

Will China-US Great Power Competition Lead to War? A Thomistic Perspective

Written by Andrew Latham

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/12/will-china-us-great-power-competition-lead-to-war-a-thomistic-perspective/>

ANDREW LATHAM, AUG 12 2021

This article is structured in the manner of Thomas Aquinas' "exemplary method of philosophy," the '*quaestio* format' used in his magnum opus, the *Summa Theologica*. This format – itself a reflection of a core pedagogical technique of the universities of his time, *quaestiones disputatae* (literally, questions debated) – provided a means of thinking through a question that engages with contrary arguments but ultimately demonstrates the superiority of one answer over another. In Aquinas' *Summa*, each "article" reflects this basic approach, with each section of the article having the same basic structure and opening with its own distinctive opening phrase that reveals its specific purpose within the text. of sense, for he is concerned not merely with informing his readers, but also with teaching them the proper method for thinking through an issue – one that forces them to give serious consideration to alternative perspectives before arriving at a reasoned conclusion.

The structure is outlined as follows:

- "*It seems that....*" – First, Aquinas states the position he will end up disagreeing with, and then gives what he thinks are the three best arguments in favor of that position.
- "*On the contrary....*" – Second, Aquinas articulates his own position, typically citing some authoritative text in support of his position.
- "*I answer that*" – Third, Aquinas lays out the argument in favor of his own position.
- "*Reply to....*" – Finally, Aquinas rebuts each of the counter-arguments to his own position as presented in the first part of the article.

Question

Article 1: Will the accelerating growth in China's power, increasingly harnessed to the goals explicit and implicit in President Xi Jinping's "China Dream", result in a systemic or world war with the United States?

Antithesis

Objection #1: To be sure, the rise of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) as an economic, diplomatic, and military power – a dynamic focused and amplified by Xi Jinping's ambitious vision of a rejuvenated China – does raise the very real possibility that the PRC will (or at least will attempt to) displace the United States (US) as global hegemon or predominant political, economic, and military state within the international system. And in the past, it has been more common than not that the rise of an active challenger to the dominant or status quo power at has been strongly correlated with what scholars refer to as "hegemonic war" – that is, a system-wide war over the very nature and governance of the international order. Indeed, some scholars now refer to this phenomenon as the "Thucydides Trap", after Thucydides' account of the way in which Athens' rise threatened Spartan hegemony, trapping both powers in a dynamic leading inexorably to the Peloponnesian War. However, in the US/PRC case the likelihood of such a war is in fact vanishingly small due to the incontrovertible fact that these two powers are enmeshed in web of economic relations that is without precedent in the long history of hegemonic rivalry stretching back at least as far as Thucydides' time. Simply put, these two countries share what is in effect a single economy. This interdependence

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mitigates the possibility of hegemonic war in that it makes war far too costly for either power to seriously consider. In such a war, there could simply be no winners – only losers. This makes war an irrational, perhaps even unthinkable, option.

And as for the Thucydides Trap, history teaches us that it is far from being inescapable. While it is true that the rise of Athens that precipitated the Peloponnesian War, it is also true that the rise of Spain in the late-15th century did not trigger a war with hegemonic Portugal; nor did the rise of the US in the early 20th century spark a war with hegemonic Britain. Nor, significantly, did the four-decade long “twilight struggle” between the US and USSR result in anything even remotely like a hegemonic war. Now the international realm is without question one of uncertainty – what Clausewitz called the “fog of war” shrouds not only the battlefield in time of armed conflict, but the entire terrain of international relations even in times of peace (Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, Book 1, Chapter 3). And it is also true, as the Second Vatican Council noted, “insofar as men are sinful, the threat of war hangs over them, and hang over them it will until the return of Christ” (*Gaudium et Spes* 78). While war due to misperception, miscalculation, miscommunication, or even our post-Lapsarian human nature remains an ever-present possibility, in this case the economic costs of war, and the obvious benefits to both countries of some form of what St. Augustine called *tranquillitas ordinis*, strongly favor the continued peaceful rise of China – even if that rise ultimately leads to the PRC displacing the US as global hegemon. Therefore, there will be no hegemonic war between the world’s two largest economies and two most powerful states.

