

# US-China Power Struggle or Peaceful Coexistence: Will it Avoid the Thucydides Trap?

Written by Mithlesh Jayas Mukherji

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MITHLESH JAYAS MUKHERJI, AUG 1 2024

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Thucydides, an ancient Greek military historian wrote of the Peloponnesian War, "It was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this instilled in Sparta, that made war inevitable." The term "Thucydides Trap" was coined by the American political scientist Graham Allison in an article in 2012 for the *Economic Times* (Allison 2015). This landmark article, based on 16 case studies from history, argues that whenever an existing great power is challenged by a newly rising power, there is a chance for a war. This analogy has been used in the context of a rising China to analyze whether there would be a transfer of power from the United States to China, and whether it would be peaceful. In the paper by the Belfer Center at Harvard University, in 12 out of the 16 case studies, changing power dynamics led to war (Belfer Center, n.d.). Analyzing the Belfer Center paper and the descriptions given by Thucydides in the Peloponnesian War, two key drivers of this dynamic are the rising power's growing sense of entitlement and demand for greater say and sway, and the fear, insecurity, and determination to defend the status quo this causes in the established power. Throughout history, an existing but weakening regional or global power has been replaced by an emerging one either through war or through internal succession. The change occurs when the weakening power gradually relinquishes space with the successor state gradually taking up the space ceded or, in cases of catastrophic defeat, an immediate or early exchange of spheres of control. In rare cases, the weakening power has shown a rare gumption to stand up and defeated the challenger, only to later collapse by the effort involved in defeating the challenger. There are also situations in which a combination of the above factors helps a challenger overcome the existing power.

The original coinage of this term was based on the description of the Peloponnesian War in the 5th Century BC between Athens and Sparta. Sparta was the premier, reigning Greek state because of its leadership in the wars against the Persians, but Athens had risen fast and saw itself as an equal power with a better navy and more extensive trading empire. Athens and Sparta both created countering alliances to counterbalance each other and, in a situation reminiscent of the start of the First World War, a war between the Greek states of Corinth and Corcyra (Corfu) drew in their alliance partners, namely Sparta and Athens and the Greek-allied states. The war lasted for 30 years, resulting in Athenian defeat and destruction, the waste of Spartan and Greek manpower and eventual Persian domination over the Greek states.

In his essay, Graham Allison enumerates 16 instances of such changeover between an existing and an emerging power and claims that in 12 of these instances, the change was accompanied by war. This chapter reviews the four instances in which war did not happen. In the first case, both late 15th century Portugal and a rising Spain were neighbouring kingdoms with different initial aims. Portugal was focused on exploration and colonisation. Spain was completing its Castilian Wars of Succession and removing Islamic influence from the Iberian Peninsula. Its focus during colonisation was on Central America, the Caribbean, and the western coast of the Americas. The Treaty of Tordesillas, negotiated in 1494 and blessed by Pope Julius II some 10 years later effectively divided the world between the Spanish and the Portuguese, stopping further rivalry. Later, the Dutch and the English would compete with Spanish and the Portuguese. Thus, war between rising Spain and established Portugal was averted due to common ancestry, religion and culture, non-overlapping spheres of influence and the later emergence of serious

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competition from other powers that were adversarial culturally and politically. In the second instance, Allison said that the presence of nuclear weapons prevented the Cold War getting 'hot', despite the many active proxy wars – the Korean War, Vietnam War, Arab-Israeli Conflicts, Indo-Pakistani Wars, Rhodesian and Namibian conflicts, etc. – being fought in the developing world. Thus, while there was no traditional war, the conflict was determined by economic and political might and espionage.

