

The US-China game of Go

BY CARLO PELANDA

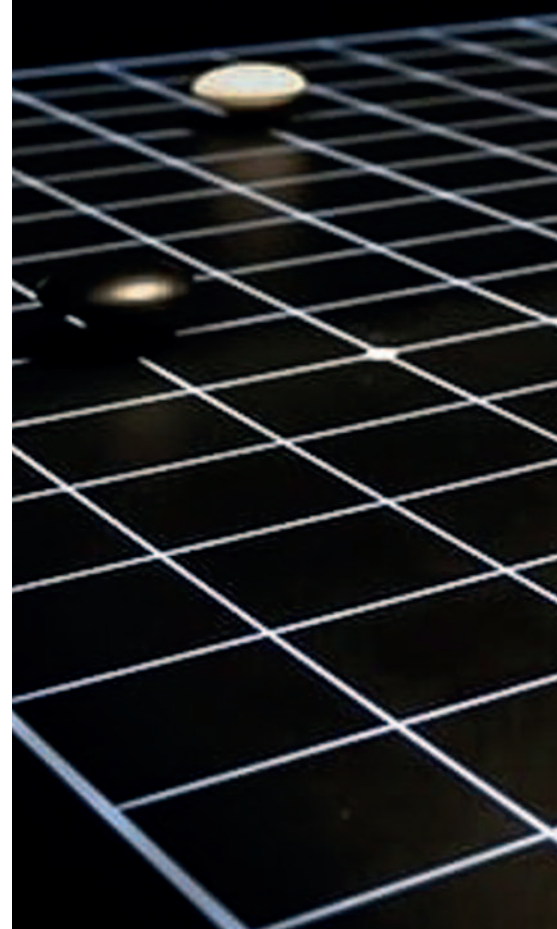
Invented in China more than 2,500 years ago, it is an abstract strategy board game for two players in which the aim is to surround more territory than the opponent. This way, a player wins by reducing the space of the other. The confrontation between the US and China has become a Rome-Carthage one. Is there still room for trial and error?

A maglev game of Go (weiqi) at the 5th Exhibition of Arts and Sciences in Beijing in November 2019.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered an earthquake, a strategic Big One. It reshaped the world order, but not too much. Thus, the widespread hope that China might be an active player helping a diplomatic composition of the conflict in Ukraine seems a geopolitical nonsense from a realistic point of view, even though Beijing's ambiguity shows the profile of a power inviting Russia to take a de-escalating posture.

Notwithstanding the strategic earthquake, the real global confrontation is still between United States and China. Washington aims to confine the Chinese power into a limited regional perimeter bringing down its potential global challenge. And yet, China tends to answer through opposing symmetric moves.

In its long term "grand strategy", the US has no interest in conceding any (geo)political space to China. Although conversely, Washington tends to use the NATO-Russia conflict – localized in Ukraine, but global in terms of economic war – as a means to deter and compress China. This dissuasion, mostly based on the threat of extending the economic sanctions toward Moscow also to Beijing in case of a non-compliant behavior, is a matter of concern for the Chinese Politburo, forcing China to practice a sort of acrobatic relationship with Russia: support, but not visible and not operational – i.e. aware of the thoughtful US gaze – with a







China is weighing its relations with Russia carefully. China's leader Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin of Russia attending a meeting during the BRICS summit in Brasilia, Brazil, in 2019

word-of-mouth in defense of the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Nevertheless, it's unquestionable that, Putin would have not started an invasion without receiving a green light from Xi Jinping who at the beginning probably was interested in opening a second front to lower the pressure against China in the Pacific. Now this green light is more a (half) amber one, after the Russian defeat, the close-packed block of democracies and the intimidating economic deterrence. After all, China's growth is at its lowest point and Beijing cannot bear further restrictions to its export already at risk of implosion.

As a result, China's position has been ambiguous: it refrained from endorsing Russia's righteousness to invade Ukraine, but providing its own support to Russia in the UN security council. China has been described by political commentators as taking a position ranging from neutrality to support. Perhaps this ambiguity might have stimulated some analyst to think that a convergence between China and America would

have been possible for freezing the conflict in Ukraine. Yet, this is a misperception. And this misperception is more evident if we analyze the strategic interests/conditions of all players.

America (it would be better to say its "imperial bureaucracy") has no interest in terminating the state of tensions in Europe aroused by the Russian threat. First, the European anxiety and the need to secure an independent military protection it doesn't have, destroyed the concept of a (post-NATO) European sovereignty, repowered the transatlantic alliance and prepared it for a possible projection toward the Indo-Pacific area, guaranteeing Washington its strategic dominance. It (re)conquered Europe "debellicized" since WWII (as the Britain-based military analyst Colin Gray once described it) within the US led project of a global alliance of democracies. Thus, Washington likely has the interest of freezing the open conflict in Ukraine, yet not that of ending its profitable tensions.

