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Opinion – US-China Relations and the Perils of Historical Analogy

<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/06/18/opinion-us-china-relations-and-the-perils-of-historical-analogy/>

DAVID SHIPTON, JUN 18 2024

From Sarajevo in 1914 to Munich in 1938, historical analogies provide a cognitive shortcut to help us make sense of complex issues, allowing policymakers to make decisions with a minimum level of original analysis. In no field is this trend more visible than in the study of Sino-American relations, where a rotating cast of scholars have sought to understand and shape the world's most important bilateral relationship by reference to the past. But in most cases, direct – and overwhelmingly western-orientated – historical analogies have proven more likely to obscure and confuse than to illuminate and guide assessments of US-China relations. More worryingly, because the most common analogies are drawn from the wars of the past, their irresistible appeal risks creating a self-fulfilling dynamic which draws the countries closer to conflict.

Graham Allison's popularisation of the "Thucydides Trap" frames the US-China relationship using the timeless dynamic of a rising power (China) threatening an established power (the US). Just as Sparta's fear of the rise of Athens rendered the Peloponnesian Wars "inevitable", Allison asserts that the emergence of China as an economic and military rival to US hegemony will push the countries towards violent confrontation. This framework has proven profoundly influential in foreign policy circles, with Joe Biden describing Allison as "one of the keenest observers of international affairs" and Xi Jinping repeatedly citing the need to avoid the Thucydides Trap.

The pervasiveness of Allison's theory amongst practitioners has, however, been matched by the zeal with which his colleagues have attacked both the Thucydides Trap concept and its application to Sino-American relations. While classical scholars argue that the framework derives from a misreading of Peloponnesian history, other commentators have disputed its underlying causal mechanism, arguing that aspirant powers, rather than established ones, are more likely to initiate war. Other critics argue that the "Thucydidean cliché" overstates Chinese strength, whilst minimising the geopolitical significance of Sino-American economic interdependence and the strength of America's regional allies. Strategic hawks in the US have also joined the chorus of disapproval by rejecting Allison's prescription of "accommodating" China, arguing that its aggressive stance was prompted not by an overbearing US, but a distracted one.

Allison is far from alone in seeking to bend history to fit Sino-American relations (and vice versa). Drawing on the same theory of hegemonic war, many commentators have made worrying comparisons between US-China relations and Anglo-German competition before 1914. Like modern China, Imperial Germany was an ascendent "revisionist power" rapidly expanding its navy to challenge its established rival for regional dominance. Through this lens, Sino-American economic interdependence serves less as a prophylactic against future conflict than as another eerie similarity with pre-1914 Europe. But by ignoring the role of Russia in driving Germany towards war, this analogy misses the significance of China's less perilous geostrategic context, which protects it from any realistic threat of invasion. Moreover, the Anglo-German analogy overlooks the role of nuclear deterrence in contemporary international relations and understates the historical contingency of Europe's "sleepwalk" into war in July 1914.

The recent deterioration in US-China relations has also witnessed a proliferation of "Cold War" analogies in which China replaces the USSR as America's primary ideological and geopolitical antagonist. But while reflecting a longstanding Chinese desire to learn from the Soviet Union's mistakes, this analogy too fails to capture the

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contemporary relationship between the two states. True, the challenge of China's brand of authoritarian state-led capitalism to Washington's liberal-democratic model superficially mimics the ideological clash between America and the USSR, but China lacks the universalist ideology which shaped the Cold War dynamic. The depth of the cultural and economic connections between America and China is also vastly different to the bifurcated structure of Cold War relations and, even despite the growth of its "no limits partnership" with Russia, China lacks the Soviet system of international alliances. Crucially, the Cold War analogy can also lead to a cognitive bias which overstates each side's malicious intentions and misdiagnoses "security-seeking" behaviour as "power-seeking" ambition.

So should we resile from comparisons and declare the US-China relationship unprecedented? Certainly, a sense of uniqueness is reflected in each country's assertions of its own exceptionalism. Although the re-emergence under Trump of an "America First" ideology explicitly challenges notions of America's "civilising mission", America's status as an "extraordinary nation" with a "special role to play in human history" continues to pervade foreign policy under Biden. Concurrently, China's evolving but persistent sense of its own superiority – founded upon a sense of China's historical destiny as a great power – dominates Xi's approach to international relations. There is also a sense on both sides of the Pacific that the quantitative scale of Sino-American global dominance is qualitatively unique. The US and China together account 43% of total world GDP and over half of global military spending, and their collective contribution to Co2 emissions vastly exceeds their nearest rivals. But a bilateral relationship cannot defy all comparisons simply because its protagonists consider themselves unique, or because they hold unprecedented resources. In fact, historical analogies persist even amongst those who hail the distinctiveness of the US-China relationship. Niall Ferguson's illusion of a "Chimerica" of co-dependence between the countries, for example, implicitly invokes the Nichibei, which prompted American fears of Japanese ascendancy in the 1980s.

If the seductiveness of analogies for the US-China relationship cannot be overcome, they can at least be improved in three respects. Firstly, US-China commentators should draw upon a wider repertoire of analogies to avoid cognitive bias. They may wish to consider, for example, whether Anglo-French naval diffusion during the 19th century is a better comparison than the Anglo-German arms race, or whether the Cold War analogy works best with America recast in the role of the Soviet Union. Secondly, analogies should focus less on past protagonists than upon the underlying mechanisms which drove historical change. As Ian Chong and Todd Hall note, for example, 1914 carries useful lessons regarding the dangers of complex alliance systems, rising nationalism and persistent crises, without requiring a direct comparison between Imperial Germany and China. Finally, in drawing analogies, commentators should avoid the unfounded but persistent assumption that Europe's past will be Asia's future, and look for precedents from across the Asia-Pacific region itself. The results may sell fewer books, but could slow the march to war.

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