

POL175 Term Paper - Due 29 April 2023

Given the history of U.S. relations with China, why would the Communist Party leaders of the PRC be inclined to go to war with the United States?

In the nearly eighty-five years of the existence of the People's Republic of China, it and the United States have clashed countless times. With China rising internationally and the United States being the superpower it challenges, it is obvious to see the U.S. and China as natural rivals. As China gains power, it threatens the *Pax Americana* that has existed since at least the conclusion of the Cold War, posing a challenge to the Americans. On the other hand, the American lock on global power is something the Chinese cannot follow if they want to increase their power and prestige internationally. Thus, as Hal Brands and Michael Beckley state, "The CCP is trying to shape the next century in ways that threaten to overturn what America has achieved over the past century"¹. The CCP is trying to change the world order, and the Americans, having created the current system, refuse to succumb to the pressure. In the past, the solution to this power struggle was large-scale war, and while China has reason to go to war with the United States on the simple stance of power struggles, the reality is more complex. Simply, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party would be inclined to go to war with the United States not only because of economic competition and diplomatic rivalries but also due to perceived historical mistreatment and China's expansionist philosophy of *tian xia*.

Roughly translated, the Chinese diplomatic philosophy of *tian xia* means "Everything Under Heaven." Not only does this refer to a guiding principle for China's foreign affairs, but it also refers to the Chinese view of the world: everything is around the Central Kingdom —

¹ Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 16-17.

China. The Chinese goal under this system is to expand its influence wherever it can, leading to an aggressive foreign policy. The Chinese view is that they “are pursuing their dream, which means expansion and consolidation... The problem for us is that China believes in a tributary system; that is the normal order of things for them. They are determined to change the status quo, and their ultimate goal is expelling the U.S. as a regional power and to take control within the First Island Chain”². China’s goal is to expand, both in territory and influence. It has always been their goal, and this naturally leads them to confrontation with others. Since their goal is to be the most powerful nation, they must work against the United States to accomplish this goal, as the United States is the current leader of the world system. Moreover, the idea of *tian xia* and Chinese domination leads it to act more aggressively. It wants to militarize and show its power to gain more influence — that is conventionally how a country gains power on an international stage.³ Thus, the Chinese philosophy draws it into conflict with the United States simply because it wants to increase its power; to do that, however, it must enter into conflict with the United States.

Not only does China seek to expand its influence due to its philosophy, but *tian xia* also dictates that the Chinese are the superior people,⁴ influencing its foreign policy vastly. As the literal center of the world under *tian xia*, it is only natural that they are superior in their eyes. This influences how they organize power; previously, the Chinese dynasties followed the tributary system, having polities outside of China itself pay tribute to the Emperor, de facto controlling them.⁵ The Chinese see anyone outside of their rule as “barbarians,” and thus, the Chinese have no interest in working with them on an equal footing — to them, all non-Chinese

² Howard W. French, *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China’s Push for Global Power*, 1st ed. (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 30.

³ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 5-8.

⁴ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 33.

⁵ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 36-7.

have much to learn from China, and China has little or nothing to learn from them.⁶ This dismissive attitude not only perpetuates the idea of Chinese superiority but also refuses any agreements on any basis of equal power. When European traders first came to trade with the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century, they were quickly dismissed. This led to the Chinese trailing the rest of the world technologically and, in turn, allowed the Europeans to dictate Chinese affairs with their superior technology.