In the last instance of a peaceful transfer of hegemony from the British Empire to the United States at the end of the Second World War, war was avoided due to the British increasingly viewing the US as a succeeding Anglo-Saxon power with similar political and economic institutions, a common language, large intermixing of populations and lack of adversarial outlook. Even France, though racially like Britain but culturally different and a long-time adversary of Britain had been co-opted into the Anglo-Saxon system after its defeat in the Napoleonic wars. Its transition to a 'liberal democratic, western' state, as well as its incorporation into the British alliance system and later into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) cemented its position as an important part of this alliance system, suggesting that political, racial and cultural similarity can bring about co-option rather than conflict.

Similarly, Germany – a long-time adversary of both France and Britain but having the same Anglo-Saxon cultural roots – has joined the NATO alliance system after the Second World War. Germany was also a challenger to the British Empire in the early 20th century, having successfully dethroned France as the leading continental power in Europe in 1871. Its challenge to the Anglo-Saxon system resulted in two World Wars. The political system in Germany during both periods was authoritarian; hence the conflict with the British-French alliance can only be construed as natural.

This chapter in the following section analyzes US-China power dynamics in present geopolitics and compares China's position with that of Imperial Germany at the turn of the 20th century. The challenge for the US is to contend with the reality of China, a nation of 1.4 billion people, an economy of nearly \$6 trillion and a 5,000-year-old cultural history. China has the size be a long-lasting threat to the US. Both President Biden and President Xi have denied any possibility of mutual conflict, on-the-ground realities notwithstanding. The COVID-19 pandemic can be viewed as chapter one of the new Cold War, while the stand-off in the Himalayas with India, a subsection of chapter one. The Russia-Ukraine war is chapter two. The Cold War between the US and China is either underway, or both sides are playing a remarkable drama on the international stage.

## China the New Imperial Germany

Chinese tradition and cultural ethos strongly favour an authoritarian political ideology or *Zhong-guo*, 'Middle Kingdom'. This term, in principle, means that the dominant Chinese state is the Middle Kingdom, or central authority to whom all other states must bend. To this ideology can be added the principle of the Chinese emperor or ruler being the arbiter of 'all under heaven' who cannot be questioned. Another important point is that the Chinese Communist Party, unlike the Soviets in Russia, did not believe in international communism, but rather considered itself the successor of various ancient empires. This also means that the present rulers of China wish to overturn the 'century of humiliation' that China suffered from the 1840s to the mid-1940s. According to this vie, the unfinished business of China requires re-establishing control over Taiwan, taking back suzerainty of the Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan and the Indian territories of Ladakh, Sikkim and Tawang, reoccupying islands in East and South China Seas and establishing control over Korea, the northern parts of Vietnam and Mongolia. Additionally, the People's Republic of China plans to establish trade or political hegemony over the rest of Central and Southeast Asia and secure its energy supplies by intervening in South and Southwest Asia. Achievement of such aims would require challenging the present geopolitical order, especially the US-based alliance system. It would also mean achieving dominance over or degrading the capabilities of key swing states such as India, Russia, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam which can challenge Chinese hegemony in Asia and the Pacific.

Additionally, ever since it opened its economy in 1979 and undertook national modernization, China has built up a tremendous infrastructure and manufacturing base as well as modern institutions for research and development. Lee Yuan Kew the late leader and developer of Singapore who had been a mentor for Deng Xiaoping of China said about China that its rise would require the West to create a new power balance as the existing power balance cannot

