

Understanding the Current China-US Relationship through the “Thucydides Trap”

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the theory of the "Thucydides Trap", including its theory, validity, and exceptions in history. Based on an analysis of the events that correspond to and support this theory from ancient times to the present, the four criteria applicable to the Thucydides trap are summarized: national safety, economic interests, competitive global status, and ideological difference. The paper analyzes the four criteria with regard to the "China-US relationship", and concludes that the conflict between the two countries will be more focused on economics, technology, and politics rather than war. Furthermore, to avoid the worst outcome between the two countries, mutual respect is necessary even if the two countries try to compete with one another.

Introduction

The current tensions in the bilateral relationship between China and the United States makes a large proportion of the public in those countries, and beyond, intrigued and concerned, wondering where the conflict will lead them. Many scholars and journalists such as Raymond Zhong and Steven Lee Myers proclaim that this is the most significant current international conflict. As Zhong and Lee Myers stated in the New York Times, “No relationship is shaping the planet more. And no relationship seethes, across such a wide and consequential set of issues, with more tension and mistrust” (Zhong, Raymond, and Steven Lee Myers). The conflict between the two nations is complicated because China and the US are deeply intertwined, and the relationship is simultaneously mutually beneficial, but also discordant. Moreover, the conflict can be found in three main areas: economics, technology, and politics.

China's economic and technological development have been closely linked with Western countries (including the US) since 2001, when China joined the World Trade Organization after going through a period of internal reform and opening up. In 2018, the leading country in terms of importing and exporting goods with China was the United States, which had a total trade value of 4107.1 billion USD, while the European Union, the second, had a total trade value of 583.3 billion USD, and this robust trade relationship has resulted in many industrial or foreign trade jobs. For example, in 2019, U.S. companies exported goods and services worth up to \$164 billion to China, and these companies and jobs exported to China provided nearly 900,000 U.S. jobs. At the same time, exports to China also accounted for 7.4% of all U.S. exports (USCBC). So any conflict between the two countries, such as economic decoupling, technological conflict, or trade wars will not only affect the national situation of both countries but also disrupt the global supply chain. The current conflict between the two countries broke out mainly due to the contribution of coronavirus and technological competition on 5G.

The US and China's relationship in current times has been consistently marked with conflict, caused by incompatible ideologies. While the current tensions are deeply rooted in the global pandemic and concerns over technological advancements, the earliest conflict can be traced to 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defeated the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek, supported by the US. Even before the widely discussed incident of US House Speaker Nancy Patricia D'Alesandro Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan in August, China had already been trying to decrease its dependence on the US, increasing other countries' dependence on China, and expanding its

global influence (Hass). While the US held the attitude that China disrupted the global order, it correspondingly launched a series of sanctions against China.

Due to the possible impact of the deteriorating relationship between these two countries on our world, an analysis of the current situation through the lens of the “Thucydides trap” and real-life considerations is worth researching. Based on the research, the current international relationship between China and the US suits the four criteria of the Thucydides trap summarized by this paper from past examples, which are threatened national safety, economic interests, competitive global status, and ideological difference. However, there is still a very small likelihood that China and the US will begin a “hot” war with guns and missiles. This paper will investigate the ancient theory, “The Thucydides Trap,” explore whether conflict between China and the US falls into that trap, analyze the different countries that have gone through the trap, and lastly suggest that the US and China relationship is unique and will lead to different outcomes.

Insights on the Thucydides Trap

Past recorded history has shown that conflict between different groups goes back thousands of years, such as when caves of ancients used up their resources and then would attack another cave to seize food to survive. In our current society, war occurs because of territories; resources; poverty; or inequalities in society, economy, and political policies. In one battle, The Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens, a famous Athenian historian named Thucydides observed the war and wrote the book, “History of the Peloponnesian War”. In the book, he wrote that the Spartans were afraid that the Athenians would continue to develop and one day threaten them. The Spartans started the war due to fear, honor, and resources (Chittick, pp. 069–090). In addition, based on the quotations of Thucydides, this trap was a theory popularized by a scholar named Graham Allison, who was inspired by the historical event of the Peloponnesian War (Mohammed). The theory indicates that “when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the most likely outcome is war” (JL, Chris).

