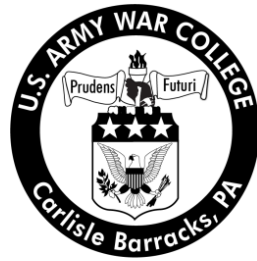


China, the United States and Thucydides: Is War Inevitable?

by

Colonel Lorri A. Golya
United States Army



United States Army War College
Class of 2014

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Colonel Lorri A. Golya
United States Army

Dr. Christian B. Keller
Department of National Security and Strategy
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Abstract

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China's rise and the uncertainty or fear that it inspires in the United States have caused politicians, military leaders, political analysts and even academicians to reference Thucydides who wrote about the Peloponnesian War. According to Thucydides, the rise of Athens and the fear it inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable. Modern historians and political analysts refer to this as the "Thucydides Trap," the idea that a peaceful transition between a rising power and a ruling power is not possible. This paper will examine great power transitions by considering extant Power Transition Theory, the roles that fear, honor and interest play in the competition for power and finally, provide a cursory overview of China's strategic culture (identity, political culture, and resiliency) which influences these motives, informs their national interests, and determines their degree of satisfaction with the international system. Armed with this understanding, policymakers in both China and the United States may indeed avoid the Thucydides trap.

China, the United States and Thucydides: Is War Inevitable?

War is about politics, and politics is about the distribution of power—who has how much of it, what they do with it, and what the consequences are.

—Conway W. Henderson¹

China's rise and the potential redistribution of power in the international order that could result have caused many to consider the United States' relationship with China as "the most challenging and consequential bilateral relationships that the United States has ever had to manage."² China's unfinished rise means that no one yet knows – including China – its true potential and ability to project power; how much power and influence it will have or how it will use its growing power.³

This uncertainty or *fear* has caused politicians, military leaders, political analysts and even academicians to reference Thucydides, who wrote about the Peloponnesian War: "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable."⁴ Modern historians and political analysts refer to this as the "Thucydides Trap," the idea that a peaceful transition between a rising power and a ruling power is not possible and that *China's growth in power and the alarm which this inspires in the United States, may make war inevitable*. And when one considers that "since 1500, 11 of 15 power transitions have resulted in war,"⁵ it makes one wonder if the United States and China can avoid the trap or if war is truly inevitable.

Thucydides saw relations among nations as a competition for power and war as a possible result of that competition, but he further explained that in this competition, people (nations) act out of fear, honor and interest.⁶ If, as Thucydides states, fear, honor and interest dictate a nation's behavior in international relations, then whether

war is inevitable or not will depend largely on the role each of these terms plays in whether a nation chooses war or peace in the competition for power.⁷

This paper will examine great power transitions by considering extant Power Transition Theory, the roles that fear, honor and interest play in the competition for power and finally, provide a cursory overview of China's strategic culture (identity, political culture, and resiliency) which influences these motives, informs their national interests, and determines their degree of satisfaction with the international system. Armed with this understanding, policymakers in both China and the United States may indeed avoid the Thucydides trap.