The Europeans' technological superiority led to the Chinese being dominated by Europe in the late 1800s, further fueling the Chinese drive for a better position in the future. The Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century led to a so-called "century of humiliation," and from then on, China's goal was to regain its past prowess.⁷ As the Qing dynasty fell from grace, it felt both external and internal pressure; the Europeans put pressure on the Chinese to give more trade access, and the inability of the Qing dynasty to adequately fight back led to a large amount of internal frustration.⁸ From the end of the Opium Wars in 1839 to the declaration of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China was forced to fight more than a dozen wars in its home territory, and it suffered two massive civil wars in the Taiping Rebellion and the Chinese Civil War. These two civil wars alone cost China thirty to forty million people.⁹ By the end of this century, China was seen as "a vast poorhouse" — it was devastated by constant conflict and turmoil.¹⁰ China incurred mass amounts of damage to its land and population, and by the time the CCP rose to power, the Chinese economy was decimated and could not compete with the rest of the world. As a result, the Chinese goal became to return to the prestige they once had. Often, this is referred to as "The Chinese Dream of great national rejuvenation," meaning that China

⁶ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 39-40.

⁷ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 6-7, 18.

⁸ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 69-70.

⁹ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 27-8.

¹⁰ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 3-4.

had to work to regain what it once had — supremacy over its world, both economically and militarily.¹¹ To the Chinese, they had to reclaim their natural rights to what they had once had. However, their path to regaining what they had once forced them to come into conflict with whoever stood in their way, which led them to become increasingly adversarial with the United States during the Cold War.

During the Cold War, anticommunism in the United States drove the U.S. and China apart, immediately placing them on opposing sides of world politics.¹² As a result, the United States worked to hinder the Chinese by supporting the Kuomintang and Tibetan rebels throughout the Cold War. Washington wanted to pressure the CCP to stop being communist and end its relationship with the Soviet Union, causing it to oppose the Chinese, leading to incredibly bloody wars between the two in Korea and Vietnam.¹³ The American conflict with the Chinese worsened relations between the two nations and caused the Chinese to work against the US as a direct opponent. Since neither side was willing to meet the other's demands, the two powers neither power could better the relationship. Moreover, the United States heavily supported Japan, angering the Chinese. Japan was China's historical regional adversary, and was accordingly demonized by the Chinese — anyone who was associated with Japan was by nature antagonizing China.¹⁴ Thus, China and the United States are also drawn into conflict due to Cold War opposition and China's need to return to its past glory after a century of humiliation.

However, the competition between the United States and China expands beyond the military and political realms. It is also economic, as both countries vie for control over the global markets. After Mao's death, economic reform allowed China to rise to prominence on the world

¹¹ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 20, 72.

¹² Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 13-14.

¹³ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 26-28.

¹⁴ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 23-4.

stage and challenge the United States as the world's economic superpower.¹⁵ Here, *tian xia* also applies: to grow its influence, China can dominate nations economically and force them to be reliant. In past dynasties, this was done through the tributary system, and even nations like Japan paid tribute to the Chinese. However, as the world globalized and China fell behind, Japan turned instead to the global markets, rendering the region's economic Sinocentrism and rules restricting trade ineffective.¹⁶ Thus, Japan left China behind for better markets, and when China was modernizing in the 1980s, it took notes from Japan's modernization and worked to surpass it in economic potential.¹⁷ This was hardly a coincidence, as Japan was also a longtime economic rival of China. However, China's ambitions did not stop there; once it surpassed Japan, its attention turned global, bringing it into conflict with the United States.

As China rose to prominence, it opened yet another front with the Americans — to act on its ideals of *tian xia*, China used economic development and trade to get control over the economic system; this antagonized the United States, which currently has economic control in these markets.¹⁸ The U.S. and China are in an economic struggle for dominance on the world stage; one action the United States took, for instance, was forcing tariffs on Chinese goods. The U.S. sees these tariffs as necessary actions to curb Chinese influence, and the Chinese see them as an action to suppress their enterprises.¹⁹ Simply, China and the United States struggle for dominance in the global economic sector due to their shared dominance of the global markets; any action one country takes to curb the other's influence angers the other.

Furthermore, the Chinese use economic development to influence other nations' trade, and the most overt example of this influence is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI

¹⁵ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 4.

¹⁶ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 32.

¹⁷ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 16.

¹⁸ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 40-1.

