

China Dream vs. America First: Is the Thucydides Trap Unavoidable?

Scholarly Essay

Dr Wei Zongyou*

From 3-13 November, the United States (US) President Donald J. Trump made his first 12-day trip to Asia since entering the White House, the longest such trip by a sitting US President after more than 25 years. Although North Korea and trade remained dominant topics of focus, China was undoubtedly the most crucial part of the Asia debut for President Trump, where he discussed bilateral trade, North Korea, and possible cooperation in Afghanistan, among others, and reached trade deals worth more than USD 250 billion.

Despite his apparently successful China trip, China-US relations have been on a path of strategic rivalry in recent years, especially in the Asia-Pacific, with each viewing the other with growing suspicion and concern. Whereas, the US accuses China of trying to undermine the order the former helped to establish after World War II, and of trying to displace its leadership, Beijing complains Washington is aiming to contain its rise and denying its rightful place in the emerging Asia-Pacific order. With Trump elected as US President and his 'America First' foreign policy mantle, and Xi Jinping emerging from the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) ever more powerful and vowing to rejuvenate and make his country even stronger, their bilateral relations have entered a period of turbulence and uncertainty. People on both sides of the Pacific Ocean are beginning to talk about the Thucydides Trap - when rising power and an established power are locked into a collision course and end in tragedy (Allison 2017; Canrong 2015).

* The author is Professor, Center for American Studies; and Senior Research Fellow, Center for Taiwan Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai, China.

Same Mindset, Different Dreams

At the 19th National Congress of the CPC in October 2017, President Xi Jinping was re-elected and began his second term as President, the Commander-in-Chief, and Party Secretary. Besides, his 'Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' was written into the Party constitution (Xinhuanet 2017) effectively raising his status to that of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, and making him the most powerful leader since Xiaoping more than two decades ago. Compared to his two immediate predecessors, Xi is much more vocal in asserting and defending China's interests and vows to rejuvenate and make China great again.

In 2012, when visiting an exhibition featuring 'China's Road to Rejuvenation', Xi first put forward the idea of the 'China's Dream.' He said:

People around are discussing about China's Dream. In my view, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of Chinese people since the modern times.

He further added that:

We are confident that the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects by the time of CPC's 100 anniversary, and building China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious, by the time of PRC's 100 anniversary, is within our reach, and China's Dream of the grand national rejuvenation will surely come true (Ibid.).

Basically, there are two dimensions of the 'China Dream': one is a prosperous society, and the other is a strong army commensurate with its economic power and able to defend its increasing interests, forcefully if necessary. To build a prosperous

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society means that domestic economic development is still a top priority for the Chinese government. Building a strong army means China should have the hard power to defend its legitimate interests, and should not be seen as a spineless economic animal that can be looked down upon and taken advantage of. Ever since then, the China Dream and the two 100 anniversary goals have become important topics for the average Chinese, and the overarching guidelines of the government's domestic and foreign policy agendas.

When Trump ran for President, he vowed to 'Make America Great Again' and America First was his foreign policy vision. In his opinion, for too long, the US has put others' interests whatsoever above its own, been greatly taken advantage of, in fact the country does not even know where its interests lie, and how to defend them. In April 2016, at a campaign rally, he delivered his first ever 'America First' foreign policy address. He claimed that the US foreign policy is a complete and total disaster, with 'No vision, no purpose, no direction, no strategy.' As a result of this failed policy, he argued, the US resources are overextended, allies are not paying their fair share, friends are beginning to think they cannot depend on the US, and rivals no longer respect America. He declared: 'It is time to shake the rust off of America's foreign policy'... that he will view the world through 'the clear lens of American interests,' and 'America First will be the major and overriding theme of my administration' (Peters and Woolley 2016).

After the election, in his inaugural address delivered on 20 January 2017, Trump reaffirmed his 'America First' foreign policy vision to the American and foreign audience. He bemoaned that:

For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; we've defended other nations borders while refusing to defend our own.

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He vowed to put an end to this situation and declared:

From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this moment on, it's going to be America First.

For Trump, this means above all two things: protecting American security from terrorism; and defending American economic interests from being taken advantage of by others, especially through foolish foreign trade deals. In other words, defending American security and prosperity will be the two guiding principles of the US foreign policy.

As no-apology preachers of the 'China Dream' and 'America First', both Xi and Trump vow to see their policy and agendas set in motion under their watch. How these two different visions, with their heavy dose of nationalist flavours, can proceed smoothly against each other, especially in the backdrop of an emerging power transition, is an open question.