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accommodate the magnitude of Chinese growth. In 1980, China had 10 percent of America's real total Gross Domestic Product (GDP); and 6 percent of its export volume. The total value of foreign currency held by China, meanwhile, was just one-sixth the size of America's reserves. (Allison 2015) By 2014, those figures were 101 percent of GDP and 106 percent of exports. China's reserves today are 28 times larger than America's (Allison 2015). The historical significance of China overtaking the US's GDP is equivalent to the US overtaking Great Britain in 1872 and, later, Germany in 1875 (Khoumour, 2008). These events, along with German naval expansion, led to the formation of the Triple Entente. By mid-2016, China's real GDP was already 12 percent higher than that of the US. At the end of 2015, China's total manufacturing output represented 150 percent of the US, and was equivalent to the combined total of the US and Japan (Canrong, 2016). This rapid rise of China has taken place in broadly two phases. The initial phase from 1978 till 2008 could be termed, in the words of Chairman Deng, the 'hide and bide' phase. A newly rising China was careful not to step on toes of other powers. China expressed its growth as peaceful and merely an effort to eradicate poverty amongst its citizenry and improve their quality of life. It pointed to Singapore as an example of a benevolent authoritarian state and to faltering democracies as examples of wasted opportunities. Its support for the Western alliance helped it overcome censure for the suppression of human rights and civil liberties in its own provinces. By providing cheap labour and unthought-of profit margins to Western corporations, China slowly cemented its position as a manufacturing hub. China needed stability and access to Western markets and used this opportunity to develop key industries and scientific-industrial-military capabilities. The Chinese would thus 'bide their time and hide their capabilities', as a prelude to a more muscular approach that would come later. During this phase, all talk was about emulating China's peaceful rise, even though in 2006 the US steamed a carrier battle group through the Straits of Taiwan when China threatened the Taiwanese with invasion.

Like Imperial Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, modern China has surpassed the existing power (the US) in many vital parameters of economic and industrial criteria such as coal, iron and steel manufacturing, production of cars, foreign direct investment, GDP, exports, oil and energy consumption, smartphone and software markets, consumer goods markets, internet usage, scientific publications, carbon emissions, holdings of US debt, luxury goods consumption, ship building and holdings of foreign reserves. (Allison 2015) Like Germany, which had surpassed the British Empire in iron and coal production and industrial output and got into a naval arms race that ultimately triggered war and its downfall, modern China has started a ship-building and island-making spree to push the US and its allies out of the western Pacific. It has made extensive forays into the Indian Ocean and set up its first international naval base in Djibouti, with friendly ports at Gwadar in Pakistan, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and the Cocos Islands, the latter of which were leased to China from Myanmar. China claims the use of these ports and bases to ensure safety for its energy imports from the Persian Gulf, as well as to combat piracy. Imperial Germany felt that, as a premier rising great power, it should have overseas colonies and bases from which to project power. Similarly, China has tried to acquire national assets, ports and airports from countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Kenya, which have fallen prey to its predatory economics. Imperial Germany, towards the end of the first decade of the 20th century, felt that it was the premier land power and the next premier naval power. It started a naval arms race with the British. Similarly, China is now reaching a stage where it thinks the West must recognise and respect the 'Chinese Dream', which has been presented by Xi Jinping to represent the deepest aspirations of hundreds of millions of Chinese people, who wish not only to be rich but also powerful. In Beijing's view, China is now being restored to its rightful place, where its power commands recognition of and respect for China's core interests. (Allison 2015) China expresses as its core interests the areas it disputes with its neighbour's both on land and sea and deems these non-negotiable. In addition, it demands as a measure of its great power status, unrestrained authority over Asia and the Near East. These 'core interests and principles' are destabilizing to the present international order and a threat to its neighbours' and could respond by engaging China in conflict with the US, NATO and the Quad.

## **Is China Really a Threat?**

The era of 'hide and bide' effectively ended with the rise of Xi Jinping, who has stunned colleagues at home and China-watchers abroad with the speed at which he has consolidated power and displayed it openly, especially with the 2008 Beijing Olympics, 2009 Naval Parade and the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Domestically, he has bypassed a seven-man standing committee and instead consolidated power in his own hands, ended flirtations with democratization by reasserting the Communist Party's monopoly on political power and attempted to transform

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China's engine of growth from an export-focused economy to one driven by domestic consumption. Overseas, he has pursued a more active Chinese foreign policy that is increasingly assertive and has created disquiet and alarm in his neighbours. Countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, such as Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand, which were previously neutral or supportive of China, have expressed reservations. Countries like Vietnam, Philippines, India and Taiwan, with whom China had disputes, have started developing capabilities to resist Chinese expansion. India and Japan, which have long resisted being associated with alliances directed against specific countries, have come together with the US and Australia to form the Quad, which aims officially to promote democracy in this part of the world and maintain freedom of navigation of the high seas. This, on paper, looks like an attempt to oppose the complete takeover of the South China Sea by China. Similarly, countries that had even better relations with China or had developed extensive trade dependency on China, such as Myanmar and Australia, have been forced to take a second look at Chinese involvement in their national trade, security, research and development.