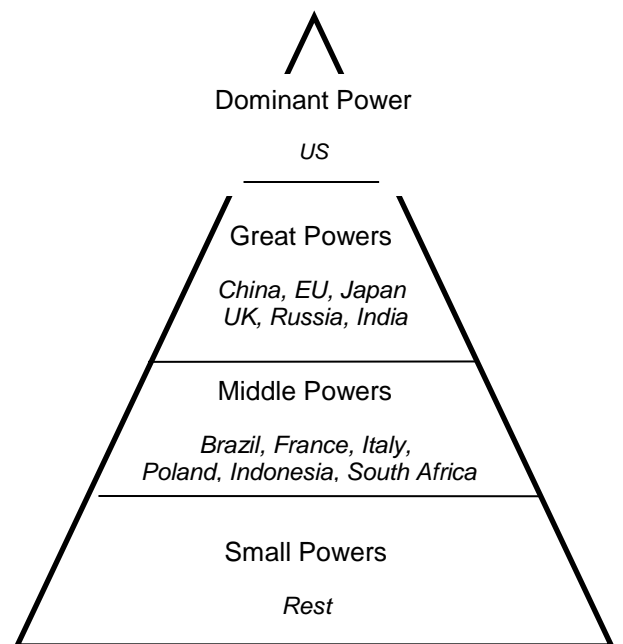
Power Transition Theory

“States rise and fall in their international status. Some emerge as the premier powers and even hegemons of their day, while others drop out of the ranks of leading states and even suffer a loss of their statehood,”⁸ Athens, Carthage, the Roman Empire, The Ottoman Empire, Germany, France, and Russia all come readily to mind when considering this statement. Some states may be able to regain their position, but those cases have been rare in history and if it does occur, the regained status is often short-lived -- Germany after World War I is one example.⁹

It is China's rapid rise in international status and the implications of that change in status that are at the heart of the current international commentary on power transition. The Thucydides Trap argues that a peaceful transition between a rising power and a ruling power cannot take place, or at best is quite unlikely. In 1958, A.F.K. Organski, perhaps prompted by this idea, first posited a theory to try to understand power transition among great nations. The Power Transition theory (PTT) he arrived at has been refined, extended and tested since that time and may serve as a useful tool

for policymakers as they work to understand power interaction in 21st Century international relations.¹⁰

In PTT, power is defined as “the ability to impose on or persuade an opponent to comply with demands.”¹¹ National power is derived from the size of the population, its economic productivity and the political capacity of the government to garner those resources to achieve their national interests; but it is the combination of these elements that give a nation the ability to project power beyond its own borders. Singularly, none of these elements can confer international power.¹²



Source: Tammen, et al., (2000) (nations added by author)

Figure 1.

PTT describes international politics as a hierarchy with a dominant power sitting atop the international system. The dominant power is the nation with the largest proportion of power resources (population, productivity and political capacity) and is recognized as the international leader; it retains its position by maintaining the greatest proportion of power over would-be rivals and by creating and managing alliances with

nations that share a common commitment to the rules and norms established within the international system that satisfy their national interests.¹³

Residing below the dominant power are the Great Powers. These are nations with a significant proportion of the power within the system who are committed to supporting and sustaining the international order and are satisfied with the leadership of the dominant power within that order.¹⁴ There are great powers, however, who are not satisfied and have both the capacity and the desire to challenge the dominant power for international control.¹⁵ The Middle Powers occupy the third tier of the hierarchy and although they are substantial states with considerable resources, they lack the national power to challenge the dominant power; and occupying the final tier are the Small Powers, although large in number, have limited power and resources and pose no threat to the dominant power.¹⁶

Whether or not the dominant power will be challenged or threatened is relative to the degree of satisfaction other nations within the hierarchy feel toward the international system and the capacity of would-be rival nations to actually challenge the dominant power. This degree of “satisfaction” is subjective, but nations are generally dissatisfied when they are not fully integrated into the international system and feel that the system is unfair, corrupt or dominated by hostile forces.¹⁷ But dissatisfaction alone is not enough; the challenger must have the capacity to challenge the dominant power. Therefore, likely challengers arise from among the great powers. Dissatisfied great powers, though, do not become challengers until they have achieved parity or begin to overtake the dominant power.¹⁸ Parity is achieved when a dissatisfied great power develops, either through increased productivity, technological innovation, and/or political

capacity, greater than 80 percent of the strategic resources of the dominant power, and overtaking occurs when the challenger's economy is growing at a faster rate than that of the dominant power.¹⁹ Only when the challenger state gains parity with or overtakes the dominant power, can it reasonably expect success, so this is when conflict is most likely to occur. But it is important to note that parity and/or overtaking alone does not necessarily lead to conflict. The challenger must be determined to change the status quo and have the will of its polity to assume the risks associated with changing the international order.²⁰ If the dominant nation can convince the challenger that its interests will be incorporated into the existing order along with changes in power structures, conflict can be avoided.

Of the current great powers, only China has the potential to challenge the United States' position in the hierarchy and then only if its rise continues and it remains dissatisfied with the current international system.²¹

In the interests of theoretical succinctness, only the fundamentals of the PTT were considered in the preceding paragraphs in order to view the Thucydides Trap through a modern theoretical lens. But the outcome remains consistent. As the challenger (Athens) gains parity with or begins to overtake the dominant power (Sparta), war is often the result. The divergence between the trap and the theory lies in the historical fact that Athens was not necessarily dissatisfied with the status quo. China too, may not be as dissatisfied as many fear or claim; after all, it is the current international system that is assisting its rise.