This theory itself was often used to predict the potential possibility of war occurring between two countries. This trap has high credibility and accuracy due to research that found out, “the past 500 years have seen 16 cases in which a rising power threatened to displace a ruling power” (Allison). While the wheel of history keeps turning, the form and mode of war are also evolving. At the time of the Peloponnesian War, war was narrowly defined as military conflict over national strength and armies. But in current times, conflict has increased its diversity compared with the old times. Any action or conflict that seeks interests with others based on the interests of that group (as small as a few people or as large as a country) can be generally regarded as wars, such as public opinion wars, economic wars, technology wars, and so on.

So now this Thucydides Trap still has a high reference significance, but the specific expression of war may be different from the age proposed by this theory. Hence despite the numerous breakout events that exacerbate the conflict and bring it to the public’s eye, the test of each other and the conflict between China and the United States actually existed a long time ago. A lot of internet users think that there’s a great possibility of China and the US ending up at war. For example, when the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in China posted that they are “Prepared for War” on Weibo (one of the largest Chinese social media platforms), they gained over 300,000 likes in 12 hours, in addition to a large group in the comment area suspecting that there will soon be a war occurring (Dangwal). Motivated by the belief that Chinese hackers stole US intellectual property, on September 24th, 2018, President Trump added an additional 10% tariff which later climbed to 25% on January 1st, 2019, on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods. He also proposed to impose tariffs on up to \$50 billion of Chinese products (Huang). Beyond that, in 2020 President Trump limited the number of Chinese who can work in the five state-run Chinese news organizations in the United States down to 100 people, expelling a large proportion of Chinese journalists stationed in the United States (Tracy). Furthermore, the US suggested Huawei’s (a Chinese technology company) success was based on its theft of technology from the US. Therefore the US, accompanied by its allied countries including Britain, Australia, and New Zealand all banned Huawei, and listed it on the international blacklist (Inkster). Last but not least, talking about the

Covid-19 pandemic that hit the whole world, President Trump, during a speech on July 4th, 2020, said that “China must be held fully accountable” (Wilkinson), and accused Chinese hackers of stealing America’s research on Covid and vaccines.

Historical Reference of the Thucydides Trap

To have a more comprehensive understanding of the current situation, learning about the past is helpful for comparative purposes. As the Chinese Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty once said, "History is a mirror that reflects the vicissitude of life" (Wong). The two most famous examples of the Thucydides trap are the Athens-Sparta Peloponnesian War and the US-USSR Cold War, and among these examples there are four main reasons that the two superpowers at that time began the war or conflict: threatened national safety, economic interests, competitive global status, and ideological difference.

In the Athens-Sparta war, the two powers involved were respectively Athens and Sparta. First of all, Sparta was an oligarchic city-state while Athens implemented democracy; these two ideologies are fundamentally different. In Athens, the people had an equal right to participate in public policy, while in Sparta most or even all of the effective rights were in the hands of the privileged classes, and the majority had been trained as soldiers since they were children (Andrews). This made the two city-states form different alliances with other city-states with similar ideologies. The Athenian alliance formed an empire that included most of the islands and city-states along the northern and eastern coasts of the Aegean Sea, while the Spartan alliance included most of the major land powers in the Peloponnese and central Greece, as well as Corinth on the sea (Strauss). Because of this reason, the two alliances often had wars and conflicts, for example, Sparta’s invasion of Attica, and Athens's control over the Megara, one of Sparta's allies.