China has questioned the existing Bretton Woods global economic system and tried to build its own, looked down on global treaties that do not favor it, has threatened its smaller neighbors with military power on border issues and has used predatory economics to obtain control of national assets in many countries. But do these policies and steps by China indicate belligerence or simply that it is now trying to make its weight on the world stage felt? The challenge for the US would be to engage with the Chinese on issues such as the continued de facto independence of Taiwan, China's digital policing and its use of cyber espionage, differing policies towards North Korea, NATO counterbalancing of Russia and the Russia-Ukraine war, China's increased naval presence in the Pacific and its claims over the South China Sea and human rights in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong.

On the face of it, it does seem that China poses a threat to US dominance. This threat is not just about control of waterways, trade routes, access to natural and energy resources and financial transactions, but also about minds and opinions. The Chinese model would be deemed a success only if a matching democratic model fails. The Chinese Dream can only be successful as long as it keeps finding sources of raw material delivered for free as a result of its predatory economics. It has already ensnared countries such as Laos, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Maldives, Pakistan, Fiji, Samoa Islands and Sudan in debt traps and has high stakes in countries such as South Africa, Myanmar, Thailand, Australia, Italy, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Iran and many other such countries, especially in Africa. It is the largest trading partner to most African and Asian countries and even larger economies, such as India and Japan, as of 2019-20. Since then, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent suspicions of Chinese withholding of information, there have been global cutdowns on trade dependencies with China. The US, Australia, India, Japan and many other countries have been diversifying their trading relations and decreasing their trade volumes with China.

China itself has declared that its intention is to end the domination of the Bretton Woods institutions and dismantle the US-based alliance system, though it was the security and prosperity provided by these very institutions that allowed the rapid expansion of Chinese power. It has undertaken 'salami slicing' measures in the South China Sea, the Himalayas and the East China Sea to snatch territory from India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan and Japan; it has been accused of diverting rivers and promoting dissidents by India; and it has been also accused of industrial and technical espionage by the US. Its many 'Confucius institutes' in various countries are trying to harness goodwill in these countries in a bid to create soft power and an idea that the Chinese are the power whose time has come and that even the US and its allies would not risk a conflict with China. All these measures show an impatient power, which is now unwilling to abide by existing international rules and norms, believing itself to be above those rules. At the same time, it tries to enforce those same rules in its neighbourhood whenever they are to its advantage, quoting instances from the previous century when the US or Britain had in their heydays broken or bent international rules. China has also tried to give justification for its actions as a payback or rejig of terms imposed upon it during the 'century of humiliation'. All these steps have alienated even some of its most consistent supporters and have created fear and doubt in the minds of other regional and global powers, namely the US, UK, France, India, Japan, Australia and Vietnam. For all these countries, there is fear and apprehension of Chinese territorial and economic aggression, creating circumstances ripe for another application of the 'Thucydides Trap'. A look at China's wars with its neighbours from the Korean War right up to its major war with Vietnam in 1979 shows that Beijing turns violent when confronted with the prospect of permanently losing control of territory or face. It tends to attack one enemy to scare

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off others, and it rarely gives advance warning or waits to absorb the initial blow (Beckley and Brands, 2021).