Fear, Honor and Interest

The vanity of nationalism, the will to spread an ideology, the protection of kinsmen in an adjacent land, the desire for more territory or commerce, the avenging of a defeat or insult, the craving for greater national strength or independence, the wish to impress or cement allies – all these represent power in different wrappings.²²

It is clear that nations compete for power. But this passage provides the practical purposes of war, what moves nations to choose war over peace is often not practical and might be seen in retrospect as irrational. Thucydides' Athenian envoys tell the Spartans that

It follows that it was not a very remarkable action, or contrary to the common practice of mankind, if we did accept an empire that was offered to us and refused to give it up under the pressure of three of the strongest motives, fear, honor, and interest.²³

Thucydides clearly believed fear, honor and interest to be the chief motivational factors that influence the behavior of nations in his epoch, but does this theory hold up when applied to other wars in other periods?

Donald Kagan, in his book, *The Origin of War and the Preservation of Peace*, studied the motives of fear, honor and interest by considering the origins of the Peloponnesian War, the Second Punic War, World War I, and World War II – “examples from different historical periods involving a variety of types of states living in different kinds of international systems.”²⁴ A brief summary of his observations follow:

The Peloponnesian War (431-401 B.C.)

Although the growth of Athens may have inspired fear in Sparta it was not the proximate cause of the Peloponnesian War. The Corinthians felt that their former colonists, the Corcyreans, had failed to show them proper respect in past interactions and they had grown to hate them. Corinth's decision to intervene in the civil war in

Epidamnus provided them the opportunity to avenge themselves against the Corcyreans. Neither interest nor fear played a part in Corinth's decision. Their motivation came from a sense of wounded honor and a desire to punish the Corcyreans and to increase their prestige in the Greek world.²⁵

The Second Punic War (218-201B.C.)

Sagantum a city in Spain, under Roman protection, feared the presence of Hannibal, the Carthaginian commander in Spain and asked for help from Rome. Hannibal had not attacked Sagantum, nor made any hostile gestures toward it, but Rome sent an envoy to Hannibal who then assaulted and threatened him. Because Rome had no intention of taking action to defend Sagantum or to engage in hostilities with Hannibal, they sent the envoy to quiet their allies, maintain their honor and to check Carthage's growing power in Spain.²⁶ Rome's insults were humiliating to both Carthage and Hannibal and he refused to accept them and their implications. Had he done so, his personal honor and the honor and reputation of Carthage in Spain would have been diminished. For their part, the Romans could not accept Hannibal's affront, and the war began.²⁷

World War I (1914-1918)

After World War I Sir Edward Gray, Britain's Foreign Secretary, wrote that "the real reason for going to war was that if they [Britain] did not stand by France and stand up for Belgium against Germany, we should be isolated, discredited and hated; and there would be nothing for them but a miserable and ignoble future."²⁸ Understanding the danger Germany posed to their interests, the British "brought themselves to face its consequences, by seeing it as a threat to their honor."²⁹

World War II (1939-45)

Germany invaded Poland and in response Britain declared war on Germany. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, under much public scrutiny and criticism, had shortly before reversed his earlier appeasement strategy toward Germany and vowed that Britain would resist any attempt by any nation to dominate the world by force.³⁰ Chamberlain would go on to guarantee Poland, Rumania and Greece against aggression.³¹ The British people responded enthusiastically. According to Kagan, this new resolve resulted from “a sense of shame and anger over honor betrayed more than from a need to protect British interests.”³² Germany’s invasion of Poland, then, made Britain honor bound to defend Poland. By the time Winston Churchill became Prime Minister, most of Britain “preferred the risks and suffering of a terrible war to the dishonor of a shameful peace with a dictator.”³³

Honor

In these cases and others, Kagan demonstrates “how small a role considerations of practical utility and material gain, and even ambition for power itself, plays in bringing on wars and how often some aspect of honor is decisive.” Indeed, in most of his historical examples, Kagan places honor above fear and interest as a motivation for war, but clearly elucidates all three, as did Thucydides, as the underlying causes for armed conflict.³⁴

