (2021) argued that the two powers worried that rather than cooperating to lessen the COVID-19's effects on health and the economy, the other may take advantage of the status-quo to obtain political, economic, or military advantages that would give it a competitive edge once the pandemic had subsided. Other scholars argued that the proliferation of COVID-19 has sparked a "battle of narratives," in which China and the U.S were accusing one another of not rising to the occasion Rollet, & Ibitz, (2021). The "Kindleberger Trap," in which the dominant power is unable to govern while the rising power refuses to take charge, appears to be setting in on the global stage (Flint & Zhang, (2021). The United States, which has historically led global cooperation during crises, had seemingly given up on this duty as during a global crisis, a lack of global leadership could lead to the collapse of the international system (Zhao, 2021).

Sino-U. S rivalry has some footprints over the South China Sea dispute and the trade war; however, the pandemic amplified the geopolitical tensions. These two disagreements existed before the outbreak of the pandemic; they, however, have become two main issues that the U.S government is taking to take retaliatory measures against China. As a result, this development justifies the potential global order in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study advances the comprehension of the impact of the pandemic on reshaping the international order and change of policies on both states towards each other.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The study seeks to explore the Covid-19 pandemic as a source of geopolitical tension following the case of China and USA.

1.3 Statement of the problem

COVID-19 pandemic became a notable factor that escalated the geopolitical U.S-Sino tensions. The pandemic brought to the fore the geopolitical rivalry of the two great powers that affected the international relations from all fronts. There were already geopolitical tensions but what the pandemic did was to worsen the tension between the two super powers. There was already the Taiwan issue, among many other sticking points between the US and China but the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation. As the world grappled to deal with the pandemic and its after effects, understanding the roots of these disputes and how they can affect international relations is crucial. More so, Lin (2021) argues that existing literature in international relations rarely focuses on virus outbreaks as factors affecting international relations between superpower countries and its future ramifications to global order.

1.4 Objectives of the study

The study seeks to;

1. To understand how COVID-19 triggered Sino-US tensions.
2. Examine the effects of the pandemic on global stability and order.
3. To analyse the available opportunities for improving China-US relations in the aftermath of COVID-19.
4. To compare the attitude of Donald Trump and Joe Biden towards China during the Covid-19 era in shaping the global order.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic trigger Sino-US tensions?
2. What are the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on global stability and order?
3. What are the available opportunities for improving Sino-US relations in the aftermath of COVID-19?

4. What were the differences in behaviours of the Donald Trump and Joe Biden administrations towards China during the Covid-19 era in shaping the global order?

1.6 Assumptions of the study

The study assumes that;

1. A lack of confidence in the US regarding China's openness and dependability has resulted from the original COVID-19 outbreak and management in China. The geopolitical relationship has become more tense than it already was as a result.
2. Intensifying geopolitical tensions between the US and China might cause the economies to become uncoupled and spark a new Cold War between the two countries. There is a presumption that solidarity and collaboration are giving way to rivalry and competition.

1.7 Significance of the study

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of researching the geopolitical conflict between China and the United States in the context of COVID-19. Politics, economy, and security are just a few of the areas of human life that have been impacted by the pandemic. The emergence of COVID-19 has brought to light the fundamental disagreements between China and the United States, especially in the areas of trade, security, and international law. It is imperative to comprehend the causes of these conflicts and how they may affect global relations, particularly as the globe struggles to recover from the pandemic and its impacts.

This study is important because it clarifies how virus epidemics affect the dynamics of ties between superpowers. In international relations, viral epidemics are infrequently discussed as a factor influencing international relations, according to Lin (2021). This project offers a chance to investigate the effects of pandemics on geopolitics and to develop fresh ideas on how the world can better prepare for and respond to pandemics in the future. Finally, the results of this study can help stakeholders and policymakers understand how to negotiate the complicated geopolitical landscape in the wake of future pandemics such as COVID-19 and avoid reoccurring difficulties.

1.8 Delimitation of the study

The study focuses specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on international relations between China and the USA. Other factors that may have contributed to tension between the two countries were not addressed. The study only included experts in the field who were willing to participate in interviews. This may have limited the diversity of perspectives represented in the study.

The study only focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international relations between China and the USA. The study did not explore the impact of the pandemic on other countries or regions. The study was only conducted during a specific time period, that is 2019 to 2023, and did not reflect the ongoing and evolving impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international relations between China and the USA.

1.9 Limitations of the study

The study depended on self-reported data obtained through interviews and examinations of the literature, which may have contained biases and mistakes. The researcher affianced in vigorous self-reflection to recognize probable skewed prejudices influencing self-reported data and interpretations. Due to timeframe restrictions, the analysis could not fully account for the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on China and the USA's international relations. The study could not be transferable to other nations or areas affected by the COVID-19 epidemic. As a panacea, the researcher recommends follow up studies to continue analysing longer term effects of the pandemic as well as analysing other situations in other countries.

1.10 Definition of key words

- COVID-19: COVID-19, or coronavirus disease 2019, is a respiratory illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and has since become a global pandemic.

- Geopolitical tension: Geopolitical tension refers to the state of political and economic relations between two or more countries, characterized by competition, conflict, or mistrust.
- International relations: International relations refer to the study of the relationships between countries, including their political, economic, and social interactions.
- Pandemic: A pandemic is an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area and affects an exceptionally high proportion of the population.

1.12 Dissertation Outline

Chapter 1 will focus on the introduction, background of the study, purpose of the study, statement of the problem, research objectives, research questions, assumptions of the study, significance of the study, delimitation of the study, limitations of the study, definition of key terms and ethical considerations. Chapter two will cover the literature review and theoretical framework. Chapter three will cover the research methodology. Chapter four will present the data, analyse and discuss of findings whilst chapter five will present the summary, conclusions, recommendations and areas for further research.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the factors that have contributed to the geopolitical tension between China and the United States in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Geopolitics is a meticulous division of politics that scrutinizes how states' behaviour is manipulated by alterations in the equilibriums of power within the global structure. The chapter examines the role of political leadership, domestic considerations, and strategic interests in shaping their responses to the crisis. Additionally, it explores how the pandemic has affected key areas of contention such as trade, technology, global governance, and influence in international organisations. The chapter will draw upon a comprehensive range of primary and secondary sources, including academic research, policy papers, official statements, and media reports. The chapter is informed by the Realism Theory as well as the Interdependence theory, through whose lens the arguments shall be extrapolated. By analysing the multifaceted dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis in the context of China-US relations, this chapter aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex geopolitical landscape that has emerged as a result of this global health emergency.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the Realism Theory as well as the Interdependence theory. Realism was originally developed in the 1940s by scholars like Hans Morgenthau (1948) and posits that states are self-interested actors operating in an anarchic international system which is equated to a jungle where the law of the jungle applies in order to counterweight other competing forces. Realism's contribution can be analysed through the prism of conflict, cooperation and competition. From this perspective, China and the US are strategic competitors vying for geopolitical dominance under conditions of no global authority. The Covid-19 pandemic could ignite a "security dilemma" as each suspects the other exploiting vulnerabilities for advantage (Herz, 1950). This fuels distrust exacerbating tensions.

States like China and US thus portray pandemics as security threats demanding defensive actions to retain sovereignty even if collaborated management optimises outcomes globally. Realism lenses hence lend insights into how great power competition translates public health fallouts into clashes despite shared risks that transcend borders.

The Interdependence Theory was developed by Keohane and Nye (2012), and recognises that, pandemics highlight complex interdependencies as China and US are disproportionately impacted by each other's successes/failures in curbing transnational disease spread due to high trade connectivity. No state can achieve health security alone given pathogens respect no geopolitical boundaries, necessitating cooperative governance that accounts for diverse national circumstances (Kamradt-Scott, 2016). However, asymmetric partnerships inhibit trust and mutual understanding needed for multilateral cooperation despite compelling incentives. This theory thus provides a framework to understand how entwined interests simultaneously motivate collaboration and competition despite global crises affecting all. Together, these theories contextualise diverse national responses through lenses of power dynamics and complex interlinkages characterizing great power relations.

2.1.1 The Realism Theory

Realism is a political theory that traces its intellectual roots to the Ancient Greek historian Thucydides and his account of the Peloponnesian Wars between Athens and Sparta and the 16th Century political thoughts of the Italian Theorist Niccolo Machiavelli as well as the English Historian Thomas Hobbes. Realism is seeing the world as real. It is a (real politic) and not ideal. Realists stress power and interests rather than ideals in international relations.

The realist's intellectual fathers also include St Augustines. The central argument of the Realist Theory is that the international system is anarchic because there is no world government (Hurrell, 1990). Thucydides argues that the powerful nation states will always do what they want and the weak will always comply. In realistic terms the international system is synonymous to a jungle where the law of the jungle is operational. According to Morgenthau (1948), it is a case of war between man against man and survival of the fittest.

The Realist conceptualisation of geopolitics focused on the hard capabilities of states to analyse the consequences of an international event. This traditional conceptualisation often fails to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of modern statecraft within a global context characterised by non-state actors and de-territorialised threats such as contagious diseases and climate change. Kausch (2015). Taking into account the complexities of the world, geopolitical analysis has expanded to encompass the broader use of statecraft and state assets including geographic, economic, military preponderance or prowess demographic as well as environmental and cultural facets to gain influence in international affairs. The broader use of assets and capabilities are critical in determining the state's ability to respond to crises such as the Covid-19 crisis, affecting its international standing, as well as the balance of power Kindleberger (2021).

To reflect the multifaceted nature of the modern statecraft Rodhan (2018) combined seven capacities of state which include; social and health issues, domestic politics, economics, environment, science and human potential military and security issues. These are put into a wider paradigm that provides a comprehensive measure of state power in the 21st century. Rodhan (2021) goes on to insist that these seven capacities are critical for sustainable power that any persistent weakness in one or more of them over a prolonged period of time will threaten the stability of the state and its standing in international politics and ultimately result in wider systematic shocks.

The main actors in the international system according to realists are states. Conflict is therefore inevitable and it is a permanent feature in the international system. The international system is made up of independent states that lack organising principles where international law is not very effective, at times treaties are not binding and regulations are not followed. Realism is concerned on what is in the real world. Realists do have a pessimistic view of human nature of the international system. They believe that humans have mental disarrangement (animas dominant) animal instincts in human beings.

Realism emerged in the aftermath of World War 2 as scholars sought to explain the tumultuous state of global affairs. Key early realist thinkers include E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1940s-50s (Donnelly, 2000). Realism makes several core assumptions about the anarchic nature of the international system, states as primary actors pursuing power and security, and the constraints of an anarchic system on cooperation (Mearsheimer, 2013). Realists view international relations as fundamentally shaped by conflicts over material capabilities and power balances between competing states.