Following that, the rapid development of Athens also challenged Sparta's hegemony and threatened its national safety. The naval power of Athens was outstanding, and according to the Stele, there was a decree for an alliance between Athens and Kerkyra. The Stele shows three figures standing along with each other. On the left stands Athena, saint of Athens, and on the right the patroness of Kerkyra. Finally Zeus, who represents rule and justice, stands in the middle authenticating the alliance of both sides (Attic workshop). Kerkyra was one of the three city-states with the greatest naval power, the other two being Corinth and Athens (Thucydides). Hence Sparta accused Athens of violating the treaty they signed in 446/445 BC, by threatening their national safety (Bagnall). Last but not least, Athens was a very powerful city-state where the nearby towns and cities of Attica, where it was located, joined together and formed a polis, therefore the coalition and geographic location (near to the ocean) of Athens provided it with a lot of trading opportunities. They traded with the Italians and Egyptians for wood and grain and traded olive oil, silver, and pottery (Garland). Moreover, Athens had the most dominant naval power with more than 400 battleships called triremes and 80,000 sailors and soldiers, which was even bigger than the other city-states added up (Daley). On the other hand, Sparta was a city-state that focused a lot of its resources on war and invasion. Sparta had an intimidating and formidable military power, especially its ground force. The two countries at this stage were the two most powerful city-states in Greece.

Recent Crisis Involving the Thucydides Trap

The cold war between the US and USSR involved these factors as well. The US became a superpower around 1898 after the US and Spain made a cease-fire agreement on their conflict over Cuba and the Philippines, which pushed the US into the global stage (Ellwood). Beside this, the USSR also became a superpower after World War 2 due to Soviet expansion, economic boost, military development, and political alliance with other eastern European countries (K. Alina.). First of all, the USSR was based on communism while the US was based on capitalism and democracy; the two most incompatible ideologies. Each party wanted more countries to share the same ideology with them in an alliance. Therefore after World War 2 when notable countries, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union, met

in Germany, Stalin from the USSR proposed to make Germany united but unarmed. But the other two countries strongly disagreed, especially the United States which grew distrustful of the USSR's intentions. Because once Germany was weakened but still unified, if it wanted to develop, it would inevitably develop together with the republics in Southeast Asia, which is what the capitalist country did not want to see (Rainio). So very soon this conflict escalated to verbal warnings about the use of nuclear weapons and ultimately the Cold War.

Secondly, after World War 2, the United States started the Marshall Plan. The Marshall Plan provided economic aid to Europe for post-war recovery. In fact, the true purpose of this was to suppress the development of communism against the Soviet Union and its allies (History.com Editors). This led to the political and economic dominance of Western Europe, which embarked on the emergence of a new world pattern of bipolar confrontation and the blockade of the Soviet Union's economy (De Long). The nuclear deterrent and arms race threatened the two countries and pushed the two forces closer to conflict. Lastly, the USSR and the US became the two most powerful superpowers after WW2, just before the Cold War started. Summing up, the Cold War involved all four of these factors.

Exceptions of the Thucydides Trap

On the other hand, some cases escaped the Thucydides trap. One representative example was between Britain and the US during the 20th century, where the areas of competition were global economic dominance and sea dominance in the Western Hemisphere. Britain had been a very powerful nation since the 18th century, and because of its colonization all over the world, it was also called the “empire on which the sun never sets,” while the US was just a colony at that time. However after World War 2, the US, as the victorious country we all know, entered a period of rapid development.

At the same time, the British suffered from the Suez Crisis in 1956, or the Second Arab–Israeli war. Egypt used to be a colony of the British, hence the British held a 41% share of the Universal Company of the Maritime Canal of Suez (Fry). The new Egyptian government however abandoned the old government's pro-Western policies and this deprived Britain of nearly half of its assets in the canal, causing strong dissatisfaction among Britain and France. Finally, the British, France, and Israel together opened a war with Egypt that has been widely criticized by the international community (Warner). Last, the Suez Crisis devastated Britain's imperial colonial system, while Britain declined from a global superpower to a regional middle power (Brown).