That fear and interest moves states to war will not surprise the modern reader, but that concern for honor should do so may seem strange. If we take honor to mean fame, glory, renown, or splendor, it may appear applicable to an earlier time. If, however, we understand its significance as deference, esteem, just due, regard, respect, or prestige we will find it an important motive of nations in the modern world as well. Honor, in these senses, is desirable in itself, but it also has practical importance in the competition for power. When it is on the wane, so, too, is the power of the state losing it, and the reverse is also true. Power and honor have a

reciprocal relationship. It is obvious that when a state's power grows, the deference and respect in which it is held are likely to grow as well. But the opposite is also true.³⁵

Consider the role fear, honor, and interest has played in the wars the United States has fought – The American Revolution, the Civil War, Vietnam, Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq I and II, or Afghanistan – in each, the role of honor, especially, cannot be ignored; or consider the role of fear, honor and interest in the context of our current foreign policy with China, Iran, Russia, and the Ukraine. Although one rarely hears the word honor in “international contexts, [it] lurks under words like credibility and resolve.”³⁶

Alliances

Another commonality of Kagan's four wars has to do with the role alliances played in the outbreak of war.

The complex system of alliances led both Corinth and Corcyra to seek assistance from Sparta and Athens; Carthage played one against the other. In the end, both Sparta and Athens sought war at the urging of their allies and because of the nature of the alliance system within ancient Greece. The conflict spread across the Peloponnese and encompassed nearly every Greek city-state.

If Hannibal had accepted the demands of the Romans, Saguntum might have been encouraged to “trouble tribes allied or subject to the Carthaginians, as they may have been doing already, and others might do the same, in the belief that Rome would protect them.”³⁷ If Athens had not come to Corcyra's aid, it may have encouraged wavering tributary states in the empire to rebel and ally with Sparta, not to mention the loss of the large Corcyrean fleet. The alliances in this case served to ignite the proximate causation of the wars in question.

In World War I it was Britain's alliance with France and commitment to Belgium that formally brought them into the conflagration; in World War II, the guarantee to Poland was the proximate cause.

Alliance systems are common throughout history; in some cases they serve to prevent war and in others, as shown above, contribute to their outbreak.³⁸ The United States has five mutual defense treaties and two security cooperation agreements with countries in the Asia Pacific region. An understanding of the power that alliances can have in influencing fear, honor and interest cannot be overlooked.

Strategic Culture

Strategic culture influences a state's fear, honor and interest in times of diplomatic crisis, informs its national interests, and determines the degree of satisfaction it feels with the international system. Strategic culture therefore affects a country's strategic thinking and actions. *The Analytical Cultural Framework for Strategy and Policy* provides a framework to consider a nation's strategic culture using three components - identity, political culture and resiliency.³⁹

Identity defines who we are and is formed when a group of individuals come together based on some commonality – race, religion, gender, language, family, tribe, or nation. Identity provides a sense of purpose; political culture refers to how the group organizes itself in order to achieve its purpose; resiliency is the group's ability to adapt to its environment and accept change.⁴⁰ “Identity, political culture and resiliency inform national culture, which in turn determines national values; national values frame how the actor determines and expresses its national interests; and once interests are determined, culture, through the three components, continues to influence actions and perceptions.”⁴¹

With these definitions and processes in mind, an overview of China's geography, history, beliefs, and current domestic and regional concerns follows. The Power Transition Theory; the roles of fear, honor, interest; and the impact of strategic culture in the U.S.-China relationship all affect and are in turn affected by these considerations.