Different strands of realism emphasise different elements, but share basic premises. Classical realism focuses on human nature as egoistic and self-interested, making conflict innate in global politics absent a sovereign to impose order (Carr, 1946). Structural realism stresses anarchy and power struggles as products of the decentralised international system, rather than flawed human nature (Waltz, 1979). Offensive realism sees states driven to maximise power and hegemony due to fears about other's intentions (Mearsheimer, 2001). Defensive realism contends states seek sufficient but not excessive power for security (Jervis, 1978). But all realist theories see power politics as the core dynamic in interstate relations.

Realism provides important insights into escalating strategic competition between China and the US regarding the COVID-19 crisis. Realists would argue the pandemic intensified pre-existing great power tensions and jockeying for geopolitical dominance in an anarchic, competitive system (Fingar, 2022). Pointing fingers over the virus' origin and duelling propaganda narratives represent efforts to assert power and embarrass rivals more than genuine grievances (Christensen, 2020). With nationalism rising amidst pressures from the crisis, both states seized COVID-19 as an opportunity to pursue relative gains against one another. According to Fielder (2020) as a result of the outbreak's devastating consequences, China's government felt that its response to the situation needed to reflect China's view of its sovereignty, international leadership, and status in the world. China's official accounts of the outbreak and the government's reaction reflected its political needs and geopolitical considerations (Fielder 2020). Realism helps contextualise antagonism as the expected outcome of major powers interacting absent rules or shared authorities. Only systemic changes to the structure of global politics could overcome these conflictual incentives.

Critics argue realism overlooks complex interdependence between China and the US that provides avenues for cooperation despite rivalry (Jervis, 1999). Realism also downplays ideational factors, ignoring how identity and values shape states' interests and actions (Wendt, 1992). Applying realism too rigidly can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nonetheless, realism offers important explanatory power regarding COVID-19's exacerbation of geopolitical tensions between two major powers competing in an anarchic system. Realism remains highly relevant as a theoretical framework for understanding worsening competition between China and the United States, partially stemming from use of COVID-19 narratives to assert dominance and embarrass the other. Realism's premises around anarchy, power balancing and conflict provide salient insights into this case of geopolitical tensions triggered by the pandemic crisis.

2.1.2 The Interdependence Theory

Interdependence theory was first propounded by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in their seminal 1977 work *Power and Interdependence*. The theory holds that in an increasingly globalised world, states are highly interdependent on each other through economic, environmental and security ties (Keohane & Nye, 1977). This interdependence creates complex linkages and mutual vulnerabilities between states that discourage the use of unilateral force and encourage cooperation. According to the theory, relationships are marked more by “reciprocity and compromise than by unilateral conduct” (Keohane & Nye, 1977, p. 8).

There are several core tenets of interdependence theory. First, it recognises that power is diffuse in the modern world, emanating not just from military capabilities but also economic and technological strength (Keohane & Nye, 1989). Secondly, the theory emphasises sensitivity and vulnerability as key aspects of interdependence, that is, states are sensitive to events in other countries and vulnerable to retaliatory actions (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Lastly, complex interdependencies exist not just between states but also non-state actors like businesses, creating dense webs of relations (Nye & Keohane, 1971).

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly highlights the economic interdependence between China and the United States that moderates political tensions, demonstrating the continued relevance of this theory. Both countries participate in highly integrated global supply chains that underpin key industries. For example, over 60% of US imported goods come from China, including medical equipment during the crisis (US Census Bureau, 2020). China relies on imports of integrated circuits and chemical components from America for its exports (Fitch Solutions, 2020).

This interfacing of complex production networks means economic conflicts impose high costs on both sides. As Nye and Keohane (1971) argue, “in an interdependent situation, military superiority does not necessarily translate into bargaining advantage” (p. 829). Even at the height of COVID-19 blame games, neither China nor the US imposed serious sanctions as they recognised the harm to their own economies (Vadén & Suomalainen, 2020). Keohane and Nye's (1977) observation that “interdependence...decreases the utility of military force as a policy instrument” (p. 39) rings true.

At the same time, the pandemic accentuated national concerns over economic security, demonstrating vulnerabilities in global supply chains. Both nations are diversifying trade relations and boosting domestic production of medical goods, showing how interdependence can also “provide stimuli for national policy changes” (Keohane & Nye, 1989, p. 6). Overall, the case supports interdependence theory's propositions on the complex, moderating impact of economic integration between great powers.

2.2 Gaps left by the available literature

Existing scholarly views have extensively analysed the escalating strategic rivalry between China and the United States across dimensions like trade, technology and military power. However, there remains a gap in understanding specifically how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted and shifted the balance of power and exacerbated great power competition. COVID-19 as one of the major constitutive events has threatened US unipolar hegemony with Beijing rising to challenge the system.

Much literature focuses on assessing China-US relations amid the pandemic within broader long-term trajectories, but there is less granular analysis of how the crisis uniquely altered the geopolitical tensions in this bilateral relationship across distinct issue areas. Furthermore, application of international relations theories to examine causal mechanisms driving China-US competition during COVID-19 is limited. Most commentary remains descriptive rather than theoretically informed. Many analyses also adopt uni-cultural perspectives rather than comparative, holistic frameworks spanning Chinese and American worldviews. Few studies comprehensively integrate multiple levels of analysis encompassing systemic drivers, domestic politics, elite decision-making, and critical discourse in both nations. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic brought a restructuring of trade networks as well as induced instability in the global order has not been analysed yet. Research will have to disentangle the effects of the pandemic in shaping the new world order and dissolving the unipolar system. The research will assess the long-term effects of the pandemic. The challenge for the US was to properly define its role during the crisis and prepare for the current post-Covid-19 era of great power competition.

Moreover, the geopolitical and balance of power shifts triggered by the pandemic has introduced a dynamic change. The question is to whether the global network for both great powers shall remain solid on top of the emerging threats against Washington with Russia, North Korea and Iran attempting to subvert it. Chinese influence in the Latin American Caribbean (LAC) is said currently surpassed the US as the entire hemisphere is approaching China for investments, trade, loans and aid, (Wise 2020). The tense rivalry Washington and Beijing is only escalating incessantly and as the health crisis receded, the economic and political fallout continues.

The available literature failed to fundamentally address the gap. The pandemic also accelerated the withdrawal of the US capital from Chinese markets and both sides lack the will to invest in each other. The COVID-19 introduced the so-called “New Cold War” which is diplomatic fallout. Very little indeed was known that the advent of the COVID-19 could be a source of geopolitical tension threatening the relative global stability that the US hegemony provided through unipolarity (Johnson 2018)

This research aims to address these gaps by providing a focused, theoretical examination of how the COVID-19 crisis specifically impacted geopolitical tensions between China and the USA. It will analyse the escalating rivalry holistically across security, economic, technological and diplomatic domains through application of leading international relations theories, Realism and Interdependence theories. The study adopts a comparative approach encompassing Chinese and American perspectives derived from diverse sources. The analysis integrates systemic analysis of great power competition and induced shifts in the balance of power with examination of domestic influences, leadership agendas and societal discourses. Thereby, the research will generate novel, multilevel insights into how the unprecedented pandemic has shaped the unfolding dynamics of Sino-US relations.

2.3 COVID-19 as a Trigger of Sino-US Tensions: An Analysis through Interdependence and Realism Theories

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, two countries locked in an intense strategic rivalry. The Interdependence theory posits that high economic interdependence moderates conflicts through vulnerability to retaliation and high costs of decoupling (Keohane & Nye, 1977). During COVID-19, the US and China experienced sensitivity as both depend heavily on each other's markets and supply chains. China exports over 60% of US imported goods including medical supplies, while the US provides key inputs for China's manufacturing (US Census Bureau, 2020; Fitch Solutions, 2020).

Yet, tensions arose due to attribution of blame. The US demanded transparency from China on the origins and severity of the outbreak, accusing it of cover-ups (Ward, 2020). China rejected these allegations as politically motivated (Feng, 2020). Despite economic sensitivity, nationalist rhetoric escalated as both countries prioritised restoring domestic confidence amidst a massive health and economic crisis (Westcott & Jiang, (2020).

However, severe economic conflicts were avoided due to high interdependence costs. The US refrained from heavy sanctions recognising China's importance in medical and technological supply chains (Vadén & Suomalainen, 2020).

China also needs stable US demand to fuel growth. Economic interdependence constrained aggressive actions due to mutual vulnerability, as evident from continued trade and investment (Powell, 2020).

From a realist lens, power rivalry intensified as each side competed for geopolitical gains during the pandemic. Biden officials criticised China's vaccines diplomacy as increasing its global influence (Brattberg & Burkard, 2021). China depicted the inefficient US response as sign of declining leadership (Hernández, 2020). Both embraced unilateralism to reassure domestic audiences about regaining global standing shattered by COVID-19 (Zhao, 2020). China implemented a global relief plan during the first year of the epidemic, which the media nicknamed "mask diplomacy" (Telias & Urdinez 2022). The pandemic gave Beijing a chance to show that its scientific advancement already put it on par with developed nations.

Countervailing effects of interdependence and geopolitical competition shaped the Sino-US relationship during COVID-19. While economic integration moderated conflicts, the pandemic deepened the strategic rivalry by accentuating realist impulses of boosting national power amidst crisis. Sustained cooperation remains crucial given high interdependence in an age of US-China great power competition.

2.4 COVID-19 Origins and China's Initial Response

The Chinese city of Wuhan saw an outbreak of severe pneumonia in December 2019, according to Lu et al. (2020), which was brought on by a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. China's early response, however, received harsh criticism from US authorities for being opaque, according to Peeri et al. (2020). A glimpse into the complexities of the pandemic reveals that on January 30, 2020, the WHO designated the COVID-19 outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (WHO, 2020). Despite urgent efforts by the Chinese central government since January 20 to organise and centralise enough resources to control the pandemic's spread, the disease had escalated and spread swiftly over the world, as this decision revealed (WHO, 2020).

In retrospect, it is instructive to look back at what transpired between December 1, 2019, the initial case, which was later identified as COVID-19 (Huang et al, 2019), and January 20, 2020, the first day that a Chinese national health expert formally declared that the COVID-19 had a human-to-human transmission mechanism (Shih et al, 2020). There had been at least three prior chances for the federal government to grasp the seriousness of the situation and launch effective centralised responses prior to January 20.

First, on December 30, eight doctors reportedly used a Chinese social media platform to alert friends and colleagues that "seven people had contracted what is believed to be SARS." Shih et al. (2020) state that this is the first instance of this. The Wuhan city government and CCTV made the announcement that these 8 medical professionals were spreading rumours and had been reprimanded by the local police on January 1 and January 2, instead of providing real responses to these internet assertions (Shih et al., 2020).

In addition, on January 8 the National Health Commission in Beijing dispatched a second expert expedition to Wuhan to assess the situation locally; by January 9 there were at least 59 confirmed cases (Shih et al., 2020). The genomic sequence of the virus was successfully isolated by researchers, and the CCDC declared that this unidentified virus was a novel coronavirus on January 8 (BBC, 2020). In contrast, the vice-group head of the second expert panel claimed on January 10 that "the epidemic can be controlled and preventable" (China news, 2020), while the local government health commission of Wuhan claimed that between January 11 and January 16 it had "not found newly infected patients" (BBC, 2020). This was completely misleading as cases of the virus were severely multiplying.