## **The Likely US and Western Response**

The US had initially been supportive of the rise of China after the Sino-Soviet fallout, seeing it as a necessary counterbalance to Soviet Russia. From 1978 onwards, the reforms introduced by Chairman Deng Xiaoping led to rapid growth in the Chinese economy, manufacturing base and research institutes. This was also supported by the US to the extent of facilitating the entry of China into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and accepting the People's Republic of China's 'One China' policy and derecognizing Taiwan even though Taiwan was a treaty-based ally of the US. Despite this support, there have been instances when the US has taken stand at odds with China; after the crackdown on Tiananmen Square and subsequent killing of protestors, the US stopped arms sales to China. Also, in 1996, the US steamed a carrier battle group through the Taiwan Straits when the Chinese threatened invasion and carried out live missile tests in response to calls of independence from Taiwan. There was also the incident of the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the Balkan Crisis. At the time, however, these incidents were minor irritations in an otherwise smooth relationship. Things changed after the ascension of Hu Jintao and, later, Xi Jinping. The Chinese have taken a much more aggressive stance in the South China Sea, East Asia and the Indian Ocean region. They have claimed the entirety of the South China Sea which, if allowed to happen, would severely limit US communications with its allies in East Asia, cut off Japan from its route of import of resources and impact its energy security, isolate the Taiwanese in a China-dominated South and East China Sea and push the US back beyond the second island chain. These fears have been realized following Chinese testing of anti-carrier and Anti-Satellite (ASAT) weapons, their strengthening of the Hainan Island submarine bases and their building airstrips on the engineered islands and reefs in the South China Sea. Chinese purchase and acquisition of stakes in rare earth mines, purchase of energy sources in Africa and attempt at buying off Shell Oil's stake in the Sakhalin Island (directly affecting Japanese energy security) are now being seen as more than just energy security efforts.

In response, since 2013, the US has pivoted to the Indo-Pacific, set up informal alliances with regional powers such as India, Japan, Australia and Vietnam and strengthened its existing alliances in East and Southeast Asia. The revitalization of the Quad and the formation of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) have been the US's attempt at stabilizing the situation in Southeast Asia. It has reactivated its bases in Singapore and the Philippines, set up agreements with Vietnam on naval facilities, is cooperating with the navies of India, Australia and Japan in the region and has refused to accept the Air Defense Information Zone (ADIZ) set up by the Chinese in the South and the East China Seas. This zone is important as the South China Sea is the main highway over which trade passes from the Indian Ocean into the Sea of Japan and the Pacific Ocean. It is the major route through which China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan import oil as well as through which these countries trade most of their goods to Asia and Africa. About half of the world's entire merchant fleet passes through these waters (Mirski, 2015). China imports around 80 percent of its oil from the Persian Gulf, which is shipped through this route (Mirski, 2015, Buszynski, 2013). In the case of war with either the US or its allies or with India, these shipping routes would become vulnerable to blockade, which could slow down Chinese mobilization. Hence, to protect its economic 'chicken neck' China has been modernizing its navy and building up an expeditionary capability in recent years. (Heydarian, 2014)

In the last 5-6 years, we have seen the US effectively disengaging from the Middle East and Afghanistan and refocusing on Europe and the Indo-Pacific. It has been building up its capabilities again after a decade of squandering men and material on counterinsurgency to face a challenge coming from the coordinated actions of Russia and China, two nations that, in the past, have built up a sizeable war chest, an economically strong China and both nations having stockpiled large numbers of long-range missiles as area denial weapons. Both Russia and China are presently revanchist powers with memories of lost empires they wish to re-establish. Chinese actions in the South China Sea and their image of a modern economically robust nation have created doubts in the minds of US allies. Between 2015-21, it would look as if the US was no longer willing to sweat it out to maintain its primacy in international affairs. The country was looking inwards, into its own problems of income disparity, race relations and domestic violence. However, the Covid-19 pandemic from January 2020 through to the present day and China's possible involvement in its origins have created a global feeling of angst against the nation. Many western countries that had previously latched on to the BRI have now stepped back and are seeking alternate supply chain

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arrangements that benefit countries like India, Vietnam, Indonesia and Bangladesh. Countries such as South Korea, Japan and the US are now moving much of their manufacturing commitments away from China. Thus, the process of realignment of western manufacturing demand from China to other friendly countries has started, and though most of these countries will not be able to supply at the volumes China did, there is expected nevertheless of a broader distribution of the supply chain centers across the globe.