Geography

The singularity and longevity of the Chinese culture has been significantly impacted by its geography.⁴² The influence of geography is probably one of the most defining measures of how a culture develops. It determines the availability of resources, where the population lives, what they do, and what they eat. It determines their access to other cultures and to trade, and whether or not they are safe from invasion or surrounded by potential enemies. According to the CIA World Factbook and the National Geographic World Atlas, China is the world's fourth largest country, shares borders with 14 countries, and has 9,000 miles of coastline. Its landscape is diverse – hills, plains, deltas, plateaus, deserts and mountains. Its climate is varied, ranging from tropical in the South to subarctic in the North. Approximately 12% of China's land is arable. China experiences earthquakes, droughts, floods, typhoons, tsunamis and sandstorms. "China's mountains, deserts and the Pacific Ocean have provided formidable barriers between China and the rest of the world" which have often served them well in war and when they have sought isolation, but have not always stymied invasion.⁴³ The arid and semi-arid western half of the country has affected demographic trends, as have the locations and flow of the great rivers, nearly all of which are in the East. The Himalayas to the south offer a formidable but not insurmountable barrier to access to the Asian subcontinent, while Manchuria juts like a thumb into Siberia, creating easy access to Russian mineral wealth.

Population

China is the most populous country in the world with 1.3 billion people – 92% are Han Chinese; 1.3% are Zhuang and 7.1% are other (includes Hui, Manchu, Uighur, Miao, Yi, Tujia, Tibetan, Mongol, Dong, Buyei, Yao, Bai, Korean, Hani, Li, Kazakh, Dai and other nationalities).⁴⁴ As of 2010 China is officially atheist with 52% of its population unaffiliated with any religion; 13.1 % of those that do identify with a religious faith claim Buddhism as their preference, followed by 5.1% claiming Christianity, 1.8% claiming Islam and less than 1% adhering to other faiths.⁴⁵ The literacy rate is 95% among all Chinese citizens. By the end of 2012, China's working age population (15-64) was 1.0040 billion, the largest in the world; 34.8% are employed in agriculture, 29.5% in industry, and 35.7% in services and the state officially has an unemployment rate of 6.4%.⁴⁶ The diverse geography has caused an uneven distribution of population within China – 50% of its 1.3 billion people live in urban areas and 94% live in the eastern third of the country.⁴⁷ The disparity in wealth between urban and rural dwellers has been the subject of much concern among the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party in the last decade, as has the exponential growth in affluence, “westernization,” and industrial strength of the elite in the great coastal cities, such as Shanghai.

History

According to Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, “historical experience creates preconceptions about the nature of war and politics and may generate irresistible strategic imperatives.”⁴⁸ China's history spans more than 4,000 years and its cultural foundation lies within this antiquity. China has been governed by warlords, kings and emperors, dictators, colonial powers and most recently a communist regime. Its people have experienced benevolence, oppression and ruthlessness by its leaders.

Some have led China to greatness and others to near collapse. Although the people have been known to revolt against an overtly oppressive government, such rebellions have seldom resulted in any significant changes for the long term.

China is an ancient civilization that has known imperial greatness - when art, philosophy writing and literature flourished; technological and engineering marvels (China invented the concept of modern paper, printing, firearms, banking and paper money); and at several points in its development may, in fact, have been the center of the civilized world as its age-old mantra, "The Middle Kingdom," alludes.⁴⁹

China has also known despair. Millions have died through natural disasters, famine, brutality and war over the centuries. Throughout much of its history, ancient and modern, China has been at war. In modern times China has experienced peasant uprisings, revolution and civil war (Taiping Rebellion 1851-1864; the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911; May 4th Movement of 1919; Civil War 1947-1949; the Great Leap Forward 1958-1961; The Great Famine--40-million died of starvation; and the Cultural Revolution.)⁵⁰ China has also experienced invasion, occupation, and subjugation by foreigners (called "barbarians" by the Chinese). Chinese historians refer to this most recent period of foreign domination as its "Century of Humiliation: 1839-1949" (Opium War of 1839; Boxer Rebellion 1898-1901; Japanese Invasion and Occupation 1894, 1931, and 1937.)⁵¹ The Chinese experienced loss of sovereignty and territory during this period (Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau) and, most recently, believe they have been contained and isolated by the western-dominated world community.⁵² With these experiences China gained a distrust of foreigners and foreign intentions.