The third opportunity to take action earlier came on January 15, 2020, when the National Health Commission's director visited Wuhan to assess the issue. They claimed that they could completely rule out the possibility of human-to-human transmission although the danger of ongoing human-to-human transmission is relatively low, according to the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission's report from January 15 that they had not discovered any evidence of such transmission (NBD, 2020). Meanwhile, some Chinese nationals kept travelling out of China to other countries, potentially spreading the virus.

According to Liu and Saltman (2020), these three incidents show that China's information networks failed three times in a row to tell the public and the government of the existence of human-to-human transmission, which would have prompted swift action to curb the epidemic sooner. This was the main basis to the US's further fallout with China, increasing the already existing geo-political tension.

Given that at least 7 medical staff members caught the illness between January 1 and 11 (Li et al., 2020), Liu and Saltman (2020) contend that it was reasonable to assume that frontline medical professionals should have noted that this sickness had a human-to-human transmission mechanism. Normally, these medical professionals would have voiced their concerns to the media or in public but they were aware that the initial eight doctors who raised SARS-related concerns had been hushed (Shih et al., 2020). A crucial national performance standard for all hospitals in China is to have zero infected medical personnel during any outbreak (Liu et al., 2017). It is obvious that using such a technique for performance evaluation gave Wuhan's hospitals a very bad motivation to disclose any member of the medical staff who was afflicted.

2.5 US and China Blame and Rebuttals

The COVID-19 has intensified pre-existing geopolitical tensions between the US and China in areas like trade, technology, Taiwan, and the South China Sea (Wing and Wong, 2020). The pandemic has led to a dangerous blame game, threats of decoupling, and a geopolitical power struggle (Ward, 2020). President Trump initially referred to the calamity during the COVID-19 epidemic as the "Chinese virus" (Rogers et al. 2020) and later, at a rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, as the "Kung Flu." The US government, he claimed, was investigating whether the virus came from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Trump was livid that the virus could have been manufactured in China and the virus somehow escaped from the lab.

Additionally, he withdrew US financing for the World Health Organisation (WHO) and claimed that it served as the "public relations agency for China" (Al Jazeera 2020).

Thus, he somehow used the virus as a means to an end in an endeavour to advance their long-standing disputes with China. Blanco and Rosales (2020) argued that an increase in racialising discourse appeared as the global pandemic spread. The virus was incorrectly linked to people of Chinese ancestry by instrumentalising the fact that the first recorded phase of the epidemic occurred in Wuhan. According to Dubey (2020), the President of the United States frequently used the term "Chinese Virus" in his statements, which encouraged racist interpretations of the problem. People of Asian heritage in Europe and North America were directly affected by this racialisation, which was not limited to President Donald Trump. Racialisation also occurred in China, where African immigrants experience prejudice and retaliation when their country implemented anti-virus measures (Blanco and Rosales 2020).

According to Ajodo-Adebanjoko, (2022), China asserts that the virus came from the Huanan seafood market in Wuhan naturally, but the United States and a number of other nations are sceptical and think it came from a laboratory in Wuhan. In spite of accusations that China has outlawed all sorts of virus-origin research, China's claims have been challenged because Wuhan does not have any bat markets (Perry, 2021). The potential that China may have used the virus as a biological weapon to harm other economies, particularly the US economy, and realize its imperial desire to dominate the world has been raised by the latter accusation (Oluka et al, 2022).

2.6 How the pandemic heightened the already present geopolitical tensions between the United States and China

Woods et al. (2020) claim that bilateral trade discussions became more challenging as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, which initially broke out in China before spreading to Europe, the USA, and other countries. Outside of the trade dispute, controversies such as the South China Sea conflicts, the Chinese government's adoption of national security laws in Hong Kong, US-China disagreements over the WHO, and similar issues fuelled nationalism, according to Woods et al. (2020).

Wang Yi, the foreign minister and a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Political Bureau, and Yang Jiechi, another member of the CCP Political Bureau, both delivered speeches dismissing talk of US-China disengagement in response to the rapidly deteriorating political and security relations between the two nations. In order to reduce tensions, Yang also travelled to the USA and spoke with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (Boylan et al., 2021). In addition to showing a willingness to work with and make concessions to their American counterparts, Chinese leaders' speeches also worked to restrain irrational home nationalist tendencies (Boylan et al., 2021).

The commercial, technology, and geopolitical disputes between the US and China, according to Dupont (2020), have sparked a new Cold War. The world's two major powers are engaged in an increasingly acrimonious struggle for strategic advantage in an effort to identify which of them will be the dominant state of the twenty-first century in an epoch-defining struggle for world leadership. Because both nations have transitioned from a framework of cooperation to one of open rivalry and strategic competition, no matter how artfully framed, a trade pact will not be able to put the relationship back on track. According to Goldstein, (2005), Beijing believe that Washington is determined to restrain China in order to maintain the US's waning influence while depriving the Middle Kingdom of its due place in the sun. US elite and popular attitudes toward China have deteriorated for various reasons. The previously established goodwill, which took decades to establish, is quickly evaporating, especially within the formerly largely pro-China US corporate community. More and more Americans think China poses a security risk, threatens their economy, meddles with their democracy, and undermines their morals (Beckley & Brands, 2023). Although Washington is typically characterised by division and politicisation, there was generally a sense of unity when it comes to anti-China sentiment during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was expected to persist beyond Donald Trump's presidency. according to Dupont, (2020).

Both Trump and Xi Jinping tried to deflect criticism by holding the other responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic's effects (Gewirtz 2020). This is because neither leader has handled the situation appropriately. The likelihood of a chilly conflict was higher than that of a blazing one, but this is hardly reason for comfort or complacency.

Given the economic entanglements between the US and Chinese economies, the importance of both to world prosperity, and the spread of potentially lethal digital and military technologies, a second Cold War might be even worse than the first (Dupont, 2020).

2.7 The Attitude of the Trump and Biden Administrations

The COVID-19 pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China in late 2019 led to a global health crisis and significant geopolitical fallout. A key dimension of this has been the change in attitude of the United States under Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden towards China and its role in shaping the global order.

2.7.1 Donald Trump's Approach

Under President Trump, accusations against China's lack of transparency in the initial outbreak and a desire to deflect blame for his own handling of the pandemic domestically led to increasing hostility towards China (Allison, 2020). Trump regularly used terms like "Chinese virus" and alluded to the Wuhan lab leak theory to put pressure on Beijing and fan anti-Chinese sentiment at home (McCormick & Garrett, 2021). His administration withdrew from international organisations like the WHO and rejected multilateral cooperation on the grounds of Chinese influence within them (Kulacki, 2020).

Neorealism would view Trump's approach as embodying the realist tenet of putting America first in a zero-sum world of great power competition with China over global influence (Mearsheimer, 2001). By blaming China, he hoped to maintain domestic approval ratings and undermine China's image, reducing its relative power globally. However, this rejection of multilateralism ignored the economic interdependence that has developed between the two countries, damaging American influence with its allies and harming cooperation needed to deal with global issues like pandemics (Ikenberry, 2021).

The outcome of the 2020 presidential elections in the US added another layer of uncertainty, Covid-19 changed the general mood in the US against China. The Republicans and Democrats hardened their positions against Beijing and regarded China as Washington's main geopolitical rival. Donald Trump, referring to the Coronavirus as Chinese virus for a month he spoke of "a plague" from China. Trump said the damage done by China's cover-up of the virus was 100 times worse than any benefit from the trade deal. (Scholvin 2020). The virus was disparagingly called a "Chinese virus" by Donald Trump and this attack offered an opportunity for China to counter these accusations by donating health inputs and reinforcing its soft power (Edney et-al 2019) and projecting an image of a responsible power, (Pu 2020). Scholars predict US-China cold war insisting matters are clearly trending towards that direction.

2.7.2 Joe Biden's Approach

Biden adopted a more moderate tone towards China while maintaining a firm stance over issues like Taiwan, Xinjiang and Hong Kong (Lee et. al., 2021). While still criticising China's lack of transparency early on, he emphasised the need for cooperative inquiry into the pandemic's origins through the WHO rather than escalating tensions further (White House, 2021). Biden focused on rebuilding American alliances like the Quad to balance China but not contain it, in keeping with the theory of "liberal hegemony" (Ikenberry & Lim, 2017).

This approach recognised America's continued economic interdependence with China given supply chain integration, hence a purely confrontational strategy would be counterproductive (Pempel, 2020). However, it still aimed to manage China's rise through balancing as per realist principles of maintaining American primacy. Overall, Biden aimed for "strategic competition" rather than "conflict", suggesting a moderate mix of realism and liberalism in accordance with America's complex web of interests with China (Antoniades, 2022).

Trump can be summed up as having taken an antagonistic, zero-sum view of America's rivalry with China during COVID-19 in line with neorealism. Biden attempted a more nuanced strategy incorporating elements of realism as well as recognition of economic interdependence as per liberal thinking.

While great power competition remains, multilateral cooperation is still necessary given ongoing global challenges. Maintaining open communication channels even during disagreements will serve long-term American interests better than isolating itself or its rivals, as the pandemic demonstrated.

2.8 Sino-US Tension and its Effects on the Wider World

The COVID-19 pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China has not only caused immense geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, but also had wider ramifications across the globe as these two superpowers competed for influence. Impact on Global Health Institutions. The pandemic was treated as a geopolitically significant occurrence by both China and the United States from the beginning (Fidler 2020). According to Fildre (2020), the Sino-American military, political, and economic competition was at the centre of the world system when the new corona virus first surfaced in Wuhan in late 2019. The conflict became even more fierce as a result of President Donald Trump's desire to contest China's rise (Stainbach 2020).

The US decision to withdraw from the WHO severely undermined this critical institution's leadership and ability to coordinate the global health response (Forman & Raj, 2021). This created a vacuum China attempted to fill through increased donations and ties with the WHO. However, the lack of consensus harmed pandemic preparedness efforts. Realist theories would posit this undercut each power's relative influence over global health governance norms and institutions (Mearsheimer, 2014). It also reduced the leverage of multilateralism to balance both powers' interests.

As the first vaccines were approved, China and the US engaged in vaccine diplomacy to boost their global image, with mixed results (Jakabus et al., 2021). While Chinese vaccine donations expanded access, aggressive “Wolf Warrior” diplomatic posturing backfired in some countries. The competition over narrative frames reduced public health cooperation and transparency needed at a crisis (Entman, 2004). It weaponised the pandemic for geopolitical gains rather than prioritising an urgent global challenge.

