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NEO-CONTAINMENT

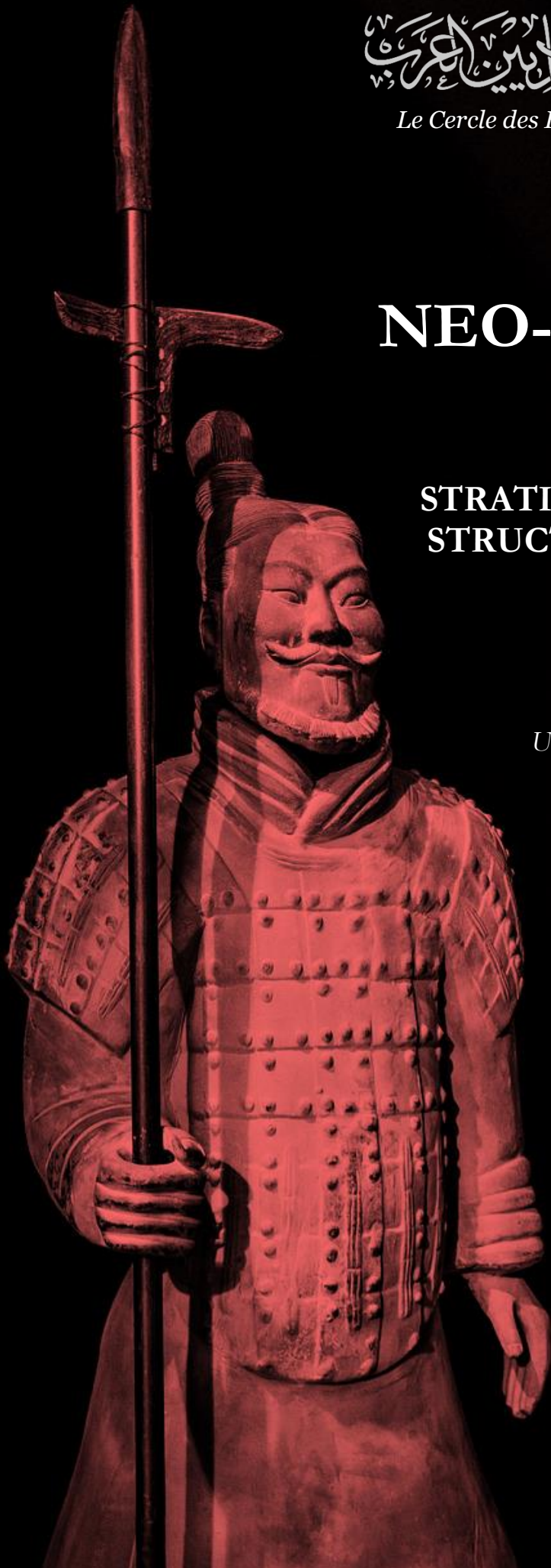
STRATIFIED COMPETITION UNDER STRUCTURAL INTERDEPENDENCE

*Understanding the Architecture of International Relations
through the United States-China Rivalry
and the Fate of American Hegemony*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for a renewed understanding, or rather a distinct form of containment, here termed **neo-containment**, where in a single integrated system governed by a reticular order, competition is structurally stratified, waged across multiple domains at differing intensities, by every instrument short of conventional warfare. Against the prevailing ‘new Cold War’ analogy, this article explains that the strategy the United States now pursues toward China is **neo-containment**, and that its form is explained by two structural variables: **the degree of economic interdependence between hegemon and challenger, and the distribution of network centrality between them**. Where the challenger is a central node of a reticular world economy, containment by isolation is structurally foreclosed and the hegemon is driven toward selective constraint across domains. The article traces this strategy to George Kennan’s 1948 doctrine of *political warfare* rather than to the militarized containment of NSC 68, a lineage that French strategic thought and the Chinese theory of *unrestricted warfare* have kept more clearly in view than Anglophone scholarship. It then specifies the form of competition that neo-containment produces, **Stratified Competition under Structural Interdependence (SCSI)**, in which rivalry proceeds at different intensities across functional domains at once and is governed by the **Dual Chokepoint Dilemma**: when each side controls indispensable but distinct chokepoints, neither can use its weapon in full without prohibitive self-harm, so escalation ends in negotiated suspension rather than rupture. Methodologically, the article combines a structured, focused comparison across time and targets with tests of five hypotheses against the record of 2023-2026, chiefly the semiconductor and rare-earth export-control cycle and its serial suspension, and the Iran war and its extension to the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb. The evidence supports the theory and locates its boundary: the mechanism disciplines the relationship between the two hubs, not the conduct of states already excluded from the networks it governs, and it operates through the choices of ruling elites. The binding constraint on American primacy lies less in Chinese power than in the domestic sustainability of the containment effort itself.

Keywords: neo-containment; political warfare; reticular world; structural interdependence; weaponized interdependence; network centrality; dual chokepoint dilemma; stratified competition; United States-China rivalry; American hegemony.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE TYRANNY OF THE FAMILIAR ANALOGY

When an established power confronts a rising one, statesmen and scholars reach for the nearest precedent. For the rivalry between Washington and Beijing that precedent is the Cold War, and the strategy it summons is containment. The vocabulary has become common currency: a ‘new Cold War’, a ‘second Cold War’, a ‘new containment’ of China and its partners.^[1] The analogy persuades because it is familiar. It supplies a ready grammar of blocs and balances, of patient pressure and eventual victory, and it recalls a contest the West remembers winning. That memory is selective on two counts. The historiography of the Soviet collapse now attributes it first to internal causes, which the West then turned to its advantage, from German unification on Bonn’s terms in 1990 to the Gulf War of 1990-1991, rather than to containment itself.^[2] And outside Europe, above all in the postcolonial Middle East, the binary view of the orthodox historiography, now surpassed, rarely held: alignment was seldom clear-cut, and most regional states bargained between the blocs for their own ends.^[3]

This article contends that the analogy misleads, and that the error carries consequences for theory and for statecraft alike. The Cold War opposed two military and ideologically separate worlds, whose economies, though never sealed from each other, were structurally far less entangled than today’s.^[4] The present rivalry unfolds within a single, densely integrated one: a *reticular world*, in which power concentrates at the nodes where flows of goods, capital, data and energy converge, and in which every connection is at once a benefit and a potential weapon. Globalization has not receded in such a world; it is being rearticulated along strategic and security lines, with trade and investment between geopolitical blocs declining relative to flows within them since 2022.^[5] The Soviet Union was a military colossus and an economic cul-de-sac, enclosed behind a curtain largely of its own making. China is the workshop of the world, the indispensable processor of its critical minerals and a leading trading partner of most economies, including those that fear its rise. To contain such a power as Kennan’s generation contained the Soviet Union would be to wound the coalition that attempted it.