In 1997, General Li Jijun, then of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) said in an address at the U.S Army War College:

Before 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established, more than 1000 treaties and agreements, most of which were unequal in their terms, were forced upon China by the Western powers. As many as 1.8 million square kilometers were also taken away from Chinese territory. This was a period of humiliation that the Chinese can never forget. This is why the people of China show such strong emotions in matters concerning our national independence, unity, integrity of territory and sovereignty. This is also why the Chinese are so determined to safeguard them under any circumstances and at all costs.⁵³

Identity

Although geography and history have had a great impact on the identity of China, its "ancestor worship" culture has much to do both with Chinese identity and the tenacity of the Chinese civilization.⁵⁴ The premise of this belief lies in the "duty of the son to care for the parents both before and after death" which has had the effect of making Chinese families, strong, capable and resilient – a quality noticeable today.⁵⁵

Chinese values are also derived from Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism is undisputedly the most influential thought pattern that forms the foundation of Chinese cultural tradition and still provides the basis for the norms of Chinese interpersonal behavior.

But Confucianism is not without its problems and contradictions.

His [Confucius'] love for the hierarchical socio-economic and political relationships: ruler and servant, father and son, his preference for the rule of benevolence and rituals to the rule of law, his admiration for the high class and rulers and prejudice against the commoners, his view on the unalterable class stratifications, his way to make the people follow an order but not to understand it and his "contribution" to China's authoritarian tradition...the entire stock of Confucius' political thought is about authoritarian order and rulership."⁵⁶

And, although one of the five virtues is “harmony over conflict,” a “People’s Liberation Army (PLA) task group publication has shown that from 2200 BC (the beginning of the Chinese civilization) to 1911 (when the dynastic history came to an end), China had experienced 3,766 wars, almost one war per year.”⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that leaders of the party and the military have little to no experience in waging modern war and the Chinese military has no actual experience in using their new weaponry or testing the validity of their current doctrine.

Political Culture

During China’s entire history, it has been ruled by either dynastic or authoritarian regimes, which later made it well suited to communist ideology.⁵⁸ Communism and the nature of modern authoritarian rule has now become part of China’s identity. Although China is a communist state, very much controlled by the party, recently “economic imperatives have taken primacy over communist dogma and ideology.”⁵⁹ The party is the central authority and in the perception of the Chinese people, the party has brought stability and is responsible for China’s rise as an economic, political and military power. The party sees China’s success as proof that there is an alternative to the “western” way of growth and prosperity. The political culture of China is not destined to change in the near term, barring some unforeseen “black swan” event such a gigantic natural disaster that could potentially delegitimize the regime in the eyes of the people.

Domestic Affairs

The final factors influencing China’s identity are current domestic and regional concerns, which in turn are influencing its strategic thinking and actions. Domestically, China is facing a myriad of daunting social, demographic, environmental and resource challenges. Socially, there is an unequal distribution of wealth and unequal growth and

development among regions, urban and rural. Urbanization has stressed the existing infrastructure - housing, roads, public services (mass transit, hospitals, waste facilities) and water supply—and new development is falling behind public demand. Urbanization is expected to continue, with some estimates as high as 90% by the end of the century which could exacerbate the problem of food production within China.⁶⁰

Demographically, the Chinese population is aging, the working age population is declining, the fertility rate is down and there is gender imbalance – many more males than females. Singularly, these issues are a concern, but when combined, the results could be strategically devastating. The Chinese will, by necessity, have to reconsider or relax some of their current policies and create new ones. The One-child policy, for instance, will need even further refinement than that just finished, and mandatory retirement age policies, pension plans, healthcare for the elderly, social security, and women's rights issues will all have to be substantively addressed in the near term. The social implications of not finding solutions to these vexing problems are profound, but the economic ones could prove disastrous to China's rise, costing it nothing less than its competitive edge in the globalized world. Environmentally, China is the world's largest single emitter of carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels. China is dealing with air pollution (greenhouse gases, sulfur dioxide particulates) from reliance on coal, pollution which, in turn, produces acid rain, water shortages, water pollution from untreated wastes, and deforestation; there is an estimated loss of one-fifth of agricultural land since 1949 to soil erosion and economic development.⁶¹ China is aggressively working on these issues but their combined impacts economically and socially will get worse before they get better.