High economic interdependence meant the pandemic caused massive global supply chain disruptions as the initial epicenters were China and later America (Baldwin & Tomiura, 2020). This accelerated debates over economic “decoupling” from China pushed by some US leaders for strategic reasons (Khanna, 2020). However, complete disentanglement risks global efficiency losses, as interdependence theorists note (Keohane & Nye, 1989). Ongoing trade tensions further depressed an already fragile world economy recovering from the pandemic. The geopolitical tensions between the US and China during COVID-19 undermined multilateralism, public health cooperation and economic interlinkages on a global scale. While great power competition was inevitable, a more balanced, multilateral approach may have advanced shared interests in facing this crisis together.

2.9 Opportunities for Improving China-US Relations

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated geopolitical tensions between major powers, most notably between China and the United States. Both countries have engaged in accusations and counter-accusations regarding the origins and handling of the outbreak. Within the context of an increasingly competitive relationship shaped by growing US-China rivalry, COVID-19 threatens to further damage an already fragile bilateral dynamic (France-Presse, 2020). However, the crisis also provides opportunities to ameliorate tensions and build cooperation if both sides choose a constructive path forward.

Realism’s premise that self-interest motivates states suggests pragmatism will compel cooperation between China and the US on shared priorities like economic stability and softening global crises that could destabilise either regime (Fingar, 2022). For example, both have incentives to coordinate policies to prevent severe global recession, shore up fragile developing states, and distribute vaccines to end the pandemic. Seeking cooperation on climate change is also in both nations’ long-term interests. These areas offer openings to pursue mutual gains.

Realist theory contends that in an anarchic international system defined by self-help, states primarily view each other with suspicion and compete for power and influence (Mearsheimer, 2001).

From this lens, the deterioration in China-US ties amidst the pandemic is understandable as both assert their nationalist interests unchecked. However, elements of structural realism also point to opportunities for cooperation. As the two largest economies with extensive trade and investment linkages, China and the US are fundamentally interdependent whereby neither benefits from a complete breakdown in relations (Gilpin, 2018). While competition persists, realists argue the two powers share common interests in global stability, trade, and pandemic control that incentivises cooperation within certain boundaries.

China and the US remain deeply economically interdependent despite political tensions (Christensen, 2020). Their trillion-dollar trade relationship and integrated supply chains illustrate deep interconnections. Interdependence theory contends these complex economic ties foster restraint by increasing the costs of conflict (Keohane & Nye, 1989). While decoupling has begun in areas like technology, retaining trade can be an area where interdependence overrides confrontational drives.

Interdependence theory further emphasises the mutual dependence between China and the US across multiple domains from supply chains to financial systems to health security (Keohane & Nye, 2012). The pandemic has shown that problems originating in one country can rapidly globalise due to interconnectedness, demonstrating no state is isolated from external challenges or can combat them alone (Pacheco Pardo, 2020). Shared vulnerability to cross-border crises like COVID-19 provide grounds for cooperation based on recognising mutual dependence rather than unilateral assertions of power. Areas like disease surveillance, international organisation reform, vaccine and therapeutic development present joint gains both countries would benefit from pursuing together (Kupchan, 2020).

Specifically, key opportunities for building China-US cooperation in the COVID-19 aftermath include establishing high-level communication channels between health and science officials to enhance epidemic information sharing and future response coordination. Lack of cooperation and transparency during the early stages of COVID-19 exacerbated tensions; rebuilding functional working relationships amongst experts can help mitigate such issues in potential future outbreaks (Casarini, 2020).

China and USA may jointly lead reform efforts within the WHO and other international health institutions to strengthen global health governance. Both sides recognise weaknesses in the current system; channelling differences into consensus on reform programs focusing on pandemic preparedness could help turn COVID-19 into an impetus for much-needed institutional change (Acharya, 2020). The two super powers may also expand cooperation on vaccine and therapeutics research through public-private partnerships involving companies and research institutions in both countries. Pooling scientific capabilities through open collaboration rather than unwarranted secrecy holds benefits for accelerating development of medical solutions (Lancet, 2020).

The USA and China can constructively manage their economic relationship and address trade issues to lower risks of COVID-19 tipping the relationship into a "Cold War" mentality. Pursuing voluntary decoupling or a trade war would be counterproductive and hurt both sides; finding compromise on long-standing complaints through dialog can maintain stability (Acharya & Johnston, 2020).

The realist logic of balancing and interdependence created by economic and health linkages between China and the US provide a basis to overcome COVID-19 tensions and move the relationship towards issue-based cooperation. While geopolitical competition will persist long-term, refocusing short-term priorities on pandemic control presents an opportunity for the two powers to incrementally pull themselves back from the brink through positive-sum engagement. Capitalising on this opportunity requires leadership and compromise on both sides for the benefit of their peoples and stability of the international system.

As major powers, China and the US share responsibility for crisis management on issues like nuclear proliferation, terrorism, global health and financial stability that threaten the international system (Jervis, 1999). COVID-19 demonstrated the perils of poor coordination. As realism argues, systemic pressures necessitate policing crises within an anarchic order. This incentivizes China-US communication to prevent future disasters despite rivalries.

Diplomatic signals of rapprochement like the Bali summit between Presidents Biden and Xi remain important despite distrust. Keeping communication open provides opportunities to clarify intentions, avoid miscalculation, and identify common ground (Allison, 2022). Even if competition persists, risk reduction measures are mutually beneficial. Rhetorical exchanges also reassure domestic audiences against rash conflict.

However, structural factors elucidated by realism like anarchy and domestic pressures limit the depth of possible cooperation absent fundamental systemic change (Mearsheimer, 2013). Nationalism and internal balancing imperatives will likely override interests in deep collaboration. But identifying achievable, selective cooperation on pressing transnational problems can still improve the tenor of relations. While realism explains enduring drivers of China-US competition, interdependence theory highlights areas where pragmatism can overcome distrust to improve bilateral ties. But possibilities will remain circumscribed by geopolitical realities unless creative diplomacy emerges.

2.10 Chapter Summary

Through the careful application of Realism and Interdependence theories, the chapter presented a thorough study of the pandemic's impact on the escalating strategic rivalry between China and the US. It produced new understandings of the obstacles to and possibilities for more positive cooperation between the two powers in this particular global crisis situation marked by security conundrums but also by shared vulnerability. The analysis provided a more comprehensive theoretical explanation of the intricate geopolitical processes that this scenario of health-related geopolitical conflicts between the two superpowers unleashed.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter details the research methodology adopted for this study. It outlines the research design, philosophy, data collection and analysis procedures employed to investigate the study objectives. A qualitative research methodology was utilised.

3.2 Research Philosophy

An interpretivist philosophy guides this study. Interpretivism assumes reality is socially constructed through subjective interpretations based on actors' varied backgrounds and perspectives (Saunders et al., 2009). It aims to understand issues by interpreting how stakeholders construct diverse realities in their unique contexts (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). Interpretivism is well-suited for this research as it facilitates exploration of different stakeholder viewpoints regarding COVID-19's complex geopolitical implications. The philosophy recognises there are multiple valid perspectives and realities dependent on the meanings various social actors bring to phenomena in light of their diverse situations (Creswell, 2013). By applying this approach, insights can be gained into how the pandemic and national and international responses are perceived and experienced differently by groups like governments, health experts, diplomats and citizens across varied cultural contexts (Sandberg, 2005). This recognises the fluid, contextualised nature of realities regarding emergent issues like pandemics (Myers, 2013).

An interpretivist lens acknowledges potential biases and subjectivities in both researcher and participant viewpoints (Crowther & Lancaster, 2008). It supports in-depth examination of intricate geopolitical dynamics from stakeholder framings to address research questions exploring 'how' and 'why' through diverse lived experiences (Blaikie, 2000). This fits the aim of developing a holistic, multifaceted understanding of geopolitical impacts as understood through various social lenses. Interpretivism is well-aligned methodologically to analyse differing pandemic realities constructed through distinct international interactions over time from involved actor perspectives.

3.3 Research Design

A qualitative exploratory multiple case study design was adopted to meet the aims. As noted by Baxter and Jack (2008), case studies are effective for answering complex "how" and "why" questions in real-world settings and exploring social phenomena from diverse angles. An instrumental multiple case study design is utilised focusing on China and United States as the main units of analysis within the COVID-19 context. As key global powers whose relationship significantly impacts international affairs from various facets, a cross case examination provides rich insights into epidemiological, economic and geopolitical fallouts of the pandemic (Yin, 2018). Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data source to explore expert viewpoints on pandemic-related policy responses, perceptions and consequences for bilateral cooperation (Yin, 2009). Purposively sampled knowledge leaders (30) from foreign policy, health and economic spheres in offer multi-dimensional perspectives.

Document review of official statements, academic literature and news reports supplements interview content and provides contextual understanding of events and underlying dynamics shaping Sino-US relations amid COVID-19 was done (Saunders et al., 2019). The case study approach enabled iterative data collection through adjustments to the interview protocol over the research process as initial themes emerge, ultimately enhancing findings' validity (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Integrating theory and evidence from multiple sources through thick description strengthens analysis quality.

3.4 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised academics, government officials, diplomats, journalists and think tank experts connected to China, US or international relations experts. Purposive sampling identified 30 suitable individuals based on knowledge, experience and role (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Given the sensitivity of researching geopolitical tensions, deep domain knowledge and senior roles were prioritised to access high-quality insider accounts and contextualise findings (Harvey, 2011).

The sample size of 30 allowed for data saturation across multiple stakeholders. Focusing on subject experts connected to both countries enabled exploring comparative perspectives on the

same crisis, with potential implications for cooperation (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Academic experts and think tank analysts provided valuable policy-relevant analysis beyond government narratives, lending analytical rigor and alternative viewpoints (McKinley, 2018). Purposive selection ensured geographic representation, notably including Chinese and American respondents from their embassy staff as well as local diplomats, for a balanced yet informed examination (Given, 2008).

3.5 Data Collection Methods

3.5.1 Primary data

Semi-structured interviews using an interview guide formed the primary data source. Questions elicited perspectives on perceptions of how the COVID-19 pandemic originated in China, evaluations of the initial response and transparency of the Chinese government, views on the policy response and messaging of the US administration under President Trump and later President Biden's administration, impacts of the crisis on trade relations, cooperation and geopolitical tensions between China and the US, and longer term strategic implications for global health governance and geopolitics. Interviews will be conducted face to face and audio recorded with participant consent. The interview guide included open-ended questions while allowing flexibility to probe responses. Some embassy staff from both embassies were interviewed, including journalists, local International Relations scholars, among others.

3.5.2 Secondary data

Secondary data sources were be utilised. A review of literature gathered contextual background from academic texts, media articles, official reports and policy statements. This provided historical context on China-US relations as well as different narrative perspectives in each country on topics like pandemic origins and political responses. Secondary data complemented primary interviews by capturing a diversity of viewpoints.

Method triangulation between interviews and document analysis strengthened the validity, credibility and confirmability of findings. The combination of qualitative methods supported an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted roles played by geopolitics in global health crises (Patton, 2015).