The most influential recent correction to the analogy comes from Schindler and seventeen co-authors, who argue that the United States and China no longer compete to incorporate territory into rival blocs but compete for centrality in four interrelated networks (infrastructure, digital, production and finance), and that this mode of competition makes conclusive victory unlikely while most states remain integrated with both.^[6] The insight is indispensable, yet incomplete. It maps the field of competition without theorizing the strategy a hegemon adopts within it, the intensity at which that strategy is waged in each network, or the equilibrium that results when both sides hold chokepoints. It was also written before the export-control cycle of 2025 and the Middle Eastern war of 2023-2026 put its claims to their first severe test.

This article addresses these gaps with a theory of neo-containment. Its central proposition is that the form a hegemon’s strategy of constraint takes depends on two structural variables: the degree of its economic interdependence with the challenger, and the distribution of network centrality between them. When the challenger is central to the world economy, classical containment is foreclosed, and the hegemon is driven toward selective constraint across domains, a strategy that accepts permanent rivalry and continued integration as its operating environment. Three claims follow. Genealogically, neo-containment descends from the doctrine of political warfare that Kennan formulated in 1948 rather than from the militarized containment of NSC 68. Structurally, it produces a competition segmented across functional domains and graded in intensity within each, which the article formalizes as Stratified Competition under Structural Interdependence (SCSI). Dynamically, it is governed by a mechanism, the Dual Chokepoint Dilemma, which inclines the rivalry toward reciprocal escalation punctuated by negotiated suspension. The record of 2023-2026 supports each claim and also marks its limit: the mechanism disciplines the rivalry between hubs, but not the conduct of states already excluded from the networks it governs.

Section II shows why classical containment is foreclosed and recovers the lineage of the strategy that replaced it. Section III sets out the theory, its place among existing traditions, the stratified competition it produces and the mechanism that governs it. Section IV derives five hypotheses, states the research design and identifies the rival explanations the evidence must overcome. Section V tests the hypotheses against the record of 2023-2026, Section VI draws the implications for American hegemony, and Section VII concludes.

II. FROM CONTAINMENT TO NEO-CONTAINMENT

To establish neo-containment as a distinct category requires, on the one hand, recovering a strand of containment's origins that its later militarization buried, and on the other hand, demonstrating that the structural conditions on which classical containment rested are absent in the case of China.

2.1 Kennan's Forgotten Doctrine: Political Warfare

Kennan's 'Long Telegram' of February 1946 and his 'X Article' of July 1947 supplied containment's intellectual architecture. He described Soviet political action as a fluid stream that would fill every space open to it yet accommodate itself to unassailable barriers, and he prescribed the patient application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points.^[7] In this first conception containment was principally a political and economic enterprise. As Leffler shows, its early architects, lacking the means to hold every line, gave priority to the economic reconstruction of Western Europe, West Germany and Japan over rearmament, and sought to weaken the communist parties of France and Italy through recovery rather than force.^[8] Gaddis would later call this the asymmetrical variant of containment, a response applied at points and by means of one's own choosing, in contrast to the symmetrical variant, which meets every challenge where it arises.^[9]

A memorandum of Kennan's Policy Planning Staff, dated 4 May 1948, made the political character of the contest explicit.^[10] It defined political warfare, 'in broadest definition', as 'the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives', and it listed overt instruments, such as political alliances, economic measures and 'white' propaganda, alongside covert ones, from clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements to 'black' psychological warfare and the encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states. The memorandum describes a continuous contest, waged below the threshold of armed conflict, that integrates the economic, the informational, the diplomatic and the clandestine. It is the true ancestor of neo-containment.

Political warfare receded from memory because containment was militarized. After the Soviet atomic test of August 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War, NSC 68, drafted under Paul Nitze and completed in April 1950, described containment as 'a policy of calculated and gradual coercion' which, without superior military strength, would be 'no more than a policy of bluff'.^[11] The Truman administration nearly tripled defense spending as a share of national output, from 5 percent of gross domestic product in 1950 to 14.2 percent in 1953. Forward deployment and nuclear deterrence overlaid Kennan's political and economic conception, and it is this militarized memory that the 'new Cold War' analogy now summons. For the present contest it is the wrong ancestor.

The concept survived elsewhere. In France, Raphaël Chauvancy has argued that the most faithful rendering of contemporary political warfare is *la guerre par le milieu social*, war waged through the social milieu, a formulation that recalls the study of 'war in the social milieu' that Colonel Jean Némó initiated in the late 1950s after the defeat in Indochina.^[12] The Chinese tradition reached a homologous conclusion from the opposite direction. In *Unrestricted Warfare* (1999), the People's Liberation Army colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui argued that the boundary between war and non-war was dissolving and that conflict would henceforth extend into the financial, commercial, legal, technological and informational domains, a condition Western analysts have since rediscovered as the 'weaponisation of everything'.^[13] That a French doctrinal tradition, a Chinese strategic treatise and American network theory should converge, independently, on the same description of contemporary conflict is strong evidence that the category corresponds to something real.

2.2 Why Classical Containment Is Outdated

Classical containment, in its political, economic and militarized forms alike, rested on three structural preconditions. No one condition is applicable in the case of China, and the difference is one of nature rather than degree.

The first was economic separability. The Soviet Union ran a largely closed and autarkic economy, but traded with the capitalist world far more than the analogy remembers. Those exchanges remained peripheral to its economy. Thus, the Soviet Union could be isolated because it had already isolated itself. China is the central node of global manufacturing and the dominant processor of the critical minerals on which advanced industry and defense depend. It accounts for roughly 70 percent of rare-earth mining, 90 percent of separation and processing and 93 percent of magnet manufacturing, shares that became strategic facts in 2025, when its export controls produced shortages across Western defense, semiconductor, automotive and clean-energy supply chains.^[14] In January 2026 Beijing turned the same instrument against a treaty ally of the hegemon, prohibiting exports of dual-use items to Japanese military end-users and end-uses, in a market that still draws some 60 percent of its rare-earth imports from China.^[15] To isolate China would be to sever one's own arteries.

The second was technological separability at tolerable cost. Western export controls against the Soviet bloc, coordinated through CoCom, were contested among the allies but cost them comparatively little, because the two economies were already largely disjoint.^[16] Semiconductor supply chains are now so intertwined that the United States can deny China the most advanced computing nodes only by constraining the revenues of its own and its allies' firms, while China can retaliate through mineral controls that raise the cost of the very weapons meant to balance it.^[17] Interdependence has become the medium of coercion rather than its solvent.