Finally, China lacks the natural resources, raw materials and energy reserves to meet its current and especially future demands and actively pursues agreements with nations all over the world that can provide those resources - Angola provides oil, South Africa, coal; Gabon, iron ore; Zambia, copper; and Equatorial Guinea, timber, and these are just a few examples.⁶² Additionally, they have Free Trade Agreements, existing and proposed, with 28 economies in five continents (from Brazil to Switzerland, Iceland to New Zealand) and that number will continue to grow.⁶³ These agreements have positioned the Chinese favorably in a geostrategic sense, but many have placed China in direct competition with the West or their immediate Asian neighbors. It remains to be seen if this “race for resources” will someday propel China into an international crisis.

Regional Affairs

Regionally, “China sits at the center of a ring of conflict”⁶⁴ and is surrounded by United States alliances and partners. In the past seventy years China has fought wars with five of its fourteen neighbors (India, Japan, Russia, South Korea and Vietnam) and a number of the [other] neighboring states are ruled by unstable regimes.⁶⁵ “With the exception of Pakistan, China has no reliable ally in Asia; China is strategically the most isolated rising power in contemporary world history.”⁶⁶

Border disputes in the west with India; unsettled issues in Tibet and the Uyghur; and maritime territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) disputes with Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea and Russia all plague Chinese foreign policy.⁶⁷ China also has an EEZ dispute with the United States, and the American relationship with Taiwan has long been a source of contention between the two nations. Additionally, the United States has alliances or growing partnerships with all the maritime disputants, save Russia and India. For China, these disputes are

issues of national unity, honor, and territorial integrity and until they are resolved, preferably in China's favor, the Chinese leadership feels that their nation will not be a full-fledged power.⁶⁸

Resiliency

China has survived as a civilization for 4,000 years. All Chinese are “aware of this sense of continuity, of a culture that has withstood the test of time and adversity as no other human institution has done, and they are deeply influenced by this fact.”⁶⁹ Even when China experienced invasion, its culture survived, subsuming the invader rather than being subsumed.⁷⁰ Additionally, China has been able to bring itself from the verge of economic and possible state failure thirty years ago to unprecedented levels of economic growth and development today.⁷¹ The nation has adapted its government, institutions, and ideologies to survive and prosper – truly, that is resiliency. As one scholar put it, “there is pride of being Chinese, the collective memory of the humiliation and the aspiration for a return to greatness.”⁷²

China's strategic culture has informed and influenced China's identity, political culture, and resiliency which, in turn, have determined its national interests. According to David Lai, China's national interests include an insistence on national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, and national unity; a secure political system under the Communist Party; social stability; and sustainment of economic and social development.⁷³

The Dilemma

At present, both the United States and China understand that their national interests rely heavily on the strength and credibility of their bilateral relationship. Senior leaders and government officials from both countries are engaging in unprecedented

dialogue and exchanges on issues ranging from security and trade and broader economic issues, to the environment and human rights.⁷⁴

The Chinese assert that their rise will be peaceful and the United States claims that it welcomes China's rise as a regional and global partner, with both countries acknowledging the economic interdependence that underpins the relationship. China's actions, however, are undermining their message. Increasing aggression toward their neighbors regarding territorial disputes; the unilateral declaration of controlled air space over the East China Sea; a lack of transparency in their military build-up; skyrocketing theft of intellectual property; and cyber-attacks – all of these can be seen as contradicting the assertion of a peaceful rise and are causing the United States and regional players to question China's true intentions, both in the region and globally. Its national interests—borne of its strategic culture and values—seem to be trumping all else. The character of China's rise matters.⁷⁵

So does the American response to their rise. The U.S.'s current strategic rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific has become one of China's top concerns. Despite efforts to reassure the Chinese that the intent of the rebalance is to “promote peace, stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific,” they are not convinced.⁷⁶ It is their view that the true motive of the rebalance is to *contain* China and it is this perception that may undermine U.S. efforts. Chinese “fear” is bumping up against American military interests.