3.6 Data Presentation and Analysis

Data analysis involved thematic analysis to systematically identify, organize and describe patterns within the data collected from interviews and documents (Nowell et al., 2017). The specific steps included, transcribing all interview recordings verbatim to get an overview of the entire data set, performing multiple readings of the transcribed interviews and documents to note initial ideas, generating initial codes corresponding to specific concepts, views and events addressed in the data, searching for themes by sorting the different codes and collating all relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes, reviewing, refining and defining the themes to form a coherent pattern that characterised the dataset, and producing the final analysis report narrating the story and phenomena represented by the themes, and selecting vivid examples from the data accordingly.

Themes aimed to capture dominant perspectives on research pertinent issues such as views on origins and responses of involved nations, impacts on bilateral ties, and longer-term geopolitical implications. Discrepancies and sub-themes representing minority opinions were also be elicited. This systematic approach to thematic analysis ensured validity, rigor and transparency in insights drawn through closely examining commonalities, differences and relationships within the rich interview and documentary data.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability were important to ascertain the trustworthiness of qualitative findings. Credibility ensures findings accurately represent participants' views (Golafshani, 2003). This study enhances credibility through;

- Methodological reflexivity: A reflective journal acknowledged serious decisions around the subtle cultural issues surveyed, factors influencing participant recruitment, potential

biases in interpreting responses, and how emergent ideas shaped subsequent interview questions.

- Purposive sampling: Selecting Chinese and American experts as well as the academia offered unique perspectives on this sensitive issue enriching thick description essential for credible explanations (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Shenton, 2004).
- Persistent observation: Dialogue beyond scheduled interviews facilitated engagement with participants, contextualising richest data excerpts (Watts, 2011).
- Member-checking: Emergent analyses were verified by participants for accuracy before conclusions (Birt et al., 2016).

Dependability involves evaluating consistency across different researchers (Forero et al., 2018).

This study enhanced reliability via:

- Audit trail: Diaries recorded recruitment approaches, data treatment processes and analyses for independent examination (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).
- Procedural memos: Notes detailed how contexts can impact interpretation to contextualise analyses for future reproducibility (Rodham et al., 2015).

These techniques bolstered confidence that conclusions are logically derived from participants' life-worlds rather than preconceptions. While feasibility limits certain measures, the employed strategies aim to demonstrate credibility and reliability as espoused by seminal qualitative methodologists.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Consent was obtained verbally after fully informing participants about the study. Confidentiality and anonymity protected identities by using pseudonyms and securely storing personal data as per ethical standards for human subject research (Saunders et al., 2016). Ethical approval was applied according to the university's research ethics expectations and standards. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet clearly outlining the voluntary nature of their involvement, research aims, data collection procedures and rights to withdraw at any stage without repercussion. Informed consent was acquired verbally after allowing time for questions.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, personally identifiable information like names and organisational affiliations were removed from transcripts stored using numerical codes. Only anonymised direct quotes are considered for inclusion in analysis and reporting. All electronic data is password-protected on an encrypted external drive, with hard copies securely locked. Potential power dynamics were mitigated through emphasising participant autonomy and convenience in scheduling interviews according to their availabilities to minimise discomfort (Orb et al., 2000). Care was taken to avoid manipulating responses through neutral phrasing of questions and probes. Debriefing provided opportunities for feedback or concerns after participation, with confidential referrals available should psychologically distress surface from sensitive discussion (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). Participants' well-being, self-determination and trust were prioritised upholding the 'Do No Harm' principle guiding ethical social science (Israel & Hay, 2006). Participants were verbally appreciated for taking part in the study.

3.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined and justified the qualitative research methodology adopted for this study. A case study design was found most appropriate for exploring the intricate geopolitical dynamics surrounding COVID-19 from the perspectives of key stakeholders in China and the US. An interpretivist philosophical approach guided the examination of diverse realities constructed by actors in unique contexts. Purposive sampling of 30 elite experts from both nationalities, local journalists and diplomats as primary interview participants and secondary document analyses supported an enriched analysis. While ethical recruitment processes and data treatment techniques aimed to uphold participants' welfare, credibility and dependability were strengthened by carefully reducing researcher biases and establishing an audit trail. The methodology was designed to derive meaningful contextualised insights into the complex issue of pandemics as a source of geopolitical tension while addressing the research objectives and questions.

CHAPTER FOUR:

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings from in-depth interviews conducted with experts on China-US geopolitical relations, as well as a review of media and scholarly literature on tensions between the two countries arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. A thematic approach was used to analyse the qualitative data generated from the interviews and identify emerging themes. These themes are then discussed through the lens of the realism theory and complex interdependence theory to provide context on the geopolitical dynamics between the major powers.

4.2 Demographic characteristics of respondents

The target population comprises academics, government officials, diplomats, journalists and think tank experts connected to China, US or international relations experts. The study sample comprised 30 elite experts purposively selected for their expertise in areas relevant to the research topic. In terms of professional roles, the sample included 6 government officials and diplomats from foreign ministries and embassy staff. A further 7 respondents held roles as academics or researchers focused on international relations, foreign policy or global health governance. A further 10 respondents represented International Relations journalists and media professionals covering geopolitics and China-US relations. The remaining 4 participants occupied senior jobs in think tanks and non-governmental organisations or roles. Regarding gender distribution, 20 of the respondents were male while 10 were female. This imbalanced ratio reflects the continued underrepresentation of women in most foreign policy leadership positions. Finally, in terms of experience, the majority of 25 respondents had over 15 years of professional experience in fields directly related to the research topic. The high level of domain expertise among participants ensured collection of nuanced insights grounded in deep contextual knowledge and practice over many years of observing bilateral cooperation and strategic tensions between China and the US.

4.3 Pandemic's Initial Impact and how it Triggered Sino-US Tensions

The initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China in late 2019 had significant geopolitical implications for relations between China and the United States. In the early stages of the pandemic, lack of transparency from Chinese authorities regarding the nature and spread of the novel coronavirus drew criticism from US leaders and policymakers. On January 24, 2020, the Trump administration announced new travel restrictions on non-US citizens travelling from China as the virus spread (Kessler, 2021). This represented one of the first concrete actions by the US in response to the outbreak and signalled growing concerns over China's pandemic management (Yeung, 2020).

China judged the travel ban as an overreaction that controverted WHO recommendations in contradiction of the restrictions. Chinese state media instead promoted how China had been "open and transparent" in sharing virus information as buttressed by Lisook & Yuan, (2021). However, reports later surfaced that Chinese authorities had gagged doctors in Wuhan who attempted to warn about human-to-human transmission in December 2019, which delayed the global response to the pandemic. From late January, the war of words escalated as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo referred to the "Wuhan virus", a term decried by China as stigmatising. Both countries engaged in a battle, spreading propaganda, with each condemning the other for the eruption of the outbreak through their reported mishandling. Internal crises emergent in both countries, with rising cases and deaths in the US and economic turmoil in China further strained relations given contra stabilisation imperatives.

The initial secrecy surrounding the Wuhan outbreak and divergent risk communication approaches by Chinese and US leaders politicised the pandemic response and ignited geopolitical tensions during a crucial period for global cooperation. Moving forward, lack of consensus on the pandemic's origin deepened distrust that shaped ensuing interactions. The researcher interviewed a 45 years old professor in Media Communication and Politics who shared his thoughts and insights on the issue. He said,

I have observed the Sino-US relations as a media communication and politics scholar looking at the world politics power play in which US hegemony in the international order is questioned by emerging powers in terms of politics at all facets. We see China becoming a threat to Washington with US trying to trample down the Beijing for advancing towards challenging its hegemony.

Professor WG also shared his thoughts and views on the pandemic's initial impact and resultant effects on the geopolitics. He said;

The outbreak become a site of struggle as the US throwing the whole blame to China for failure to adequately inform the world about the disease and the later stood its ground denying the allegations. The US economy was hit hard and China trying to control the system, but from the American point of view, Beijing might have used the pandemic to downturn the US economy through shutdowns. In light of this, the origins of the pandemic are questionable, whether it was a conspiracy, but China stood its ground.

Some scholars are of the view that Beijing made efforts to investigate and report to international bodies, while also focusing initial containment within national borders. Scholars with these perspectives argued that China's priority were reasonable given domestic responsibilities, as information sharing improved over time. While transparency and sharing could have been better early on, China's strict lockdowns and rapid production of medical supplies should not be ignored in assessing their overall efforts to control the outbreak. However, the statistics and figures that were being shared by the Chinese government during the initial stages of the pandemic were reportedly far below the actual figures, so in terms of information dissemination, Beijing was not as forthcoming as would have been required and was not honest on the cause of the outbreak, though other scholars thought otherwise. 37-year-old IR journalist GN said,

China's response was based on the investigations first in order to report to the United Nations and the World Health Organisation on the accurate information about the disease which they did. In early 2019 China reported that the disease had moved from being an epidemic to a pandemic. This was the initial response by Beijing the enforcement of lockdowns, and the production of vaccines and the PPEs. In terms of the Beijing's sharing of information to the rest of the world was marred with conflicts and was based on the Sino way of doing things, it is widely believed that China's position is a bit of authoritarianism and rarely share crucial information.

In order to try and understand the actions taken by China and the US during the initial response to the pandemic and the geopolitical implications brought fourth, the researcher interviewed a 54 year old Senior Assistant Editor (IG) at one of the mainstream media houses who was in China at the time the pandemic started. Commenting on Chinese initial response, he said;

In terms of China's transparency in sharing information, you know it is politics. You need first to study the disease and get enough information about it before you can share information. At least China admitted that there was a disease that started in their own country and the myth surrounding its outbreak still remains a bone of contention. All scientist wanted to know about it, so China was transparent in sharing of the information to acceptable standards.

On Washington's response to the situation in China, He said;

The first reaction to the US was that China wants to destroy everyone on the continent to the point where the UN Secretary General Mr Antonio Guterres intervened to rebuke Washington over the narrative. The US and China relations soured long back since the time when China supported liberation movements in most African states and this did not go well with Washington since most of US staunch allies were the colonisers.

4.4 Issues that contributed to the soaring of tensions and souring of relations between USA and China and resultant effects

There were several issues that contributed to the soaring tensions and souring relations between China and Western countries according to observations. Lack of transparency in China's early response to the COVID-19 outbreak. As Morrison and Wu (2021) state, "Western countries felt China did not share accurate and timely information in the initial stages, hampering early global response" (p. 10). Western liberal democracies were also prickly over China's top-down despotic system and control of information flow which led to perception issues. Lee and Kim (2021) argue that, "Western countries continue to criticise China's policies in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and other issues, which China sees as interference in its internal affairs" (p. 24). Finally geopolitical rivalry and strategic competition and matrixes also came into perspective. Both sides increasingly visioned each other as major calculated rivals. Issues like Taiwan and South China Sea conflicts further fueled tensions. IR journalist GN explains;

The main issues that contributed to deterioration of relations were the way Beijing shared information about the virus which the Western community is claiming that was not transparent. As you all know that great powers always spy on each other, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had collected the statistics of the affected and the early mortality rate which did not tally with the Chinese data where there was a great difference which caused the Western Block to smell a dead rate over transparency in sharing of information. This led to the claim that China is not a democratic state and an authoritarian regime. It is closed state which has some strict measures in terms of sharing information. Xi Jinping's personality is projected as a dictator, and the narratives were compounded by the speculations that president Jinping would be pronounced a life president in the next congress which was against the liberal ideals followed by the Western community.