The third was a fracture within the adversary camp. The Sino-Soviet split furnished one, and the triangular diplomacy of 1971-1972 exploited it to draw China away from the Soviet Union.^[18] No analogue exists today. The Sino-Russian alignment is asymmetric, with Russia increasingly the junior partner, but Western sanctions have deepened it: in July 2026 a joint Sino-Russian flotilla appears to have circumnavigated Japan, and renewed American mediation on Ukraine has produced no Russian concession on territory.^[19] The memory of triangulation nonetheless invites a 'reverse Kissinger', in which Washington would court Moscow to isolate Beijing, or would cast India as the 'new China' of a triangle directed against it. Fernández Aparicio rightly judges the first a strategic illusion.^[20] A maneuver that exploited a pre-existing rupture cannot be repeated where no rupture exists, and Section V shows that the Indian variant fares no better.

III. A THEORY OF NEO-CONTAINMENT

3.1 The Proposition and Its Variables

The theory is structural. It holds that the form of a hegemon's strategy of constraint is determined chiefly by two conditions of the rivalry, and only secondarily by the preferences of particular administrations or the temperament of particular leaders:

*The greater the **economic interdependence between hegemon and challenger**, and the more evenly distributed the **control of critical network nodes** between them, the less a hegemon can pursue **containment-as-isolation**, and the more it is driven toward **containment-as-selective-constraint**: a strategy that competes for the commanding heights of networks rather than for the partition of territory, and that accepts permanent rivalry and continued integration as its operating environment instead of seeking the rival's systemic collapse.*

The first independent variable, **structural interdependence**, is the degree to which the economies of hegemon and challenger, and of the hegemon's essential partners, are embedded in shared chains of production, finance and supply, such that isolating the rival would impose grave costs on the isolating coalition itself. The second, the **distribution of network centrality**, is the extent to which each side controls indispensable nodes in the networks through which economic and military power flow: semiconductor design and lithography, rare-earth refining, financial clearing and settlement, maritime corridors and subsea cables. The dependent variable is the **form of constraint**, arrayed on a continuum from classical containment (comprehensive isolation aimed at the rival's systemic collapse), through neo-containment (selective, multi-domain constraint under continued integration), to accommodation (integration without strategic competition). Deterrence by denial, weaponized interdependence, alternative connectivity architectures and minilateral coalitions are the instruments through which the chosen form is executed. The proposition carries a corollary: where interdependence with a target is low and the hegemon's centrality dominant, nothing restrains it from the classical instruments of isolation and force. Neo-containment is a strategy for central challengers, not a general disposition of the hegemon.

3.2 Theoretical Location: Realism, Power Transition, Interdependence and Networks

Neo-containment stands at the intersection of several research traditions, each necessary and none sufficient. Structural realism explains why the United States balances. In Waltz's account anarchy compels great powers to attend to the distribution of capabilities, and Mearsheimer's offensive variant predicts that a regional hegemon will act to prevent the emergence of a peer in another region.^[21] The Quad, AUKUS and expanded American access to Philippine bases are instances of external balancing. Realism, however, presumes a separability of the military and economic domains that this rivalry does not honor. A state cannot simply balance against a rival that refines the rare earths in its own missiles' guidance systems. Realism explains why Washington balances; it cannot explain how Washington can do so without disarming itself economically.

Power-transition theory, from Organski through Gilpin to Allison, adds the temporal dimension: the risk of systemic war rises as a dissatisfied challenger approaches parity. Allison found that twelve of the sixteen transitions he surveyed across five centuries ended in war.^[22] He also attributes the absence of war between the United States and the Soviet Union in part to nuclear weapons, and the reason is structural. Mutual nuclear vulnerability produces what Glenn Snyder identified, and Robert Jervis later developed, as the stability-instability paradox: stability at the level of general war, purchased at the price of greater latitude for competition and limited aggression beneath it.^[23] Neo-containment is the strategic doctrine that corresponds to this paradox. Because the system-deciding war is foreclosed, the Thucydidean contest does not disappear; it is transposed downward and outward, into economic, technological, informational and logistical domains where it can be waged below the nuclear threshold. The trap is not sprung. It is relocated. Two qualifications sharpen the point. The operative threshold is regional, namely whether China can exclude American primacy from the western Pacific, and it is around Taiwan that the paradox bites hardest.^[24] And a challenger whose growth has slowed, to 4.3 percent in the second quarter of 2026 against an official target of 4.5 to 5 percent,^[25] may come to fear that its window is narrowing, a condition that Brands and Beckley associate with a higher, not a lower, propensity to take risks.^[26]

The interdependence tradition explains why the coercion is selective and why it can be reciprocal. Hirschman showed in 1945 that asymmetric trade dependence is itself a source of power, because the state that can more easily forgo an exchange can hold its partner hostage to it.^[27] Keohane and Nye distinguished the sensitivity of an economy to external shocks from its vulnerability, the cost it would still bear after adjusting its policies, and located power in asymmetries of vulnerability.^[28] Copeland argued that interdependence restrains conflict while leaders expect trade to continue and inflames it when they expect to be cut off.^[29] Network theory supplies the terrain on which these insights now operate. Farrell and Newman showed that the networks of the global economy are hub-and-spoke structures, and that states sitting astride the hubs can convert position into coercion through a ‘panopticon effect’ of surveillance and a ‘chokepoint effect’ of denial.^[30] Schindler and colleagues generalize the insight into a competition for centrality across networks.

What this literature has not yet theorized is reciprocity at the hubs. The United States holds the semiconductor design-and-lithography chokepoint, financial settlement and the instruments of the entity list; China holds rare-earth refining, and its controls of October 2025 claimed, for the first time, jurisdiction over goods made abroad that contain as little as 0.1 percent of Chinese-origin rare-earth content by value.^[31] Neither hub dominates comprehensively; each holds a blade to a different artery of the other. In Keohane and Nye’s terms the vulnerability is mutual but differently located; in Hirschman’s, each side can hold the other hostage in a different market. Network theory explains how one hub weaponizes interdependence. It has no account of the equilibrium produced when two hubs can do so at once, and this is the gap the Dual Chokepoint Dilemma is intended to fill.

A structural theory must nonetheless show how structure reaches decision, and here the article follows the evolution of structuralism toward the integration of agency. Hinnebusch’s complex realism, built for the Middle East, joins realism and structuralism to historical sociology and foreign-policy analysis: systemic pressures are filtered through state formation and contested identities, and how a state responds to them depends on its leadership and policy process. Neoclassical realism likewise treats leaders’ perceptions, domestic coalitions and strategic culture as the variables that translate systemic stimuli into policy.^[32] Neoclassical accounts of hedging show how the same structural pressure produces different strategies, at several levels, according to these domestic filters.^[33] In this article the two structural variables define the menu of feasible strategies; the ruling elites of Washington, Beijing and the states between them choose within it and, according to their histories, political memories and institutions, construct the statecraft that executes the choice. Agency is therefore treated as the channel through which structure operates, not as its rival.

3.3 The Form of the Competition: Stratification

Neo-containment produces a competition that this article formalizes as *Stratified Competition under Structural Interdependence* (SCSI), with four properties.