¹⁹ Edward Wong, "China Increasingly Seen as Antagonist in Diplomatic Talks Around the World," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/03/world/asia/china-diplomacy-beijing.html>.

is a massive Chinese infrastructure initiative through Central Asia and the Indian Ocean to connect China with markets in Western Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa. On land, the Silk Road Economic Belt builds infrastructure and trade routes to latch Central Asia to China economically, making it easier for nations to trade with them and sponsoring infrastructure development in these nations. In the sea, the Maritime Silk Road works to control the trade routes of the Indian Ocean to as far as Greece, attempting to get a massive portion of the global trade routes to be favorable to China.²⁰ The Chinese are pushing their way into the global markets, and they want to ensure they have favorable regimes to trade with. Economic influence and diplomatic influence are linked; to get more friendly nations, China can use its economic potential to influence them. The BRI also works to outflank the United States by creating a Sinocentric economic bloc, attempting to push the United States out of global economic supremacy. Moreover, the Maritime Road is also a route to influence Indonesia, the most populous country in Southeast Asia and the de facto leader of ASEAN, pulling it closer to the Chinese.²¹ Simply, China is weaponizing its economic potential to push nations away from the United States and rely more on China for their trade, securing its position. Its massive infrastructure projects are one of its many tools to work against the United States, deepening the rivalry.

China's jockeying for world power is also political. The United States and China are placed on opposite sides of the modern political scene, and China's actions to position itself as a more prominent diplomatic power only deepen the divide between it and the U.S. Perhaps most clearly, China supports Russia, which is currently at war with Ukraine, directly bringing both into conflict with the United States. While China does not directly help Russia, China attempts to

²⁰ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 256-7.

²¹ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 257-9.

provide diplomatic support to the Russians and has not ruled out directly helping if needed.²² The pairing of Russia and China is simple: they have similar ideals. Moreover, Russia's overt meddling in the international system assists China by exposing cracks Beijing can exploit, making the relationship incredibly beneficial for the Chinese.²³ Thus, China benefits from having Russia close, as it helps them take advantage of Russia's meddling without facing the same overt pressure and controversy the Russian regime faces. This puts China and the United States at opposing ends of the international world, making working together more difficult.

China is also attempting to position itself as an arbiter — an alternative to the United States, and thus, China is directly confronting the American diplomatic position. Recently, they have worked to mend ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran and used the success of the negotiations as a focal point for how a Chinese arbitration could be beneficial for all involved. In the past decade, the Saudis and Iranians have been hostile toward each other, cutting official ties in 2016 and having proxy conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon.²⁴ In March 2023, China used its economic power to bring both to the bargaining table and settle the dispute.²⁵ Not only did this show that China was someone that could be used to find peace between two nations with wildly differing goals, but it was also incredibly beneficial for the Chinese economically. The Middle East is a vital point for the BRI, and the Saudis were also pushed to distance themselves from the United States through this agreement.²⁶ China benefitted immensely from the settlement, both in prestige and economic value. By finding a settlement between the two states, it is attempting to

²² Edward Wong, "Blinken and Top Diplomats Stress Unity on Russia and China," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/18/world/asia/blinken-g7-russia-china.html>.

²³ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 187.

²⁴ Vivian Nereim, "Saudi and Iranian Foreign Ministers Meet in China After Thaw," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/06/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-meeting.html>.

²⁵ David Pierson, "China's Role in Iran-Saudi Arabia Deal Shows Xi's Global Goals," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/world/asia/china-saudi-arabia-iran-us.html>.

²⁶ Nereim, "Saudi and Iranian Foreign Ministers Meet in China After Thaw."

push the narrative that the United States is unable to actively be an arbiter between two sides and offering an alternative: the Chinese.

