

Thucydides' Trap and the Impending Sino-American War

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There are three principle explanation of the causes of war. The first explains war in terms of human nature. The second posits that war is based on the nature of government and, through the Democratic Peace Theory, that war will not occur between democracies. The third level explains war in terms of the international system, and that wars occur because states must rely on power to keep themselves safe.¹ In his “The History of the Peloponnesian War”, fifth century B.C. Greek philosopher Thucydides explores the third level explanation of war through the lens of the Peloponnesian War, and concludes that when a rising power meets a ruling power, war is all but inevitable -this is Thucydides’ trap.² In a 2015 article, writer Graham Allison uses Thucydides’ trap to project a possible future war between China and The United States.³ This paper argues that the Thucydides Trap provides a valuable template for projecting current and possible future Sino-American conflicts.

In the article, Allison documents sixteen cases in the past half millennia in which a rising power came up against a ruling power, and examines if the nations fell into the Thucydides Trap; that is, whether or not the situation was resolved through warfare. Only four of the sixteen cases did not result in war, and of these four only one truly contradicts the Thucydides Trap: The Soviet Union and Japan in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Of the other three, two are red-herrings as the powers in question were allies at the time. In the early 20th century, the United Kingdom and The United States were allies, so although there were some tensions, and The United States was a “rising” power, a war was highly unlikely. The outbreak of other wars in which the two countries fought side by side during this time helped to cement the “special relationship” that

¹ Morgan, “Thucydides and Realism”.

² *ibid.*

³ Allison, “The Thucydides Trap,” 2-3.

exists between the two countries, and made war between them highly unlikely.⁴ The same applies to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany from 1990 to present; in fact, the allied nature of the three countries at the time was even stronger.⁵ Three years prior to 1990, in 1987, the countries, along with several others, had entered into a single customs union by way of the Single European Act.⁶ Two years later, in 1992, the signing of The Maastricht Treaty, whose principle backers were then French President Mitterrand and German Chancellor Kohl, founded the European Union.⁷ Over the course of this supposed conflict, the three nations were in fact were drawn closer to each other.

One may argue that, just like the United Kingdom, France, and Germany from 1990 to present, The United States and China won't go to war with each other due to how economically connected the two countries are. Allison states that "however economically interdependent states may be—none of these factors is sufficient to prevent war," and is correct in this assessment. This one factor -economic codependence- is not enough to stop war. In the case of the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, there were many other factors pushing them away from war, such as their military alliances and government/cultural similarities, that simply don't exist in the case of China and The United States.

With three of the four "no war" instances considered, this leaves one "conflict" left: The United States and Soviet Union from the 1940's to 1980's.⁸ Whilst Allison is technically correct

⁴ Tisdall, "Love, Hate ... Indifference".

⁵ Allison, 5-6; "Thucydides's Trap".

⁶ "Single European Act".

⁷ "Five Things".

⁸ Allison, 5-6.

in the assertion that no war occurred, as there was no direct confrontation between the two powers during this period, it is a disingenuous representation of the conflict. An explicit exchange of arms fire between The United States and USSR may not have occurred, but The United States' commitment to the Truman Doctrine, attempting to limit -contain- the expansion of Soviet communism, during this period lead to many proxy wars/conflicts being waged across the globe, most notably in Vietnam, Korea, and Afghanistan.⁹ The elimination/limitation of communism is a second level cause of war, as it deals with the nature of the government systems in the countries at war. This may not bolster the case that the Thucydides Trap projects conflict betwixt China and The United States as a second rather than third level explanation, but it does show how likely conflict is.

Thucydides notes that the speed at which Athens' power grew increased the likelihood of war, saying "It was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this inspired in Sparta, that made war inevitable."¹⁰ It would be difficult to deny that China's rise to power and economic expansion has been meteoric. In 34 years (1980-2014), China's economy went from 10% the size of The United States' to 101%, and the size of their reserves relative to America's increased 168 times.¹¹ In addition to expanding their economic power, China has also been building up it's military.