The first is **horizontal segmentation**: competition proceeds across functionally distinct domains, each with its own logic, threshold and grammar. The military-deterrence domain runs on the security dilemma; its threshold is the first island chain, and its grammar is denial, the imposition of prohibitive cost on an adversary’s power projection rather than the seizure of territory.^[34] The geoeconomic-network domain runs on weaponized interdependence; its threshold is critical supply dependency, and its grammar is calibrated denial, the licensing-based throttling of flows to an adversary’s defense and high-technology sectors while commercial flows continue. China’s rare-earth licensing regime, which approves civilian uses while withholding those tied to defense, is the paradigmatic instrument; American entity-listing and foreign-affiliate rules are its mirror image. The technological-standard domain runs on innovation capture; its threshold is the advanced-node frontier written into both sides’ control lists, and its grammar is targeted blockade at that frontier. The normative-institutional domain runs on standards and legitimacy; its threshold is a critical mass of adoption, and its grammar is embedding, the creation of switching costs through the early diffusion of one’s own specifications, rules and diplomatic architectures.

The second property, and the most significant refinement of the network literature, is **vertical gradation**. On 23 June 2021, General Thierry Burkhard, then Chief of Staff of the French Army and a month from becoming Chief of the Defence Staff, told the defense committee of the National Assembly that the linear continuum of peace, crisis and war no longer corresponded to the reality of conflict, and proposed in its place three states:

competition, contestation and confrontation (*compétition, contestation, affrontement*). Unlike the old continuum, he observed, the actors remain the same when the state changes.^[35] The triptych has since become a reference point of French strategic thought.^[36] Competition is the normal condition of international life, in which influence and position are contested without open hostility; contestation is the deliberate challenge to an adversary's position by means that remain below the threshold of open war; confrontation is the engagement of force. SCSi adopts the triptych as its vertical axis, as an analytical device rather than a law. It is an officer's doctrine, formulated as the French army turned from counter-insurgency in the Sahel toward preparation for high-intensity war, and it takes the state as the principal unit and foreign policy as the principal instrument; firms, militias, diasporas and publics also move contests along the gradient, and where they stand depends on each society's history and lines of conflict. The United States and China can be in guarded competition in the normative domain, active contestation in the geoeconomic domain and near-confrontation in the military domain around Taiwan, all at the same moment. The strategic art lies in managing the gradient within each domain, pressing competition to advantage while preventing contestation from tipping into confrontation. Burkhard's own formula, which became the motto of his strategic vision as Chief of the Defence Staff, is to win the war before the war.

The third property is that ***interdependence acts as constraint and as weapon at once***. As constraint, enmeshment forecloses comprehensive decoupling, so the architecture of constraint must be selective, concentrated on the narrow set of nodes where advantage is most asymmetrically distributed. As weapon, the same enmeshment furnishes the chokepoints through which each side coerces the other. Interdependence is no longer the antithesis of conflict that the liberal tradition supposed. It has become its terrain.

The fourth property is ***gray-zone hybridization***: the sharpest competition occurs at the interfaces between domains, where ambiguity permits effects that no single-domain response can counter. Rare-earth controls sit between the geoeconomic and the military domains: formally trade policy, they degrade military capability without crossing a conventional threshold. Missile and drone attacks on shipping by an Iranian-enabled non-state actor sit at the same interface in the opposite direction: military means, used at the intensity of confrontation yet attributable to no state, whose effects are geoeconomic. The gray zone is where SCSi is most dangerous, because the boundaries between competition, contestation and confrontation blur there, and miscalculation is most likely to carry the contest upward against the intentions of both parties.

3.4 The Governing Mechanism: The Dual Chokepoint Dilemma

From the conjunction of distributed network centrality and structural interdependence the theory derives the mechanism that governs the dynamics of the whole.

The Dual Chokepoint Dilemma: in a system of structural interdependence in which both the hegemon and the challenger control indispensable but distinct network chokepoints, neither can fully deploy its chokepoint weapon without inflicting upon itself, and upon the partners whose support sustains its competitive posture, costs that exceed the strategic benefit secured against the adversary. The system is therefore structurally biased toward managed and reciprocal escalation punctuated by negotiated suspension, resolving neither into accommodation nor into comprehensive rupture.

The dilemma accounts for the otherwise puzzling rhythm of the rivalry, a cycle of escalation and suspension that yields neither settlement nor decisive breach, and it produces SCSi's defining condition, a permanently unstable competitive equilibrium. It differs from nuclear deterrence in one essential respect. The weapons it restrains are used continually, in calibrated doses; what it forecloses is their full deployment, not their use. It also carries a scope condition. The dilemma binds in proportion to enmeshment. A chokepoint held by an actor already disconnected from the system it constrains carries no comparable self-cost, so that full deployment becomes rational for that actor. The gray zone is accordingly populated by disconnected chokepoint-holders whose actions follow their own purposes, regime survival first among them, as Iran's did when it struck at the hegemon's network as a whole, yet by effect often serve the challenger more than the hegemon. The scope condition thereby opens the theory to the agency of non-great powers, which can set the tempo of the rivalry from outside its core.

IV. HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Five hypotheses follow from the theory, each tied to an established research tradition.

H1 - Selective Constraint. As the challenger is economically central, the hegemon will target narrowly defined strategic nodes and forgo comprehensive decoupling. *Grounded in structural realism and network theory; disconfirming evidence would be a sustained, economy-wide Western embargo of China comparable to the Cold War isolation of the Soviet Union.*

H2 - The Dual Chokepoint Dilemma. Where both sides control critical nodes, rounds of mutual weaponization will end in negotiated, reciprocal de-escalation rather than full deployment, because the costs of comprehensive use exceed the strategic gain. *Grounded in interdependence theory and the logic of mutual vulnerability; disconfirming evidence would be either side durably severing the other's access to a critical node it controls and absorbing the blowback.*

H3 - Stratification. Competition will proceed simultaneously at different intensities across functionally distinct domains, instead of escalating or de-escalating along a single linear continuum. *Grounded in the French doctrine of competition, contestation and confrontation and in the literature on hybrid conflict; disconfirming evidence would be uniform intensity across all domains, or strictly sequential escalation.*

H4 - The Limits of Coalition. A rising power with a doctrine of strategic autonomy, India being the case at issue, will decline incorporation into the hegemon's coalition even under a shared threat from the challenger, and will hedge rather than align. *Grounded in the literature on strategic autonomy and on hedging,^[33] and in Tellis's critique of the American wager on India; disconfirming evidence would be India's entry into a binding anti-China alliance or its abandonment of multi-alignment.*