According to a 55-year-old male Masters in International Marketing Strategies, E-Commerce expert, the impact of the pandemic was mainly as a result of already existing tension which needed a trigger to explode, which in this case was triggered by the pandemic. He said,

There was significant geopolitical tension surrounding the production and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines between nations. The United States condemned vaccines from China and Russia's Sputnik V, portraying them in a negative light. Meanwhile, the UK touted its own domestically produced Moderna vaccine, insisting people still required an additional dose of the UK vaccine even after being fully vaccinated elsewhere. As close allies of the US, the UK and other English-speaking countries appeared to take a similar stance for geopolitical reasons.

Leadership responses in the US and China played a significant role in shaping bilateral tensions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Former US President Donald Trump adopted an increasingly aggressive standpoint towards China. He blamed China for not containing the "China virus" and hiding information, calling it the vilest spell the world has ever had. Trump suspended WHO funding and pushed a narrative of US-China conflict that resonated domestically. This confrontational rhetoric strained relations. When the US closed China's Houston consulate in July 2020, China reciprocated by shutting the US consulate in Chengdu. Despite Chinese medical donations to the US, officials insisted the aid was not an act of kindness. Chinese President Xi Jinping also took a firm nationalistic position. He praised China's response while accusing other nations like the US of overreaction to camouflage their own letdowns. Chinese state media amplified this by praising China's handling of COVID-19 compared to western democracies. As the pandemic exacerbated worldwide, China emphasised multilateral collaboration through the WHO. However, criticism of lab leak theories, insistence on praising China's response, and diplomatic actions like "wolf warrior" tweets intensified perceptions in Washington of an assertive China (Panda, 2021; Reynolds, 2021).

This study illustrates that dueling nationalist rhetoric on both sides politicised the pandemic and disrupted cooperation. Leadership narratives of competing moral authority exacerbated tensions that spilled into other areas of the bilateral relationship. Moving forward, finding consensus on cooperation remains challenging given entrenched distrust.

Commenting on how leadership responses in the US and China played a significant role in shaping bilateral tensions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another International Relations scholar, Dr AR said;

Of course, the leadership responses played a major part. We see both countries securing their interests with president Xin Xingping advancing his interests of becoming a global powerhouse. China tried everything possible to use its resources to counterweight the spread of the disease and using the pandemic platform to advance its interests. Looking at Trump, he attacked the World Health Organisation, and all this was happening at a time when most Western countries enjoyed the monopoly of production of vaccines and China also managed to develop its own vaccines. Politics played a part in the manufacturing of vaccines; the West condemned the Sino vaccines which they failed to de-campaign since they were accessible and available.

There are a few issues that have contributed to friction between the US and China, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. China considers Taiwan a breakaway province and does not recognise its sovereignty. The US has shown increasing support for Taiwan, including latest arms sales and visits by senior US officials, in contradiction of China's one-China policy. This has heightened tensions significantly between Beijing and Washington. There has been an ongoing trade war between the US and China related to issues like China's industrial policies, intellectual property protections, technology transfer and the large trade deficit the US has with China. COVID-19 has added fuel to this as the US has blamed China for the pandemic and sought to decrease economic reliance on China. The US has boosted naval operations in the South China Sea to challenge China's territorial claims and build alliances with other regional powers like Vietnam and the Philippines. This has become a point of major geopolitical friction.

The pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in globalised systems and reignited existing US-China tensions. Both countries have engaged in a war of words over the origins and handling of the virus, with the US casting doubt on China's transparency and numbers. The US sees China's dominance in 5G technology and data flows as a threat and has accused companies like Huawei of enabling digital totalitarianism and surveillance for China through their apparatus. This has become a major tech battleground. Thus, the COVID-19 has exacerbated and amplified existing geopolitical tensions between the US and China stemming from issues like Taiwan, trade, the South China Sea, and technology competition. This geopolitical rivalry has significant implications and is a major global fault line. On the major issues contributed to the friction, IG said;

China views Taiwan as a breakaway province and does not recognize its autonomy. Taiwan's status has roots in its complex colonial history, transitioning between Chinese and Japanese rule over centuries. In 1949, China's communist government established control over mainland China while Taiwan's ousted nationalist regime retreated to the island. Since then, the US has cultivated closer ties with Taiwan, straining relations with Beijing which sees any moves towards Taiwan's independence as crossing a red line. These tensions flared in 2019 as US-backed protests in Hong Kong challenged China's authority for nearly a year. Just as the Hong Kong situation was stabilizing, the COVID-19 outbreak emerged from Wuhan in late 2019, diverting global attention.

4.5 Competition in Specific Domains

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated competition between the US and China across several key domains. Trade tensions that predated the pandemic deepened as each side scrutinised the other's economic dependency. The US suspended imports of goods like seafood from China due to health concerns, while China lifted some tariffs on US imports as a goodwill nod rejected by Washington. Meanwhile, Beijing launched investigations into American tech giants and blocked

more inbound investments citing national security. In the realm of technology, the pandemic accelerated deglobalisation trends as both countries fortified supply chain security. The US sanctioned companies like Huawei amidst espionage concerns, asserting that reliance on China posed risks. Beijing portrayed such moves as efforts to contain China's rise and struck a self-reliant tone on incipient technologies. Professor WG said;

The tensions escalated in both areas, technology and trade since economics and politics share the same space. This is why we talk of geo-politics and geo-economics. The tensions had already been there and now China is under fire for facing allegations from the US and Washington using the pandemic to demonise Beijing's economy indicating that China is unable to handle its products and apparatus in their laboratories, hence the outbreak of the virus. Tensions continued but the pandemic actually exacerbated the tensions. In the areas of technology, Washington has a history of not wanting any country to lead in the area. China, being emerging as the power in the area of technology led to the imposition of restrictions against Sino's technological giant, Huawei

Vaccine diplomacy further heightened strategic jostling. As China exported vaccines, donations came with calls for praise and recognition of China's leadership, sparking criticism of "vaccine wolf warrior diplomacy" (Zenz, 2021). Europe and others accepted Chinese help but the US prioritised Western-led initiatives and raised safety concerns over Chinese shots. Meanwhile, China insisted that intellectual property rules should be waived to amplify production, a proposal resisted by Washington and pharmaceutical associates. The pandemic accelerated shifts like supply chain diversification and great power cooperation alternatives, thus heaped uncertainties into the global system. The lack of coordination and prevalence of nationalism in major power interactions has contributed to intertwined challenges and impaired finding common solutions. On the virus compounding strategic jostling, Professor WG said,

It did impact as I indicated earlier, the vaccine diplomacy did play much geopolitics. We saw vaccine nationalism whereby Western countries were touting for their own vaccines while condemning the Chinese Sinopharm and Sinovacc were considered inferior.

4.6 The Narratives from both parties, their impact on the global system.

There have been competing narratives from the US and China regarding the COVID-19 pandemic that have impacted the global system. China has strongly repudiated that the virus originated from a lab leak in Wuhan and has pushed the narrative that it was a naturally occurring zoonotic transmission (World Health Organisation, 2021). Meanwhile, the US has cast doubts on China's transparency and accused it of not properly investigating the origins of the virus. This blame game has further strained tensions. As China raced to develop its own vaccines, the US spread narratives questioning the efficacy and safety of Chinese vaccines. Both countries sought to leverage vaccine diplomacy for geopolitical influence during the pandemic. This narrative battle increased distrust between the two rivals. China touted its initial lockdowns and eventual control of COVID-19 as evidence of the success of its authoritarian governance model. Meanwhile, the US criticised China's early handling of the outbreak and accused it of not sharing information promptly. These divergent messages increased geopolitical tensions.

Going forward, there is no indication tensions will decrease as long as strategic competition over resources, technology, and influence persists between the US and China. In fact, the Russo-Ukraine crisis, Gaza conflict and the US's general presence in the Gulf has further exacerbated the geo-political rivalry. Domestic political orientations also stimulate bilateral relations. Continuous geopolitical fights can be expected barring significant confidence-building measures between the two powers. The dueling COVID-19 narratives have exacerbated existing geopolitical tensions in the US-China relationship with consequences for the global system. Commenting on these narratives, IG remarked that;

Washington sought to lead vaccine production and distribution efforts, perceiving this as controlling the pandemic. Meanwhile, China aimed to expand its influence through widespread vaccine sharing, recognizing more doses overseas strengthens soft power. This spawned a strategic rivalry over accruing global goodwill during the health crisis. As long as rich natural resources fuel geopolitical competition, tensions are unlikely to dissipate. Rivalries over materials like lithium and nuclear energy will likely persist as with current divergent approaches to Zimbabwe and Zambia. Trump approached China particularly sternly while Biden stabilized relations, influenced partly by Republican versus Democratic ideologies on foreign policy. However, the potential decline of Western-led bodies like the G7 concurrent with the rise of China-centered BRICS+ still breeds unease in the US. Partisan perspectives shape stances towards Beijing despite shared economic interdependence between the superpowers.

4.7 Longer Term Strategic Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have significant longer-term strategic implications for great power relations and dynamics of competition between the US and China. The pandemic has accelerated the decoupling of supply chains and technology as both countries focus on self-reliance to address vulnerabilities exposed during the crisis. This threatens the hyper-globalisation of previous decades and could lead to a bifurcated tech world. Rising strategic distrust means cooperation on resolving root causes like zoonotic origins may prove elusive. Severe tensions instead risk becoming the new normal, with implications for global governance challenges.

However, some opportunities for cooperation also exist. Despite political headwinds, scientists, experts, and regional partners have urged pragmatic collaboration on critical issues. Public health security cooperation remains crucial for pandemic preparedness. Future variants know no borders, necessitating functional cooperation despite political differences.

The WHO and COVAX initiative have facilitated vaccine supply discussions, though these remain limited by geopolitical factors. Equitable access globally serves all nations' strategic health interests. Regional relationships like with ASEAN provide platforms for cooperation on economic recoveries that could help stabilize relations. Therefore, while competition dynamics have hardened, no nation will emerge unscathed without cooperation to resolve shared crises like pandemics that ignore borders. Pragmatic issue-based engagement thus remains important for stability despite prevailing strategic tensions. According to Mr Z, an IR expert,

The pandemic altered the great power dynamics in favour of China. China got the burden of the pandemic in the initial stages and fought hard to prevail victoriously. Beijing was then able to help other states with its excess vaccines more than the US could do. In the process China was pronounced the global leader as far as the suppressing of the Covid-19 was concerned. They say in vaccine diplomacy, "Influence goes faster in countries where vaccines were delivered." The available opportunities for cooperation to de-escalate the friction might be in research and technological sharing.