In the lead up to another conflict on Allison's list, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France against Germany in the early 20th Century (World War I), Allison discusses a report by British diplomat Eyre Crowe, saying

⁹ Walker, "The New American Hegemony", 17.

¹⁰ Allison, 2.

¹¹ *ibid*, 8.

Capability was key. As Germany's economy surpassed Britain's, Germany would not only develop the strongest army on the continent. It would soon also 'build as powerful a navy as she can afford.' In other words, Kissinger writes, 'once Germany achieved naval supremacy ... this in itself—regardless of German intentions—would be an objective threat to Britain...' (Allison, 4)

Take out Germany, German, and British, replace them with China, Chinese, and America, and this assessment comes scarily close to describing the current situation between China and The United States. One important element to Crowe's argument is also very important to any conjecture regarding conflict between The United States and China: the German quest for naval supremacy.

Many may write off the importance of a navy in our modern world,¹² but they remain a key piece of the defensive puzzle, especially in southeast Asia, where control of the South China Sea is vital.¹³ A 2020 report by the US Department of Defense found that, by some metrics, Chinese' naval capabilities have surpassed those of The United States.¹⁴ The area most likely to be the flashpoint in a 21st Century Sino-American war is Taiwan, a place where a navy is vital for defense.

US President Joe Biden, joined by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, recently broke more than 50 years of American Presidential silence regarding Taiwan, affirming their commitment to this previously unspoken and unwritten ally. This affirmation came amidst rising Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, and days after the Chinese violated Taiwanese airspace in an aeronautical tour de force.¹⁵ These Chinese incursions into the Taiwanese Air

¹² Conan, "Why Do We Need".

¹³ Haver, "China Expands".

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments", vii; Rachman, "A New Cold War", 4.

¹⁵ Delaney, "Biden, Suga Call".

Defense Buffer Zone are nothing new however, and have been happening with fair regularity for some time.¹⁶ Other American allies, a key part of President Biden's approach to China,¹⁷ have also been showing force in the region, with the French having recently deployed one of their nuclear attack submarines to patrol the South China Sea,¹⁸ and the Canadian Navy stepping up their presence in the area.¹⁹

Following the fall of Soviet Communism in the early 1990's, many felt that liberal democracy had won,²⁰ and some in The United States also felt that American hegemony had won -and not just the neoconservatives.²¹ It has been this belief in American hegemony that led The United States into many of the conflicts it has entered since 1991.²² It is unlikely that this belief will yield willingly to a China that wants to establish a, as Xi Jinping puts it, "trend toward a multipolar world".²³ American military involvements across the globe in the postwar era were largely justified as being either anticommunist/antiauthoritarian (e.g. Vietnam) or in defense of human rights (e.g. Kosovo). A war with China could be justified as both anticommunist/

¹⁶ Rachman, 1-2.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 5.

¹⁸ McNulty, "South China Sea".

¹⁹ Dark, "South China Sea"; Engler, "Canadian Navy".

²⁰ Fukuyama, "The End of History?".

²¹ Walker, 15; Hinnebusch, "The US Invasion of Iraq", 212.

²² Hinnebusch, 213-216.

²³ Allison, 13.

antiauthoritarian and in defense of human rights,²⁴ and could thus be explained by both the second and third level explanations of war.²⁵

As Allison shows, the Thucydides trap is a useful tool in discussing future conflicts between China and The United States. Allison describes the situation as “an irresistible force”, China, “approaching an immovable object”, The United States.²⁶ If China is truly irresistible and The United States is truly immovable, as has happened numerous times throughout human history,²⁷ this paradox can likely only be resolved through violence and warfare.

²⁴ Fukuyama, 11.

²⁵ Morgan.

²⁶ Allison, 13.

²⁷ *ibid*, 5-6.

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