H5 - Hegemonic Trajectory. American primacy will erode, if it erodes, through institutional disaggregation, not military defeat, which the nuclear ceiling forecloses, and the binding constraint will be the domestic political sustainability of the containment effort over a multi-decade horizon. *Grounded in hegemonic-stability and power-transition theory; disconfirming evidence would be a decisive military resolution, or the indefinite, low-friction persistence of unipolar institutional dominance.*

The present article lays out comparison along two axes. Across time, it sets the Cold War case against the present one to isolate the effect of the independent variables, as Section II has done for the preconditions of containment. Across targets, it exploits variation within the present period: the theory predicts neo-containment where interdependence and shared centrality are high, as with China, and the classical instruments of isolation and force where they are low. The years 2023-2026 serve as the test because they placed the theory's premises under maximum stress. The period opened in the shadow of 2022, when the immobilization of Russian central-bank reserves, the exclusion of Russian banks from financial messaging and the weaponization of energy demonstrated, at great-power scale, that interdependence had become an instrument of coercion. It then produced, in quick succession, the most severe export-control escalation yet seen between the two hubs and a regional war that climbed from Gaza to the Strait of Hormuz. The evidence is drawn from official documents, legislative records and specialist and press reporting, current to 7 October 2026.

Two differing explanations ought to be confronted equally. The first explanation is agential: the cycle of escalation and truce reflects the transactional temperament of a particular president, not a structural constraint. The comparison across targets is designed to meet this objection, because the same administration, in the same months, negotiated truces with China while making war on Iran and seizing the head of state of Venezuela. Variation in instruments under a constant leadership is what an agential account cannot explain and a structural one predicts, and the selective character of American constraint predates the present administration. Agency is not thereby dismissed: on the reading set out in Section III, leaders choose within the menu that structure defines, and what they cannot produce is variation in the menu itself. The second explanation is Copeland's theory of trade expectations, which would read the truces as the product of optimism about future commerce. The two accounts make different predictions. Copeland's expects restraint to track the outlook for trade; the Dual Chokepoint Dilemma expects it to track the reciprocal capacity to inflict harm, and so predicts suspensions that are brief, renewable and silent on the underlying grievances, with the weapons themselves held in reserve.

V. THE THEORY TESTED, 2023-2026

5.1 The Core Dyad: The Export-Control Cycle and Its Serial Suspension

The clearest test of H1 and H2 is the export-control escalation of 2025. On 29 September 2025 Washington extended its entity-list restrictions to any firm owned 50 percent or more by listed entities.^[37] Ten days later Beijing issued a package of Ministry of Commerce announcements, widely read as its reply, that constituted the most comprehensive rare-earth controls it had yet imposed. Announcement No. 57 added holmium, erbium, thulium, europium and ytterbium to the seven medium and heavy rare earths restricted since April, and Announcement No. 61 asserted jurisdiction over foreign-made goods at the 0.1 percent threshold while signaling that licenses for military end-users would in principle be refused.^[31] Western defense and semiconductor supply chains registered acute vulnerability.^[14]

The resolution matters as much as the escalation. At Busan on 30 October 2025, in the first face-to-face meeting between Xi and Trump in six years, convened after Trump had threatened an additional 100 percent tariff, the two sides agreed reciprocal suspensions for one year. China suspended its October measures until 10 November 2026; the United States suspended the affiliates rule and its Section 301 measures against Chinese shipbuilding and maritime logistics for the same period, and halved the tariff it had imposed in the name of fentanyl, from 20 to 10 percent. The April licensing regime, conspicuously, remained in force.^[38] Neither side deployed its weapon in full, each recognized that comprehensive use would inflict intolerable self-harm, and the result was a negotiated, reciprocal and explicitly temporary de-escalation that left the instruments themselves intact. This is the equilibrium the Dual Chokepoint Dilemma predicts, and it corroborates H2. It also discriminates between the rival accounts: the arrangement held out no expectation of trade beyond a single year, and both parties kept their weapons in reserve.

The suspension has since survived, but on a shortening leash. Trump's state visit to Beijing in mid-May 2026, postponed in March because of the war on Iran, produced agreement on a Board of Trade and a Board of Investment and Chinese commitments on aircraft and agricultural purchases whose scale the two governments described differently, but no extension of the truce and no movement on Taiwan; Washington thereafter deferred a 14 billion dollar arms package for Taipei. Xi's state visit to Washington of 23 to 25 September 2026, the first by a Chinese leader since 2015, extended the truce by only two months, to 10 January 2027, well short of the longer extension Beijing had reportedly sought, and produced an agreement to open a bilateral dialogue on artificial intelligence. China's published summary of the outcomes did not mention rare earths, and the arms package remained frozen.^[39] The suspension holds, but as a lever of short duration, priced and renewed by both sides.

The same record corroborates H1. The United States did not pursue comprehensive decoupling, and could not have done so. Its strategy remained recognizably the 'small yard, high fence' that Jake Sullivan, national security adviser in the previous administration, had defined in 2023: intense restriction at the technological frontier and continued commerce elsewhere.^[40] Washington also borrowed the instruments of the state it sought to constrain. In 2025 the Department of Defense became the largest shareholder of the rare-earth producer MP Materials, and the federal government took a stake of nearly 10 percent in Intel.^[41] Selective constraint at targeted nodes, under continued integration and with a growing admixture of state capitalism, is what the theory predicts for a central challenger.

The dyad also displays the stratification that H3 predicts. Trade flowed on regardless: China posted a record trade surplus of about 1.19 trillion dollars for 2025, and on 1 November 2025, at the APEC summit in Gyeongju, Xi proposed a World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization, a bid for standard-setting leadership in the domain where the technological contest is sharpest. The military domain moved the other way. In early December 2025 China deployed more than a hundred vessels across East Asian waters, from the Yellow Sea to the South China Sea; in June 2026 Beijing sanctioned the Philippine defense secretary, Gilberto Teodoro; and during Balikatan 2026 Japanese ground forces, deployed in a combat role on Philippine soil for the first time since 1945, fired Type 88 anti-ship missiles from northern Luzon.^[42] De-escalation in one stratum implied nothing about the others.

5.2 One War Across the Domains: The Middle East, 2023-2026

The Middle Eastern war that began on 7 October 2023 is the most consequential test of H3, because a single conflict climbed the domains of the framework while operating at different intensities within them. Its onset was itself a demonstration of stratification. On 9 September 2023, at the New Delhi summit of the G20, the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, Italy and the European Union signed a memorandum on the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), presented as a flagship of the Western response to the Belt and Road.^[43] Twenty-eight days later the Hamas attack on Israel ignited a war that rendered the corridor's Mediterranean hinge untenable. The normative domain had advanced while the military domain ruptured, and the one had not waited upon the other.