Objection #2: Further, unlike in most of the past cases of hegemonic war, the current geopolitical situation is pregnant with the possibility that the human race might extinguish itself. Today, any such systemic or total war would inevitably involve the use of nuclear weapons – which the US possesses in abundance and China is acquiring at an accelerating rate – either as a result of strategic calculation on the part of one or both of the powers or alternatively as the tragic outcome of unintended escalation.

Either way, war between these two powers would necessarily result in unprecedented – even unimaginable – death and destruction being visited on both countries. All of this dramatically changes the cost-benefit calculus of any aspiring hegemon that might wish to advance its ambitions by launching a nuclear *coup de main* – not to mention those of any existing hegemon that might consider launching a nuclear strike to pre-empt an aspiring challenger. Indeed, the reality of Mutually Assured Destruction is more likely to induce Mutually Assured Caution – that is, self-restraint to the point where neither power would countenance any use of military force for fear that it might lead to a catastrophic, even suicidal, war. Therefore, there will be no hegemonic war between two of the world’s most powerful, nuclear armed states.

Objection #3: Finally, the PRC does not need to formally assume the mantle of global hegemon in order to realize Xi Jinping’s admittedly ambitious “China Dream” – a dream that imagines a future China as an influential, perhaps even predominant, power on the world stage. These goals can all be achieved without the need for some sort of military preponderance or coercive domination. Indeed, as China’s leaders over the past few generations have learned, and as the current CCP leadership surely understands, the PRC can flourish as a global Great Power – and perhaps even as a dominant regional power – without assuming the costs or responsibilities of global hegemony. Specifically, they view this goal as being achievable through economic, diplomatic, and other “soft power” initiatives (like the so-called “Belt-and-Road Initiative”). Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the pursuit of Xi Jinping’s “China Dream” will result in either a sustained Chinese bid to displace the US as global hegemon or a calculated campaign of Chinese regional brinkmanship that might inadvertently precipitate a major war with the US.

Thesis

On the contrary, in the same way that “the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta... made war inevitable,” so too the rise of China will instill fear in the United States, driving great power competition and making war between these two powers inevitable as well.

Arguments in Favor of the thesis

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I answer that, if the current trend-lines concerning the development of Chinese and US comprehensive national power (i.e. power in its economic, diplomatic, institutional, and military forms) are projected out a decade or so, they will intersect. When this happens, history dictates that, absent certain highly atypical mitigating circumstances, an armed conflict is destined to erupt between these two powers. Such mitigating circumstances, history teaches us, include mutual exhaustion as a result of other conflicts (as in the Portuguese/Spanish case), and a disposition on the part of a declining hegemon to accommodate a rising one (on the basis of shared values and interests, as in the UK/US case). Perhaps obviously, none of these mitigating conditions obtains in the contemporary case.

Given the prospect that such a conflict has the potential to be catastrophically counter-productive for all involved, it may well be the case that both of the principals will limit the types of weapons employed (use of nuclear weapons, for example, will be eschewed), their targets (large civilian centers will not be attacked), and perhaps even their operating environments (space, it is reasonable to assume, will be off limits). This being said, all other types or weapons (hypersonic cruise missiles and anti-ship ballistic missiles, for example) and operational concepts (hybrid war and cyber-war, to take but two obvious examples) will likely be employed à l'outrance.

Thus whatever the limits with respect to means, it is highly unlikely that the *stakes* of the looming Sino-American war will be limited in any meaningful way: this will be a struggle for mastery of the globe in which only one power (and perhaps, in a worst-case scenario, neither power) will prevail. There is nothing to suggest that once the trend-lines intersect, the US will peacefully accommodate the PRC's attempt to usurp the mantle of global leadership.