The transfer of power, which took place almost at the same time in the two countries, avoided the possibility of more contradictions between the United Kingdom and the United States. Until now the relationship between the US and the UK was still that of friendly allies. On the U.S. department of state's government website, it stated that “The United States has no closer Ally than the United Kingdom.” It also wrote that mutual trade and investment are at the heart of our prosperity, and our commitment to free market values enables our economies to thrive,” suggesting their economic cooperation (Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs). In addition, the compatible ideology and shared history of their residents moreover bound together the alliance between these two nations and avoided conflicts or war from happening.

Brief Analysis of China–United States relations

Likewise, assessing the relationship between China and the United States fits the Thucydides theory and the previous cases to a very large extent. But concurrently the relationship is also unique compared to all the others, therefore it also may lead to a different result.

Discussing national safety, the US claimed that up until August 1st, 2022, twelve Chinese agents were indicted for disrupting U.S. presidential candidate competition, illegally obtaining information, trolling Taiwanese

independence efforts, and spying on U.S. pro-democracy activists (Ellis). If this was true, this was unethical and detrimental to the US. Despite that, the Chinese government also expressed strong concern about South Korea, since South Korea has a more U.S.-oriented foreign policy. The U.S. and South Korea have been allies since the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty. Under the deal, U.S. military personnel maintain a persistent presence in South Korea (Gu). Since South Korea is near China, this means that from China's perspective, the US army is right at their front door, being a potential threat to China's national safety. According to the Thucydides trap, wars can easily occur when countries threaten each other's national safety. Hence the Chinese government is concerned for the same reasons the US is worried.

However, some reasons refute this hypothesis. Compared to the past, modern warfare brings few benefits to either side of the war, including land, labor, resources, etc. A war can add numerous extra costs to a country's expenses, for example human resources and economic funds for ammunition. Indeed, one single cruise missile will cost around \$8.4 million and the Minuteman missile cost around \$33.5 million each (The Brookings Institution). Furthermore, due to the existence of nuclear weapons, there is no complete victory obtainable in current warfare (Franco). Using the Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as examples, the incidents caused 214,000 deaths, and the survivors also suffered from illnesses such as cancer, leukemia, and other sequelae from radiation (ICAN). So regarding these facts, China and the US will have a very low likelihood of entering a direct war or physical conflict.

When examining economic interests, China and the US have some obvious conflicts as well. The most significant example would be the trade war, referring to an earlier statement. Not to mention that democracy is one of the most important symbols of the US while modern China has been governed by the Communist party for over 73 years (Liang). Lastly, the US dollar (USD) is the most widely used currency in the world since large amounts of trade were invoiced with the USD. This ensures that the United States has a lot of freedom and power in its economy because the power to control interest rate cuts and hikes is in its hands. To minimize the influence of the US in China, the Chinese government started the Belt and Road Initiative. The goal of the initiative was to invest large amounts of money in countries mostly in Asia, so it can increase the use of RMB in Asian countries and achieve a similar function to the US dollar (Maizland). From each country's action of promoting their currency, it is shown that China and the US have competition in the economy. However, as stated earlier, China and the US were closely related to each other in the economy, so even though they are competing with each other, they also rely, at least for now, on each other. Hence while getting the most out of trading, both sides also don't want to completely end their cooperation.

Conclusion

Summing up, the current situation between China and the US is relatively tense. Generally speaking, China can't stop the current trend of economic and social development in a short period. The national conditions of China and the United States are also very different, in terms of degrees of freedom, ideology, social systems, and values. Conflict and the probing of each other will continue because each side treats the other country as a potential threat. Similarly, the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta was also mainly caused by ideological differences, fear of each other's overwhelming strength, and national security. However, the probability of war between China and the US in the true sense of guns and fire is very small. That said, a small disagreement may lead to escalation and become a higher level conflict. For example, the Suez Crisis caused serious consequences, but before the crisis no one imagined a policy change could damage Britain's power so significantly. Therefore, even though according to analysis, China and the US fit the majority aspect of the Thucydides trap, the conflict will still be more focused on economics, technology, and politics rather than war. Furthermore, to avoid the worst outcome between the two countries, mutual respect is necessary even if they try to compete (Jennings).

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