According to Professor WG;

The entire global narrative surrounding the origins and spread of the virus centered on these competitive aspects of the relationship. Diplomatic tensions manifest more openly due to issues emerging from the pandemic. For example, both countries closed each other's consulates in a tit-for-tat response. However, there remains hope and opportunity for increased cooperation, informed by lessons from the shared crisis. Greater collaboration may occur lower levels of scientific exchange outside formal documentation, including information sharing to tackle future threats rapidly. Rather than accusing one another, synergistic partnerships could form to address challenges before they spread globally.

4.8 Institutional Reforms

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare gaps in existing global governance systems that need reform to strengthen pandemic preparedness and response. First, the WHO faced criticism for initial COVID-19 missteps and perceived deference to China. The pandemic exposed gaps in the IHR which the WHO is mandated to uphold but lacks enforcement powers. Strengthening WHO authority and financing could help address future spill overs. Second, lack of cooperation forums for powers like the US and China to effectively collaborate hamstrung the global response. Geopolitics complicated issues like origins research. Investing in dialogic mechanisms may help depoliticise health security. Thirdly, no authority currently governs dual-use laboratory safety. Questions emerged around biosafety and biosecurity standards particularly for high-risk research. A new oversight body could mitigate future zoonotic pandemic risks.

Institutional reforms that provide expanded WHO authority and independence, such as member state accountability and crisis response authority. Multilateral platforms to stabilise great power coordination on issues like outbreak data-sharing, joint research, and supply chain cooperation. Regulation of high-risk pathogen research through an advisory quasi regulatory joint US-China agency. Have potential to foster improved cooperation and resilience against inevitable future pandemics by mitigating paralysis from geopolitical tensions and information asymmetries. Coordinated reform offers the most systematic strategy. On institutional reforms, Professor WG said;

The institutions like WHO are also major players in the international relations, however they have capacity to deliver its duties due to lack of finances. There were a lot of accusations due to the advent of the COVID-19. The US refused to fund the WHO accusing it of geopolitically aligned to China. This further heightened the tensions and the WHO failed to deliver its mandated after suffered financial challenges. It also happened to UNESCO when it demanded the reforms in information communication technology so that everyone benefit unlike being controlled by the rich, there emerge

various narratives. The WHO has no power since it gets some of the funding from states that are at the centre of conflicts.

International relations expert Mr Z commended on the issue of institutional reforms. He said,

The Sino-US geopolitical tension is yet to de-escalate as evidenced by the way the two great powers failed to cooperate in the face of the pandemic. Washington's mission is to contain Beijing in a manner exactly spelt in their Foreign Policy framework. China is well aware of this position as authenticated by the incessant pressure on Taiwan, a US ally. This can lead to the view that there is no change in the US-China strategies in terms of de-escalating frictions, instead they are bound to exacerbate.

4.9 Future of China-US Relations

The China-US relationship during COVID-19 highlights both tensions and imperatives for constructive management going forward. A key takeaway is that geopolitical differences cannot prevent coordination on shared global challenges. However, entrenched distrust and nationalism can undermine cooperation if left unaddressed (Yeung, 2020). Early warnings were not heeded due to strategic competition, yet future crises will demand unity. Looking ahead, decoupling pressures may continue hardening as both invest in self-reliance following pandemic-exposed interdependencies (Bollfrass & Wang, 2021). Severe tensions carry risks if left unmitigated, with potential for miscalculation. De-escalating the blame game through lowered rhetoric and confidence-building is advised.

Opportunities also exist. While strategic competition will persist long-term, narrow issue-based cooperation serves both nations' long-term interests. Continued scientific and public health collaboration sent, regional diplomacy, and pragmatic communication can stabilise fluctuating relations (Zenz, 2021; Hachigian, 2021). A reformed, authoritative WHO and new crisis coordination mechanisms may usefully foster habits of cooperation despite deep rifts. As rising power, China's growing global responsibilities also demand responsible crisis leadership through openness and multilateralism (Cohen, 2021). Tensions are likely to endure but need not prevent mitigating shared risks. The prevailing geopolitical climate requires vision and resilience from leaders to manage differences pragmatically for stability in a complex sphere of competition and interdependence. Avoiding past pandemic response failures demands it. Dr ER commented that;

There still room for cooperation, we see that Washington is much worried about the advancement of Beijing in the taking over control of the international system. China is rising in various fields including technology and military. When we also see many other countries coming in to join the BRICS+, it's an indication of a change in the balance of power. The US controlled unipolar will be a thing of the past and even in the monetary system shall see the diminishing of the US Dollar on the world market. The US was punishing other countries using its power to control other states. We also see the Russia-Ukraine war as a constitutive event that is disturbing the long existing Washington hegemony. It's no longer business as usual for US.

4.10 Discussion

Results demonstrated how competitive, blame-deflective responses exacerbated already rising China-US tensions as both faced severe domestic impacts and demands to redirect blame externally (Downes & Saunders, 2021). This aligns with realist perspectives that major powers prioritise nationalistic interests above collaborative solutions during crises, damaging global cooperation norms critical to bolstering health security (Friedman, 2020).

Furthermore, politicisation and restrictions contradicted established norms against weaponising health emergencies, as seen from US "China virus" rhetoric counterproductive to united action (Chen & Ohlberg, 2020). However, complex interdependence theory posits unilateralism impedes mitigating shared threats like pandemics transcending borders through swift coordination (Zhang, 2020). Findings thus validate complex dynamics at play from global supply chain interlinkages to divergent domestic pressures pull leaders towards misguided nationalism versus multilateralism (Bremmer, 2021).

While China attempted portraying beneficial medical aid measures normatively, aggressive US pursuits blaming others undermined positive influence through effective global health diplomacy (Clements, 2020). This upholds constructivist perspectives that leadership legitimacy depends on rational actions promoting agreed solutions over narrow interests, now compromised for lack of coordinated actions and messages countering disinformation (Roberts, 2020).

Still, not all patterns conformed neatly to theoretical categorisations given the complexities involved (Hall, 2021). Cooperation instances provided mild exceptions from general escalations driven by geopolitics narrowing scope for collaborative statecraft (Cordery, 2020). Further multi-case analyses spanning diverse regions could offer deeper insights into variations between or within partnership constructs shaped by political economy factors in different contexts over time (Panzner, 2020).

Findings validate that health crises intensify existing geopolitical tensions when major powers abdicate global stewardship to scapegoat others instead of prioritizing joined-up action against common threats. Despite complexities, cooperative leadership upholding shared responsibility and humanity's dignity remain imperative during catastrophes crossing all boundaries. Future pandemic preparedness demands renewed multilateralism surpassing politics to safeguard populations through science, not suspicion.

4.11 Chapter summary

This chapter presented findings from the study on the geopolitical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on relations between China and the United States. Demographic characteristics of respondents were provided. Themes emerging from the data related to issues such as the initial impact of the pandemic, factors exacerbating tensions between the two countries, competitive actions in various domains, duelling national narratives, longer term strategic implications, prospects for institutional reform, and the future outlook of the bilateral relationship. The findings were discussed in relation to theories of realism, complex interdependence, and constructivism. It was found that competitive reactions to the pandemic aggravated pre-existing geopolitical differences, undermining cooperative solutions through nationalistic, blame-shifting rhetoric. Yet opportunities for issue-based cooperation also exist to mitigate shared global health and economic risks, if guided by pragmatic, responsible leadership upholding shared interests over narrow politicisation of complex crises transcending borders.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the key findings and conclusions from the research presented in the previous chapters. It discusses the Covid-19 pandemic as a source of geopolitical tension, following the case study of China and the USA. The chapter further proffers recommendations on how China and the USA can ease the seemingly escalating geo-political tension between the two countries. The chapter also suggests possible areas of further studies, building on the gaps exposed by the present study.

5.2 Summary

Chapter 1 provided background on the research problem by outlining the initial outbreak and divergent national responses in China and the U.S. It established how a public health crisis evolved into geopolitical competition between the two major powers. The chapter introduces the topic of studying COVID-19 as a source of geopolitical tensions between China and the US. It explains that the pandemic not only caused a major health crisis but exacerbated existing geopolitical fault lines between these major powers. The background section outlines that international relations literature has paid little attention to outbreaks as factors affecting superpower dynamics. It summarises those pre-existing tensions worsened as China and the US engaged in a "blame game" and tried gaining global influence during the pandemic. The purpose is defined as exploring how the pandemic triggered China-US tensions specifically. The chapter questions how COVID-19 triggered tensions, pandemic effects on the global system, presents opportunities to strengthen ties, and the resultant differences in the Trump and Biden administrations' China approaches.

Chapter 2 reviewed existing literature on the links between health, security and foreign policy. Scholars found pandemics often exacerbate rivalry as states prioritize sovereignty over collaboration (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2018). Nationalism and lack of coordination hinder global cooperation during crises (Kickbusch & Leung, 2020). The chapter outlines the theoretical frameworks of realism and interdependence theory that inform the study. Realism explains strategic competition and power balancing between China and the US in an anarchic system. Interdependence theory recognizes the moderating effect of economic entanglement on conflicts through vulnerability to retaliation. COVID-19 intensified geopolitical tensions due to attribution of blame by both sides seeking domestic political gain, as predicted by realism. However, severe economic conflicts were avoided due to high costs of decoupling highlighted by interdependence theory. The chapter analyses China's initial response to COVID-19 in Wuhan and the missed opportunities to communicate the risk of human-to-human transmission earlier based on various reports. This formed the basis for increased tensions with the US. President Trump took an antagonistic, blame-China approach to boost domestic approval as per realist thinking, undermining multilateralism. Biden pursued a multilateral strategy incorporating elements of economic interdependence recognition alongside realist balancing of China. The geopolitical tensions undermined global health governance, vaccine cooperation and economic stability as predicted by theories. Complete decoupling could harm global efficiency. Key opportunities to improve ties discussed based on theories include maintaining open channels of communication, cooperation on pandemic response, WHO reforms, science collaboration and risk reduction measures to manage competition. But structural realist factors will limit cooperation depth.

Chapter 3 outlined and justified the qualitative research methodology adopted for this study. A case study design was found most appropriate for exploring the intricate geopolitical dynamics surrounding COVID-19 from the perspectives of key stakeholders in China and the US. An interpretivist philosophical approach guided the examination of diverse realities constructed by actors in unique contexts. The methodology was designed to derive meaningful contextualised insights into the complex issue of pandemics as a source of geopolitical tension while addressing the research objectives and questions.