I concede the following points to those who assert that the Thucydides Trap is escapable. First, the trap may be avoided if the US acts now with prudence, fortitude and strategic skill it may be able to dissuade the PRC from aggressively seeking to realize its hegemonic aspirations. This might include taking steps to bend either the US or Chinese trend lines in ways favorable to the status quo, containing or rolling back Chinese efforts to position itself favorably for a bid for hegemony, and/or rallying the international community in support of US leadership and in opposition to China's bid for global hegemony. Second, it is also possible that the Trap may be escaped if there is a change of regime, or a change in regime leadership, in the PRC. Finally, the trap may not spring if China's economic growth peaks well short of overtaking that of the US.

It follows from all this that the recent and accelerating growth in China's comprehensive national power, increasingly harnessed to the hegemonic aspirations intrinsic to Xi Jinping's "China Dream", is likely to result in a systemic war with the US in the foreseeable future.

Replies to objections

Reply to Objection 1: Economic interdependence was higher in Europe in 1914 than between the US and PRC today, a fact that didn't prevent the rise of another aspiring hegemon seeking its "place in the sun" from triggering a catastrophic world war. To be sure, the literature dealing with the outbreak of the First World War is vast and varied. No one doubts, however, that whether the war was an accident (the world somehow "slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war" in David Lloyd George's felicitous phrase) or the result of Germany's or Russia's or some other power's strategic (mis)calculation, it happened despite extensive and multi-dimensional (economic, social, and cultural) integration – indeed, it happened in the context of a degree of integration that was not reached again in Europe until recent decades.

Extensive and deep economic integration – with all the associated mutual sensitivity and vulnerability that entails – is thus no prophylactic against systemic or hegemonic war.

Reply to Objection 2: Given the degree to which still-raw memories of the recent Great War – coupled with fears of catastrophic destruction at the hands of massive fleets of strategic bombers – permeated popular, political, and military cultures during the interwar period, one might reasonably have expected that the prospect of a second world war would have been rendered simply unthinkable. And yet, just over two decades after the Armistice was signed in 1918 the world was at war again.

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Thus we must conclude that we cannot count on fear of death to deter or prevent the outbreak of war – even war that might involve the use of nuclear weapons, and even war that has the potential to trigger a planetary extinction event.

Reply to Objection 3: The PRC may or may not *need* to displace the US and assume the mantle of global hegemony, but that is clearly and undeniably what the dominant faction within the CCP *desires*. Indeed, the CCP ruling clique more than simply desires such an outcome, it sees it as (a) absolutely necessary, (b) unquestionably foreordained, and (c) entirely right and just. In their mind, the necessity is a function of political logic: they need this victory over the Americans as a means of cementing fealty and homage to a regime that otherwise rests on increasingly wobbly foundations. China's rulers see it as foreordained in that global domination is the natural and inevitable *telos* of China's pre- and post-revolutionary history (the former a deeply embedded cultural disposition sometimes referred to as the "Middle Kingdom Syndrome"; the latter a function of Marxist-Leninist ideology and Xi's revival of Mao Zedong Thought). And, perhaps most importantly, the CCP ruling clerisy believe it to be only right and just that China should reprise its historical role as the Middle Kingdom – that is, as the righteous center of the universe around which all other powers revolve, and the preeminent political power to which all others owe tribute and deference.

Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that the PRC will continue, indeed intensify, its current strategic campaign to displace the United States as both the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific region and the hegemonic power on the world stage.

About the author:

Andrew Latham is a professor of International Relations at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, specializing in the politics of international conflict and security. He teaches courses on international security, Chinese foreign policy, war and peace in the Middle East, Regional Security in the Indo-Pacific Region, and the World Wars. His most recent book is *Theorizing Medieval Geopolitics*.