At present, the U.S. has a concentrated military force all around the Chinese geographic rim. As two recent chroniclers stated, “The U.S. Pacific Command is the largest of the geographic combatant commands in terms of its geographic scope and

non-wartime manpower... The operational capabilities of U.S. forces in the Asia-Pacific are magnified by bilateral defense treaties with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines and South Korea and cooperative arrangements with other partners in the region."⁷⁷ It does appear that China may, after all, have a reason (from their perspective) to fear American intentions in the Pacific and East Asian regions. Although all the instruments of national power are part of the American rebalance to the Asia-Pacific strategy, the military instrument is receiving all the press. The military's role has been clearly articulated and is the most visible aspect of the strategy: the air/sea battle concept; advancement of ballistic missile defense; contention during territorial and economic exclusion zone (EEZ) disputes; increased military presence and engagements with and within regional partner nations; building partner capacity and capabilities; and forming new military partnerships. All of these examples further exacerbate China's perception of fear and make it appear that their interests, and perhaps even their honor, demand action. As history and Donald Kagan have shown, once national honor is perceived to be at stake, war is hard to avoid. All one must do, it is said, is to look at a map from the Chinese perspective, and the idea of containment is not an irrational one. If one were in the shoes of the current Chinese leadership, the question must be posed: how close are we to the edge of defending national honor?

Underneath the political rhetoric, the United States' rebalance to the Asia-Pacific and China's strategic actions in the region have created misunderstanding, fear, and a clash of interests as each country tries to assert their power and pursue their national interests. It is a dangerous situation, and it seems clear that the American strategy has engendered much of this angst by failing to sincerely take enough of China's

perspective and interests into account when formulating U.S. policy and strategy in the Pacific region. Is the Thucydides Trap unavoidable? Have both countries begun the spiral downward to war that characterized ancient Sparta and Athens?

Moving Forward to an Uncertain Future

As the United States moves forward in its relationship with China, there are several factors that should be kept in mind. First, modernization and economic development are China's number one goal and armed conflict of any kind, with any entity, would be detrimental to that goal. Second, "due to its defensive and peaceful philosophy and the lessons of history, Beijing is supersensitive to such issues as foreign intervention and interference, hegemonism, regime legitimacy, territorial sovereignty, and national survival."⁷⁸ That means the United States must use every ounce of its informational and diplomatic power to reassure the Chinese leadership that American intentions in the Pacific and East Asia are decidedly not anti-China, but in fact supportive of the rule of international law and the prosperity of the global community. Third, although, unification is one of China's three "sacred historical missions", it is unlikely to go to war over Taiwan unless backed into a corner, and its sense of honor challenged. A corollary to that issue is that China is not trying to expand its territory or advance communist ideology, but its government will continue to partner with and build relationships with states to enhance its prestige around the world, secure vital raw materials and increase access to markets.⁷⁹ To that end, the U.S. should work hard to dispel the fear in allied regional nations that China has aggressive or neo-imperial pretensions and back up that diplomacy with reduced, or at least "understated" arm sales, thereby de-escalating fear of American intentions within China. It should also extend the economic olive branch whenever possible, albeit in a difficult fiscal

environment, to allow Beijing to culture the perception, at least, of American mutual economic interests. Fourth, China does not have a workable design for a new world order and does not seek to create one; therefore, the United States should not foster its own bloated sense of fear regarding Chinese intentions.⁸⁰ Finally, as Kagan states, “no international system is permanent,” and the Chinese will eventually have to accept more responsibility in upholding the current and future world order as a great power. For that to happen—a contingency that will assist American interests by reducing the strain on American means--American policymakers will have to come to terms with their own sense of American honor in order to assuage China’s desire for an honorable position in the world order. For their part, the Chinese will likely have “to accept and sometimes even assist changes, some of which they will not like.”⁸¹

Conclusion

There is still time to refocus and redirect the American rebalance to the Pacific from the heretofore over-emphasized military to greater diplomatic, economic and informational efforts. Indeed, the current fiscal environment in the United States may demand it. The United States-China relationship will require constant vigilance and nurturing with solid and sound statesmanship on both sides. “Tensions and suspicions exist in many international relationships; it remains to be proven that they must bring war.”⁸² With careful thought, understanding of Chinese strategic culture, and effective implementation of an altered American Pacific strategy, the Thucydides trap can be avoided.

It is true that no theory can provide absolute answers to current problems and no study of historical events will provide more than guideposts for the future, but together both provide a good starting point to preserve the peace and avoid war. Thus it is with

good reason that we remember Thucydides' admonitions about fear, honor, and interest. It is well that history does not repeat itself, for neither China nor the United States can afford to be either Sparta or Athens.

Endnotes

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