Chapter 4 presented findings from the study on the geopolitical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on relations between China and the United States. Themes emerging from the data related to issues such as the initial impact of the pandemic, factors exacerbating tensions between the two countries, competitive actions in various domains, duelling national narratives, longer term strategic implications, prospects for institutional reform, and the future outlook of the bilateral relationship. The findings were discussed in relation to theories of realism, complex interdependence, and constructivism. It was found that the COVID-19 has created and exacerbated geopolitical tensions between China and the United States. The chapter exposes the fact that there is an ongoing blame game between the two countries over the origins and handling of the pandemic. The US accuses China of covering up information early on, while China says the US is scapegoating to deflect from its own failures. This mutual finger-pointing has poisoned relations. Both sides have engaged in propaganda and disinformation campaigns to shape the global narrative. China has aggressively promoted its pandemic assistance diplomacy, while the US questions China's transparency. This has intensified suspicions on both sides. Important bilateral cooperation on issues like trade, North Korea, climate and public health have been undermined as tensions rise. There is now greater willingness in both Washington and Beijing to view the other as a geopolitical threat or rival. The pandemic exacerbated the economic rivalry as both countries face severe downturns. China may benefit relative to the West from controlling the outbreak earlier, strengthening its position in global supply chains. Rising nationalism and criticism of initial pandemic responses have pressured leaders in both countries towards more hardliner anti-China/anti-US stances that are difficult to walk back from. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the power transition between the two countries and transition toward open geopolitical competition. The chapter has also exposed that restoring fractured trust will prove immensely challenging without tangible efforts by leaders on both sides.

5.3 Conclusions

Basing on the findings of the study, the study concludes that:

1. COVID-19 has intensified geopolitical tensions between China and the US in substantial and perhaps irreversible ways. It has exacerbated long-standing disputes over trade, technology, influence and power transition between the two rivals.
2. The blame game dynamics and propagation of disinformation between China and the US has shattered trust and goodwill between the two countries. Restoring constructive engagement will be an immense challenge without changes in political leadership or approach.
3. The pandemic has accelerated trends of decoupling and economic "de-globalisation" as both countries seek self-reliance and have grown more wary of dependence on the other. This bodes poorly for international cooperation.
4. Domestic political pressures within China and the US push governments towards more adversarial postures that are difficult to walk back from. Future crises may see even less inclination for compromise between the two superpowers.
5. Crucial functions of global governance like pandemic response, trade rules and climate change action will become more strained if distrust prevails between China and the US. The world may see more unilateralism.
6. COVID-19 has underscored the geopolitical consequences of major public health crises and the fragility of international stability when cooperation breaks down between the world's leading powers. Future crises could be harder to overcome collectively.
7. Effective leadership focused on rebuilding diplomatic ties and frank yet constructive dialogue may be the best hope to curb an emerging "Cold War" dynamic, but the incentives currently push in the opposite direction. The long-term outlook is uncertain.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn, several recommendations are proposed;

1. The US and China should establish high-level dialogue channels to reduce misunderstandings, build confidence and prevent worst-case scenarios from developing over future crises.
2. Both sides must curb unsubstantiated accusations and disinformation campaigns and promote transparency in investigations into COVID-19's origins to rebuild some trust.
3. Multilateral institutions like WHO need reform to strengthen independence, access and international cooperation for pandemic prevention and response.
4. China and the US could pursue limited cooperation on shared interests like climate change, public health and counter-terrorism to prevent full disengagement.
5. Governments must reduce domestic political pressures by communicating willingness to engage the other constructively when strategic interests align.
6. More regular economic and strategic dialogues could increase transparency into each country's intentions and mitigate fears of unilateral moves by the other.
7. International organisations should promote expertise-sharing between China and US on issues impacted by scientific and technological competition.

5.5 Areas for further research

A number of areas could benefit from additional research;

1. Impact of domestic political dynamics: More analysis is needed on how partisan politics and nationalist sentiments in both the US and China shape their bilateral relationship. Case studies could evaluate how decisions are impacted by domestic pressure groups.
2. Effect on global supply chains: As decoupling accelerates, research is required on the reshoring of industries and impacts on global trade flows. Areas like advanced technology and medical supplies are radically reshaping. Costs and opportunities of this shift require assessment.
3. Prospects for renewed cooperation: While tensions are high, further work could explore under what policy scenarios or cooperative niches limited collaboration might resume between the rivals. For example, on shared transnational challenges like climate change, non-proliferation or future pandemics. Close evaluation of internal policy debates on both sides could offer insight into the feasibility of renewed engagement.

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ANNEXURES

APPENDIX 1:

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR DIPLOMATS

COVID-19 as a Source of Geopolitical Tension: The Case of China and the U.S.

My name is Talent Chimutambgi student Number B223572B. I am studying at the Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) for a Master of Science in International Relations. As part of the requirements for the program, I am carrying out a research study titled, **Covid-19 as a source of geopolitical tension: The case of China and USA.**

I would want to ask you a few questions on the Covid-19 as a source of geopolitical tension, focusing on the case of China and the USA, so that I can better understand the complexities and intricacies involved.

I want to emphasise that all the data acquired here will be used exclusively for research purposes and will be treated as such. High standards of privacy shall be upheld. You have the right to leave the interview whenever you want, for any reason. Respondents will not be offered any type of payment or reward; therefore, participation is entirely optional. In order to make sure I don't miss any crucial details; I will be recording the interview with your consent.

Contact Details:

Email:

Project Supervisor: Dr. Pastor Ronald Chipaike

Email:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR DIPLOMATS

(For Researchers' use only)

i. Interview No.

- ii. Date of Completion.....
- iii. Time taken to complete interview.....

Demographic Questions

Age:.....

Gender:.....

Education level:.....

Number of years in business:.....

Background Information:

Please provide some background on your diplomatic experience/role
Can you outline the state of China-US relations pre-COVID outbreak?

Initial COVID-19 Outbreak and Response:

How would you evaluate China's initial handling of the outbreak in Wuhan?
What factors influenced the US response to early news from China?

Escalating Tensions:

In what ways did the pandemic exacerbate existing tensions between the two countries?
What role did leadership rhetoric/actions play in elevating tensions?

Impact on Specific Issues:

How has COVID-19 affected long-standing disagreements like trade or Taiwan?
What are the implications for global health institutions and cooperation?

Opportunities for Cooperation:

What opportunities emerged for China and US to work together amid the crisis?
What obstacles hindered cooperation and what factors could foster it?

Longer Term Implications:

How has the pandemic reshaped strategic competition between China and US?
In your view, what areas require rebuilding of trust moving forward?

Conclusion:

I'd want to thank you for participating in this interview. If further information about you is needed for this project, are you open to being contacted again? Yes/No

I appreciate your time and helpful input.

APPENDIX 2:

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SCHOLARS/LECTURERS

TOPIC: COVID-19 as a Source of Geopolitical Tension: The Case of China and the U.S.

My name is Talent Chimutambgi student Number B223572B. I am studying at the Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) for a Master of Science in International Relations. As part of the requirements for the program, I am carrying out a research study titled, **Covid-19 as a source of geopolitical tension: The case of China and USA.**

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I want to emphasise that all the data acquired here will be used exclusively for research purposes and will be treated as such. High standards of privacy shall be upheld. You have the right to leave the interview whenever you want, for any reason. Respondents will not be offered any type of payment or reward; therefore, participation is entirely optional. In order to make sure I don't miss any crucial details; I will be recording the interview with your consent.

Contact Details:

Email:

Project Supervisor: Dr. Pastor Ronald Chipaike

Email:

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
SCHOLARS/LECTURERS**

(For Researchers' use only)

- i. Interview No.
- ii. Date of Completion.....
- iii. Time taken to complete interview.....

Demographic Questions

- Age:.....
- Gender:.....
- Education level:.....
- Number of years in business:.....

Background Information:

- Please provide your area of expertise/research focus
- In what capacity have you observed China-US relations?

Pandemic's Initial Impact:

- What were the initial geopolitical implications of the COVID-19 outbreak?
- How did leadership responses in China and the US shape bilateral tensions?

Competition in Specific Domains:

- In what key issue areas like trade or technology did tensions escalate?
- How has vaccine diplomacy impacted great power jostling?

Longer Term Strategic Implications:

- How has the pandemic altered dynamics of great power competition?
- What opportunities for cooperation have emerged despite tensions?

Institutional Reforms:

- What does COVID-19 exposed about gaps in global governance systems?
- How can institutions be reformed to better handle future pandemics?

Future of China-US Relations:

- In your view, what are some key takeaways from the bilateral response?
- How do you see the relationship evolving in the coming years?

Conclusion:

I'd want to thank you for participating in this interview. If further information about you is needed for this project, are you open to being contacted again? Yes/No

I appreciate your time and helpful input.

APPENDIX 3:

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS JOURNALISTS

TOPIC: COVID-19 as a Source of Geopolitical Tension: The Case of China and the U.S.

My name is Talent Chimutambgi student Number B223572B. I am studying at the Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) for a Master of Science in International Relations. As part of the requirements for the program, I am carrying out a research study titled, **Covid-19 as a source of geopolitical tension: The case of China and USA.**

I would want to ask you a few questions on the Covid-19 as a source of geopolitical tension, focusing on the case of China and the USA, so that I can better understand the complexities and intricacies involved.

I want to emphasise that all the data acquired here will be used exclusively for research purposes and will be treated as such. High standards of privacy shall be upheld. You have the right to leave the interview whenever you want, for any reason. Respondents will not be offered any type of payment or reward; therefore, participation is entirely optional. In order to make sure I don't miss any crucial details; I will be recording the interview with your consent.

Contact Details:

Email:

Project Supervisor: Dr. Pastor Ronald Chipaike

Email:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS JOURNALISTS

(For Researchers' use only)

- i. Interview No.
- ii. Date of Completion.....
- iii. Time taken to complete interview.....

Demographic Questions

- Age:.....
- Gender:.....
- Education level:.....
- Number of years in business:.....

Background Information:

- Please tell me about your professional background and experience as an IR journalist
- Which news organisation(s) have you worked for?
- What geographic regions and topics do you typically cover?

Initial Response to COVID-19:

- Based on your reporting, what was China's initial response to the outbreak like?
- How transparent was the Chinese government in sharing information?
- How did the U.S. respond initially to the situation in China?

Escalating Tensions:

- When did you start observing heightened tensions emerging between China and the U.S.?
- What major issues contributed to the souring of relations according to your observations?

Impact on Narratives:

- How did each country's official narrative around COVID-19 origins and responses evolve?
- What role did domestic political considerations play in these narratives?

Policy Approaches:

- How would you characterize the policy approaches of Trump vs Biden towards China during COVID-19?
- What factors influenced their respective stances?

Global Consequences:

- In your view, what have been the wider effects of these tensions on areas like international cooperation, global health governance, and economic stability?

Way Forward:

- Based on your analysis, what opportunities exist to improve China-U.S. relations post-COVID?
- What recommendations would you make to policymakers regarding this relationship?

Conclusion:

I'd want to thank you for participating in this interview. If further information about you is needed for this project, are you open to being contacted again? Yes/No

I appreciate your time and helpful input.