Another area the United States has directly positioned itself against China is by surrounding China with its allies. One of the United States's closest allies in the region is the Philippines. The United States has long held immense sway in the nation and used it as a launchpad to assert itself in Asia through soft power. Moreover, the Philippines is a major chokepoint on the edge of the South China Sea, and they are thus absolutely vital for Chinese strategy.²⁷ To secure the South China Sea, the Philippines are something China needs to control, and the American sway over the islands causes China to position itself politically and economically against Filipinos, and through that, the Americans.²⁸ The Chinese and Americans both want to control strategically vital parts of the world and therefore, they are drawn into conflict with each other. Moreover, the United States has a vast amount of control over Asia, and this is something the Chinese see as a threat. One example of this is the United States' partnership with Australia, India, and Japan known as the Quad, which essentially surrounds China on three fronts: the Southeast, the South, and the East.²⁹ This was revived in 2017 and again in 2023 due to China's increasing animosity towards the West and worries about its expansion,³⁰ so it is simple to understand why China sees the partnership as a direct attack on its power. After all, forming a partnership on three sides and activating it when the U.S. is worried about Chinese power is a strong signal of antagonism. The American obstruction of Chinese goals is reflected through these partnerships: "Almost everywhere the CCP elites look, American

²⁷ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 73-77.

²⁸ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 77-81.

²⁹ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 54.

³⁰ Wong, "China Increasingly Seen as Antagonist in Diplomatic Talks Around the World."

power is a barrier to Chinese power”.³¹ The United States positions itself against China, making it easy for them to come into conflict with each other.

While economics, history, and politics have placed the United States and China on opposing sides of a large-scale conflict, without a flashpoint to set it off, war is unlikely. One spark for this conflict could be in the South China Sea, as China’s contested claim could directly lead to direct war with the United States as it seeks to challenge the American system and militarily control the entire sea. China sees the entire region as theirs and refuses to yield any part of it; its Nine-Dash Line of claim is deeply rooted in Chinese history and giving it up would be unthinkable for China.³² To gain its claim, it tries to control islands in a game of “hopscotch” from Hainan to Indonesia, trying to expand its Exclusive Economic Zone to cover the entire sea, even though it is disputed.³³ The South China Sea is hotly contested between all surrounding nations, and because China claims the entire sea, it is drawn into territorial conflict with every nation in the region. Furthermore, the international system has ruled against China’s claim in the sea indirectly, pitting China against the American-led world. Specifically, the International Criminal Court claimed that history was not a direct part of a nation’s claim, and by extension, China’s claim did not hold.³⁴ Thus, China is drawn into conflict with the American system over a piece of the sea that it actively claims and works to control. The South China Sea could be a hotbed for a direct conflict between the two, and with historical, political, and economic positioning pitting the United States and China against each other, it would be unsurprising to see the two fight each other if a large-scale war broke out.

³¹ Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*, 15.

³² French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 56-8.

³³ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 59-62.

³⁴ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 80-1.

Thus, the Chinese have several reasons to go to war with the United States: the U.S. and PRC have been on opposite sides historically, economically, and politically, and the Chinese philosophy of *tian xia* forces its expansionist values to conflict with the United States' current world order. Historically, the United States has antagonized China in the Cold War, supporting the KMT and Tibetan rebels. Economically, both vie for control over global markets, with China's BRI being a way to further expand its influence on a new front. Politically, the divisive Russia-Ukraine war and tensions over the South China Sea make it obvious that if a war was to break out, China and the United States would oppose each other. While the leaders of the CCP might be inclined to go to war against the United States, such a war would likely not be as beneficial as other diplomatic and economic moves. War is bad for both countries' diplomatic and economic positions, and it would not be worth it to directly attack each other unless the chance of destroying the other is a higher positive than the guaranteed economic and diplomatic loss. The U.S. and China have to navigate how to antagonize each other while still maintaining trade ties, after all, as both have a lot of trade with each other.³⁵ Thus, the world is split between two rivals, but two rivals that do not wish to actively fight each other — at least until it is beneficial to do so.

³⁵ Wong, "Blinken and Top Diplomats Stress Unity on Russia and China."

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