From late 2023 the war entered the geoeconomic domain. The Houthi movement, an Iranian-enabled non-state actor in Yemen, attacked shipping in the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb; within two months transits of the Suez Canal had fallen by 42 percent and weekly container-ship transits by two-thirds year on year, as carriers diverted around the Cape of Good Hope.^[44] The campaign was gray-zone hybridization in its purest form: sub-threshold action, attributable to no state, producing confrontation-level economic effects on a global chokepoint without interstate war. A year before the rare-earth crisis made the same point in industry, it showed that in a reticular economy the decisive lever is control over the flow through a strait more than possession of territory.

The war reached the military domain with the twelve-day Israeli-Iranian war of June 2025 and the United States-Israeli operations that began on 28 February 2026. From then on the domains ran at three intensities at once. In the military-deterrence domain the contest reached confrontation: the destruction of nuclear and military infrastructure and the killing of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and much of the senior command. In the geoeconomic-network domain it moved within a month from contestation to effective closure: on 27 March the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps declared that vessels bound to or from the ports of the United States, Israel and their allies would be barred from the Strait of Hormuz.^[45] In the normative-institutional domain it moved most slowly but cut deepest. Iran had suspended cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency under a law enacted in July 2025, and the United Nations sanctions reimposed at the end of September 2025, under the snapback procedure triggered by Britain, France and Germany, remained in force.^[46] A non-proliferation regime already weakened by the American withdrawal from the nuclear accord in 2018 was structurally compromised by the physical destruction of the facilities it had been built to monitor. American military superiority was never in doubt. What Iran could contest was the price that the world economy, and through it the domestic politics of every energy-importing democracy, would pay for that superiority.

The normative domain continued to advance while the others burned. The Abraham Accords, an American-sponsored normative and institutional architecture, expanded during the war. Their declaration and the bilateral agreements concluded under it, of which the treaty between the United Arab Emirates and Israel is the fullest, establish diplomatic relations and cooperation in trade, investment, aviation, technology and tourism without the prior Palestinian statehood that the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 had made the condition of recognition. Kazakhstan announced its accession in November 2025, and Somaliland declared its intention to join in December, after Israel became the first state to recognize it.^[47] On 30 July 2026 the Board of Peace for Gaza announced an agreement on the complete disarmament of Hamas, phased against Israeli withdrawal and the deployment of an International Stabilization Force, although implementation has been slow and troop contributions minimal.^[48] H3 holds. Stratification, however, does not mean insulation: the war propagated across domains through their interfaces, and the corridor examined next shows what that propagation does to the constructive instruments of neo-containment.

5.3 The Constructive Arm: IMEC and the Limits of the Peace Premium

Neo-containment has a constructive arm as well as a restrictive one: alternative connectivity architectures intended to compete with the Belt and Road. IMEC was its flagship, and it rested on what may be called a peace premium. By binding India, the Gulf, Jordan, Israel and Europe into a single high-trust artery, the corridor would convert regional stability into a commercial asset and create a constituency of economic actors invested in preventing the conflicts that would interrupt it. Its diplomatic foundation was the Abraham Accords, of which it was in effect the economic superstructure. The record has not been kind to the mechanism. Three years after

the announcement, its most concrete steps concern the India-UAE leg, where a digital platform for exchanging vessel and cargo data, and trial runs between Kandla, Mundra and Nhava Sheva and the ports of Jebel Ali, Fujairah and Abu Dhabi, were in preparation from 2024.^[49] The overland link through Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel to the Mediterranean, on which the corridor's strategic value depends, remains hostage to the war.

Three structural vulnerabilities explain the stall. The first is a problem of sequencing close to circularity: the peace premium presumes that the constituency for stability consolidates before the instability it is meant to prevent, yet in volatile regions instability arrives first. The keystone, a Saudi-Israeli normalization that both governments had publicly described as advancing in the weeks before 7 October 2023, was frozen on the Palestinian question before the arch could bear weight. The design compounded the problem. Routed around Iran, Turkey and the Suez Canal, the corridor sought to bypass instability by excluding rivals, and it gave the excluded a stake in its failure: Erdoğan declared that 'there is no corridor without Turkey' and backed instead the Iraq Development Road, whose memorandum Iraq, Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, itself an IMEC signatory, signed in April 2024.^[50] The second is single-chain fragility. Eurasian trade, served by a lattice of overland and maritime routes, could shift toward the Trans-Caspian corridor after 2022 and around the Cape after 2023,^[51] whereas IMEC concentrates its value in one chain through the most contested geography in the world. The third is a mismatch of finance. A consortium of democracies and private investors requires returns that cannot absorb the political-risk premium of a corridor through a war zone, whereas the policy banks that financed the Belt and Road could commit capital on strategic grounds. For the theory, the lesson is that the constructive instruments of neo-containment are exposed to precisely the gray-zone contestation that its restrictive instruments are designed to manage. China's own corridor power rests partly elsewhere: its dominance of mineral processing is a chokepoint through which the world's critical materials must pass, and it requires no physical route at all.

5.4 The Boundary of the Mechanism: Chokepoints Outside the Core

The Iran war also tested the Dual Chokepoint Dilemma at its boundary. A ceasefire brokered by Pakistan took effect on 8 April 2026; the Islamabad Talks failed, and the United States imposed a naval blockade of Iranian ports from 13 April. After five and a half weeks of open war and ten of a fragile, repeatedly violated ceasefire, the two sides signed on 17 June a fourteen-point Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding, brokered by Pakistan with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. It extended the ceasefire, reopened Hormuz toll-free for sixty days, provided for the lifting of the blockade, opened a sixty-day window on the nuclear file and attached a pledged reconstruction fund of 300 billion dollars. It was silent on missiles and proxies, and Israel, not a party, declared itself unbound and continued operations in Lebanon, where a war that Lebanese authorities say had killed at least 4,386 people by late September continued under a nominal ceasefire.^[52] That silence was the memorandum's undoing. Iran declared the strait closed again on 20 June in response to Israeli strikes in Lebanon, American and Iranian strikes resumed from 26 to 28 June, and on 8 July the ceasefire collapsed after Iran attacked commercial vessels to assert its sovereignty over the strait. Washington reimposed its blockade on 14 July.^[45]

The war then reached the second chokepoint. Having declared a maritime blockade of Saudi Arabia on 20 July, the Houthis advanced along Yemen's Red Sea coast in September, taking the port of Mokha on 10 September and the Hanish Islands and claiming almost the whole of the coastline, although government forces retook ground near the strait within days. The target was Saudi Arabia's bypass of Hormuz: since March the kingdom had diverted much of its crude to the Red Sea port of Yanbu, whose loadings had reached some 4.4 million barrels a day by late March. Drones launched from Iraqi territory on 10 and 11 September, which Riyadh attributed to Iranian-backed militias, forced the closure of the East-West pipeline that feeds Yanbu until 22 September; Riyadh absorbed the strikes without retaliation, and Baghdad dismissed the military commander responsible for the area from which they were launched.^[53] On 26 September Trump rejected an Iranian seven-day plan under which the United States would enforce a ceasefire in Lebanon and Yemen, release 12 billion dollars of frozen funds, suspend oil sanctions and lift the blockade, after which Iran would reopen Hormuz and resume nuclear talks.^[54] Tehran had bound the two chokepoints into a single negotiating package. By early October the status of the strait was itself contested: Iran's chief negotiator declared that it would remain closed until seven conditions drawn from the Islamabad Memorandum were met, while the Secretary of State asserted that oil was flowing again. Brent crude oscillated between roughly 100 and 105 dollars a barrel, the Federal