The other part of the springing of the Thucydides Trap could occur from China's own insecurities of its power when the other regional powers supported by the US catch up. China's economy, the engine of the CCP's international clout, is showing signs of slowing down. From 2007-19, growth rates fell by more than half, productivity declined by more than 10 percent and total debt surged eightfold (Beckley and Brands, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has dragged down growth even further and plunged Beijing's finances. Moreover, China's population is aging at a devastating pace. From 2020-35 alone, it is project to lose 70 million working-age adults and gain 130 million senior citizens (Beckley and Brands, 2021). The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has stiffened European resolve under NATO solidly behind the US, with even neutral European countries willing to join NATO. Russia's losses in Ukraine, even if it wins the war, have taken the sheen out of its military halo. Western military technology has shown its mettle against even upgraded Soviet Cold War technology, and damage to the Russian economy takes it out of any direct competition with the US. China, therefore, might calculate that the best time to hit the alliance would be in the mid or late 2020s as the countries recover from the pandemic. Likely targets could be the South China Sea, Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, Ladakh or Tawang. It could try a short sharp high intensity war with a single country involved to grab land or sea and present a fait accompli. The challenge for the US and its allies then would either be to accept the loss and then let the alliance fall apart gradually due to loss of trust or start a large regional war.

## **Conclusion: Will the Thucydides Trap Play out between the US and China?**

The question of whether China would fight the US as a rising power to establish its hegemony or whether the US would accommodate the Chinese and give them space or make way for them can be answered by a study of the power dynamics of the two nations, their political culture and systems and their ideologies. The rise and fall of Imperial Germany in its quest for pre-eminence holds important lessons for contemporary China. NATO has utilised the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine to consolidate itself and essentially degrade Russian military capabilities. The economic dimensions of the war would put back Russian national strength by at least a decade if not two, and there are whispers of political ramifications that could lead to regime change.

This suggests that the US will not brook a challenge to its alliance system and its pre-eminence in the near future. All talk of the US losing its appetite for competition is exactly that, just talk. It is not matched by events on ground. The US has strategically withdrawn from areas that are not vital to its interests and focused on areas that are vital for maintaining its global position. Both the US and China will not risk a loss of face with each other. Loss of face for China and any visible defeat of its military would lead to social and political unrest domestically and could even oust the Communist Party, as happened with Imperial Germany and Kaiser Wilhelm II. The Party would rather sacrifice its leader than be thrown out of power. Loss of face for the US in any region would mean loss of trust in it by its allies, which could lead to its alliance-based hegemony falling apart. This chapter therefore proposes that if a rising China challenges the US in the traditional power struggle, the Thucydides Trap may play out. However, it may not mean a hot war, but rather economic and political manoeuvring, espionage and proxy wars. If the Chinese play it slow, develop a more tolerant political climate and give up on their predatory economics, chances are that they may also sit at the high table. A hot war might result from the Chinese side if there is a threat of loss of face, as the Chinese leadership would be afraid of having been shown to be unwilling to fight to their domestic populace, which could then question their own leadership. As Thucydides said of Athens and Sparta, that given the conditions war was inevitable. However, since then mankind has progressed rapidly in developing destructive weapons and war is no longer a cheap or easy option, more so between super-powers. Hence the greater disinclination to go to an actual war and more likelihood of a great power rivalry. War is not inevitable between the US and China but the risk is there. It remains up to the leadership of both countries on how they manage their positional jousting.

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