China has a symmetric interest. A compressed and



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needy Russia cannot oppose many barriers to a Chinese subjugator, though a nightmare of growing dependence on China is scary for the Russian elite. The weakness of Moscow is allowing Beijing to reshape its own strategy. Xi Jinping could limit the costly and increasingly contrasted “Belt and Road initiative” and expand the extension of a land based “Greater China” influencing Central Asia and Russia. With the benefit of being less exposed to the US projected sea restrictions into the Pacific and with the possibility of safely using the Arctic routes.

Will Russia ultimately understand that it is the losing power if it does not find a way to close the Ukraine conflict and reduce tensions? Putin may be softening his hardline stance on the war in Ukraine as Moscow’s defense minister held rare talks with his US counterpart after a spate of battlefield setbacks. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has mediated between Russia and Ukraine, said on October 22 that Putin appeared to be “much softer and more open to negotia-

tions” with Ukraine than in the past. Notwithstanding, Putin’s regime needs to keep the tension high with the Western block in order to stir up the encirclement syndrome resulting in the salvation of Mother Russia. It’s the only way to encourage domestic consensus, especially in rural areas, and avoid or delay Putin’s dismissal.

What about the EU? It can only but follow American leadership. But the US interest in keeping the tension high diverges from the need of Europe’s most industrialized countries to provide themselves with the status of a “secure (euro)zone” in the global system. In theory this aim can be achieved by integrating the North American and European markets, i.e. over time making the dollar and euro converge through trade treaties which imply limited oscillations of the exchange rates. But the American political system, both on the left and on the right, is currently in a protectionist posture which makes a formal EU-American economic and trade convergence improbable in the foreseeable future.

Despite having no territorial claims in the region, China is seeking a role in Arctic governance.



Marines train on rotation at Værnes Air Station in the south and at Setermoen military camp in Troms, Northern Norway.

There are realistic reasons for this posture: more than half of the US middle class lost economic power in the past decades for the impact of external competition and protectionism got a socially diffused consensus with “reshoring”, but not yet with “friendshoring.” This difficulty of America in signing economic treaties perceived as asymmetric by allies is a major US weakness in consolidating alliances, both in the Indo-Pacific and in the euro area. Since the Biden Administration took power, Germany has repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, asked Washington to start a EU-US treaty in order to compensate Berlin for the loss of the Russian market and the reduction of the German openness to Chinese business. Now Germany will try to be very pro-American at military level, for example buying F35’s and sending Eurofighters to military maneuvers in the Pacific. Its aim is not to be perceived as pro-China despite Berlin not wishing to waste any business relation with Beijing. This means to swap an anti-Russia stance and huge investments in “con-

verging” military power with the permission – a sort of “red pass” to be released by the US – to keep some relations with China (though not in the high-tech sectors). At the moment this seems to be the line of a desperate Germany that no longer can be mercantilist and neutral.

This approach is diverging from the interest of France to reduce tensions with Russia in order to save the concept of European autonomy. But Germany is increasingly following its own national geoeconomic interest. Summing up, the relevant nations of the EU have the interest of reducing tensions with both Russia and China, but don’t have the strength to disobey the US.

Can we exclude a G2 agreement between China and America? Not in theory. Following Putin’s strategic mistake, China is subjugating Russia and Central Asia, reducing the hostility of India and brokering a growing influence in Iran. Thanks to this same Russian strategic mistake, the US reconquered a diverging EU,



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became the real protector of its eastern and Baltic states, controlled Ukraine and extended and reinforced NATO. Moreover, the US substituted Russia as Europe's main supplier making its fossil energy potential more profitable.

In macro-terms, the two main global powers, US and China, have conquered the two minor ones, Russia and the EU. At this point America and China might find it rational to have serious talks and splitting their influence on the globe through a compromise, a sort of a new Yalta. In this scenario the two powers might converge in a "reducing tensions common policy" where America might invite China to calm Russia. But such a scenario has a very low probability of happening. The Chinese Communist Party needs a situation of continuous external conflict in order to avoid internal divergencies. No US President would keep their post if he/she were open to recognize China as a peer. The war between America and China is of a Rome-Carthage type: truces and intra-war cooperation on some is-

ssues will be possible, but ultimately the war will finish with the destruction or implosion of one of the two actors. Therefore, neither China nor America will provide the enemy with any opportunity to increase its geopolitical influence or standing. Both actors are playing a "Go" game, i.e. a game where a player wins by reducing the space of the other.

In this sense the idea that America and the group of democracies that it is leading could accept China as a partner to reduce tensions appears to be unrealistic. In the contingencies of the war in Ukraine, China might play a freezing role. But this could only happen by deterring Beijing with the threat of extending sanctions towards China, not by accepting China as a mediator.

US Air Force officials have confirmed to Warrior Maven that US Air Force F-35s from the US have now arrived in Germany.

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