Reserve had raised rates on 16 September for the first time since 2023 to contain the inflation the war had kindled, and the G7 agreed on 2 October to release 100 million barrels from strategic stocks.^[55]

This is the boundary the theory specifies. The dyad here is not hegemon and challenger but the hegemon and a state already excluded from the networks the hegemon controls. For such a state the self-cost that produces managed suspension between Washington and Beijing is absent: Iran deployed its chokepoint to the point of its own economic ruin, while a non-state ally sought to convert control of flows into control of territory on a second strait. The Islamabad Memorandum, unlike the Busan truce, sat at a gray-zone interface, with a disconnected chokepoint-holder on one side and a non-party belligerent on the other, and it could not hold. The Dual Chokepoint Dilemma governs the relationship between hubs; at the periphery, disconnected chokepoint-holders escalate where hubs suspend. H2 holds within its scope, and the scope now has a demonstrated edge.

The corollary of the central proposition is visible in the hegemon's own conduct. Where interdependence was low and American centrality dominant, Washington did not practice neo-containment at all. Iran had been isolated for decades, and in 2026 the United States made war on it and blockaded its ports. In Venezuela, the military operation of 3 January 2026 that captured President Nicolás Maduro and installed an interim government was a unilateral reassertion of hemispheric primacy, condemned by Beijing as a 'clear violation of international law', against a state whose oil had long served as collateral for loans from Chinese policy banks.^[56] By September the interim government of Delcy Rodríguez had concluded a twenty-five-year renewable hydrocarbon agreement giving Washington majority control of 65 billion barrels of reserves, with Chevron committing 7 billion dollars over five years, and no election date had been set.^[57] Washington also set the terms of entry for others: a general license issued by the Treasury in February 2026 admitted European operators such as Italy's Eni and Spain's Repsol to new Venezuelan operations on American terms.^[58] These are the instruments of isolation, coercion and reordering, employed against targets with which the hegemon was barely interdependent. In the hemisphere they apply the 'Trump Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine set out in the National Security Strategy of December 2025, which holds that the United States 'must be preeminent in the Western Hemisphere', a claim to the hemisphere as an American sphere whose reach is yet to be determined.^[59] Toward China, over the same months and under the same administration, Washington negotiated truces. The contrast is what the proposition predicts, and it is the contrast an agential explanation cannot account for.

5.5 The Limits of Coalition: India and the Gulf

Neo-containment depends on coalitions, and H4 predicts their limits. The most organized expression of those limits is the enlarged BRICS, joined by Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates in 2024 and by Indonesia in 2025, whose experiments with settlement in local currencies and alternative development finance reduce members' dependence on dollar-based systems and create options without forming a counter-bloc.^[60] The decisive case nonetheless remains India, and the South Asian crisis of 2025 also offers the clearest demonstration of the nuclear scope condition. On 7 May 2025, after the killing of twenty-six civilians at Pahalgam on 22 April, India launched Operation Sindoor, striking what it described as terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, in the most serious conventional exchange between the two nuclear-armed states since the Kargil War of 1999. After four days of strikes and counter-strikes, which reached military installations on both sides, a ceasefire took effect on 10 May.^[61] New Delhi had calculated that calibrated strikes would not provoke nuclear escalation, and the calculation held. The nuclear ceiling remained intact while conventional violence proceeded beneath it, Snyder's mechanism transposed to South Asia; the same logic applies to Taiwan, where mutual vulnerability may embolden graduated coercion on the calculation that Washington will not escalate to the nuclear level over the island.

The aftermath tested the thesis of India as the 'new China' and refuted it. Trump claimed the ceasefire as the product of his mediation, a claim that Pakistan amplified by nominating him for the Nobel Peace Prize and that India declined to endorse. Washington then turned toward Pakistan's military leadership, receiving Field Marshal Asim Munir at the White House, and within a year Pakistan had become its chosen intermediary with Tehran.^[62] In February 2026 the two governments agreed to reduce the tariff on Indian goods to 18 percent, which Trump paired with claims that India would cease buying Russian oil and commit some 500 billion dollars to American purchases, claims that Modi's own statement did not confirm. New Delhi had concluded its free trade agreement with the European Union the previous month. In June 2026 an American strike on a tanker

carrying Iranian oil in the Gulf of Oman killed three Indian seafarers, and New Delhi lodged a strong protest; days later, at the G7 summit in Évian, Trump and Modi described a bilateral trade agreement as ‘very close’ without concluding it.^[63] Taking the concession while withholding the alignment is the equilibrium of the autonomous balancer that Tellis anticipated: India will not side with Washington against Beijing in the manner that the American wager on it presumes.^[64] The pattern extends beyond India. Middle powers able to convert geography or mediation into political capital collect it from both sides, and their refusal to choose, far from being indecision, is a remunerative policy, as it was for the leading members of the Non-Aligned Movement, whose non-alignment recent historiography reads as an active strategy pursued within the Cold War rather than an abstention from it,^[65] and it renders a clean polarization of the system impossible.

The sharpest test came on 18 September 2026, when Trump signed the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act, passed by the House by 262 votes to 159, which authorizes tariffs of up to 100 percent on all imports from the five largest importers of Russian crude oil or gas. Russia’s share of India’s oil imports had reached a record 50.83 percent in July, and the Ministry of External Affairs replied that India would secure energy for its 1.4 billion people through diversified sourcing.^[66] By early October no tariff had been imposed, and whether New Delhi will absorb the threat while retaining Russian crude remains open. To date H4 is corroborated, and the reverse triangulation discussed in Section II has no empirical footing.

The Gulf states mark a different limit, that of hedging. Saudi Arabia withholds normalization with Israel, the capstone of the Accords, and on 7 August 2026 signed with Turkey and Pakistan the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement, an attack-on-one commitment underpinned by a Pakistani deployment inside the kingdom of some 8,000 troops and a Chinese-made HQ-9 air-defense battery.^[67] Qatar and Saudi Arabia co-brokered the Islamabad Memorandum with Pakistan, and when Houthi attacks reached Saudi soil, Trump declined the crown prince’s request for American strikes against them.^[53] A coalition built on states that keep their options open cannot be mobilized on command, which is one further reason why the hegemon’s constraint remains selective.

VI. THE FATE OF AMERICAN HEGEMONY

The consequences of neo-containment for American primacy, beyond realism and traditional balance-of-power conclusions, stem from the fact that *hegemony is a sediment of institutions as well as a quantity of capabilities*. As the hegemonic-stability tradition from Kindleberger through Keohane to Ikenberry argues, the provision of public goods (open sea lanes, a reserve currency, financial clearing, a rules-based trading system) creates a constituency for the provider's primacy, because states benefit from the goods even as they resent the power that supplies them.^[68] A Gramscian tradition reaches a convergent conclusion by another route: for Arrighi, hegemonies succeed one another in systemic cycles of accumulation, in which financial expansion marks the autumn of a hegemony rather than its strength, and he read China's ascent as the possible center of a market-based world order of a different kind.^[69] The reserve dollar, the alliance architecture and the development-finance institutions reproduce American power independently of the military ledger. In a reticular world the meaning of primacy also shifts. It ceases to be command over every domain and becomes the capacity to advance and to gain within an environment of permanent contestation: resilience under severance, the ability to substitute when a corridor closes or a supply is denied, and the capacity to endure when an artery is targeted. The question H5 poses is whether the sediment that sustains such a capacity can itself be sustained.

However, the durable and structural elements of American hegemony remain substantial. The dollar's share of official foreign-exchange reserves, above 70 percent in 2001, stood at 56.7 percent in the second quarter of 2026, against 20.6 percent for the euro and 2.1 percent for the renminbi, and the dollar retains overwhelming dominance in trade invoicing and in the settlement infrastructure that the weaponization of finance exploits.^[70] Gold, on the European Central Bank's measure, overtook United States Treasuries as a share of global official reserves in 2025, although largely through valuation effects and without a corresponding flight from the dollar.^[71] The semiconductor controls have so far held China below the advanced-node frontier. The alliance architecture (AUKUS, the Quad, expanded Pacific basing, a NATO that has endured despite American friction, and a European Union that approved a 90 billion euro loan to Ukraine once Hungary lifted its veto after Péter Magyar's electoral victory) remains qualitatively superior to China's thin network of formal alliances.^[72] Adaptation, competing hard where the advantage is defensible and conceding where it is not, remains plausible.

The greater danger is fragmentation through self-subtraction. Pressure on European partners, the cultivation of Pakistan at India's expense, the 'G2' framing of the Busan, Beijing and Washington summits and the deferral of an arms package for Taiwan as a bargaining chip all tax allied confidence in American commitments. H5 locates the binding constraint in the domestic sustainability of the institutional and alliance investments that neo-containment requires over a horizon longer than the electoral cycle, and in 2026 that constraint operated through every branch of government. The Supreme Court struck down the sweeping emergency tariffs on 20 February, forcing a temporary surcharge under Section 122 of the Trade Act, later replaced by duties under Section 301. The House passed war-powers resolutions against the Iran war in June, by 215 votes to 208, and again in July, by 214 to 208. On 15 September a Republican congressman presented articles of impeachment against the Secretary of Defense. The Federal Reserve raised rates against the President's public calls for lower ones, and by early October the President was suggesting that the war would be won 'right after the election' of 3 November.^[73] A hegemon whose instruments are rebuilt under judicial, legislative and monetary constraint, and whose war aims are timed to an electoral calendar, is the object that H5 describes.

The most probable attractor lies between adaptation and fragmentation: managed competitive coexistence, the Busan dispensation generalized, in which both sides refrain from deploying their chokepoints in full, accept permanent rivalry and manage its intensities domain by domain. It is the permanently unstable equilibrium raised to the level of an order. The apposite analogy is therefore 1907 rather than 1947: the year of Eyre Crowe's memorandum on Germany and of the Anglo-Russian Convention, when British primacy faced German industrial and naval power and the outcome still depended on alliance choices and statecraft. The difference is instructive. The Anglo-German rivalry ended in general war because nothing foreclosed that outcome. The American-Chinese rivalry has a ceiling in mutual nuclear deterrence, which removes general war from the menu and leaves two outcomes: accommodation, which neither side's domestic politics now permits, and prolonged competitive coexistence, which is the wager that neo-containment represents. Structure sets the ceiling and the menu; within them, the outcome will be made by the statecraft of ruling elites in Washington, Beijing and the capitals between them, whose construction is the agenda this framework opens.

VII. CONCLUSION: WINNING THE WAR BEFORE THE WAR

The contest between the United States and China will not be settled in the way the Cold War analogy leads its believers to expect. There will be no iron curtain, because the adversary is the world's workshop and its mineral refinery; no triangular maneuver, because the fracture that made the first one possible does not exist; and, in all likelihood, no general war, because nuclear weapons have, for now, prevented that resolution. ***What remains is a stratified competition, waged across domains at differing intensities, inside a single integrated system, by every instrument short of war.*** It is the political warfare that Kennan described in 1948, which French and Chinese strategists have theorized more candidly than their Anglophone counterparts.

The theory advanced here explains this condition by two structural variables, specifies the stratified competition they produce and identifies the mechanism that governs it. Against the record of 2023-2026 its hypotheses have so far survived, and the most telling evidence lies in the distribution of outcomes. Within a single year the system produced four provisional settlements of acute crises. The Busan truce of October 2025 survived the Beijing summit and was extended at Washington, but only to 10 January 2027. The reordering of Venezuela in January 2026 was consolidated into a generation-long hydrocarbon concession. The Gaza disarmament agreement of July 2026 was signed and barely implemented. The Islamabad Memorandum of June 2026 was dead within three weeks, yet by October Iran was invoking its terms as the conditions for reopening Hormuz. The settlements that held lay inside the hegemon-challenger dyad or within the hegemon's own hemisphere; the one that failed lay at a gray-zone interface, between a disconnected chokepoint-holder and a non-party belligerent. That pattern is the permanently unstable equilibrium, and its boundary, observed in real time.

In the end, two questions remain open. The first is whether the boundary will hold. If disconnected chokepoint-holders acquire a durable capacity to close two straits at once, the restraint of the hubs may matter less than the conduct of the periphery, and the equilibrium the theory describes would be set from outside the core it was built to explain. The second is rather domestic. The nuclear ceiling forecloses the worst outcome without settling on other solutions. Whether the order settles into adaptation, fragmentation or managed coexistence will be decided in other places: in licensing decisions on rare-earth exports, in the underwriting of a corridor's freight, in the allocation of capacity on a subsea cable and in the standards bodies that will govern artificial intelligence, and above all in whether the institutions that reproduce American power can be sustained by a politics whose horizon is shorter than the contest.

In such a reticular order, governed by structural interdependence and moved by stratified competition, war is won or lost before the war itself, and a strategy of constraint or containment, as well as the theory that describes it, must be judged by that standard.

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