Changing Power, Conflicting Interests

The rise of China over the past 40 years is one of the greatest success stories in modern international history. China's overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased more than 60 times, from USD 174.9 billion (current USD) in 1977 to more than USD 11.1 trillion in 2016, overtaking Japan as the second largest economy in the world in 2010. Its GDP per capita also increased more than 40 times, jumping from USD 185 (current USD) in 1977 to USD 8123 in 2016 (The World Bank 2017), effectively lifting millions of people out of poverty and boasting the largest middle class in the world. It has also become the largest net foreign currency reservoir in the world, and the largest US government creditor, with more than USD 3 trillion reserves, and holding USD 1.15 trillion US government debts in June 2017 (Mullen 2017). China has also been the world's leading trading state since the second decade of this century, with annual trading volume of USD

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3.68 trillion in 2016 (Hara and Harada 2017), and the largest trading partner of more than 120 countries (Hucheng 2014).

As China's economy grows by leaps and bounds, its demand for goods, energy and resources also multiplies. It has become the second largest importer of goods after the US, importing more than USD 1.67 trillion worth of goods in 2015 (NBSC PRC 2017). It has also become the largest importer of oil and many of the raw minerals in the world. These huge demands and increasing market for foreign goods and services have made this country the most powerful engine of world economic growth, especially since the global economic meltdown in 2008.

As China's economy integrated more closely with the outside world and its foreign reserves multiplied, it began to look outside for investment. Since the beginning of this century, Chinese leaders have talked about 'going out' on various occasions, and promoted it to the level of national strategy in the Tenth Five-year economic plan in 2001, and then it was formally written into the 16th National Congress of CPC report in 2002. Since then, investing abroad is not only undertaken by individual entrepreneurs, but also greatly encouraged by the government as a policy. This 'going out' policy is widely seen as the harbinger of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was formally put forward by President Xi Jinping in 2013.

National interests follow goods, services, people, and investment flows. In the past, when China's economy was basically self-reliant and inward-looking, with its outside links far and few between, it did not have to take its interests abroad seriously. But as its economy fully integrates with the outside world, and becomes a world-class trading nation, its overseas interests greatly expand and have to be taken good care of. With multibillion dollar investments abroad, millions of people travelling and working overseas, factories, pipelines, and economic corridors under construction overseas, China has to make sure its people and their economic activities are safe and secure from attacks.

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Given China's huge demand for energy and heavy dependence on foreign oil, the bulk of which is shipped through Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), it has also begun to pay attention to maritime and energy security. To safeguard the security of SLOC, it has joined the international anti-piracy actions along the Bay of Aden, to escort merchant ships through the sea lines. On the other hand, it has begun to build up its navy capable of safeguarding its maritime interests and rights.

To diversify its oil imports and avoid a possible Malacca Dilemma, China has signed numerous energy deals with Russia, and countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa, and built multiple oil and gas pipelines through Central Asia, Pakistan, Burma, and other neighbouring land countries to safeguard its energy security.

With increasing naval power and awakening energy security consciousness, China has been paying more attention to defending its maritime interests and rights, especially in the East and South China Seas, which are deemed by many Chinese as taken advantage of by other claimants when the Republic was focused on domestic economic development and stuck to a 'low profile' foreign policy portfolio. If maintaining stability was the foreign policy currency concerning the maritime disputes in the past, now it has to be balanced with more forcefully safeguarding its legitimate interests (Wangsheng and Luoxiao 2013).

With increasing power, resources, and expansive foreign interests, China has also started to put forward its own version of international initiatives and institutional frameworks. In 2013, Xi proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, or BRI, to better connect the Asian economy with that of Europe and Africa via overland routes and maritime routes respectively, by means of 'five connections' – policy consultation, infrastructure connectivity, free trade, free circulation of local currencies, and people-to-people connectivity (Jinping 2013). Based on this ambitious vision, China established a first-ever infrastructure institution - Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

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(AIIB) - to provide financial services for the construction of infrastructure in Asia and beyond. Besides, it also established the Silk Road Fund (SRF), particularly for the BRI, and together with Russia, India, Brazil, and South Africa, Beijing established the New Development Bank for the infrastructure development of Brazil-Russia-India-China and South Africa (BRICS). In 2014, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, Xi argued for the kickoff of the Free Trade Area of Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) to further strengthen economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region (Jinping 2014).

The US has great concerns about China's increasing power, expansive interests, and growing ambitions. Since 2000, the United States Department of Defense has published an annual report concerning China's military development, highlighting the threatening nature of its growing military development and capabilities. When the maritime disputes in the East and South China Sea worsened post-2010, the US was alarmed by the 'assertive' behaviour of China, and took a series of steps to strengthen its alliance system in the Asia-Pacific; reaffirmed its treaty obligations to allies; expanded security partnerships with Vietnam, Singapore, and India; enhanced the maritime capabilities of Southeast Asia countries; and conducted aggressive freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. All those activities were part of a greater strategy implemented by the Obama administration, namely 'Pivot to Asia' or 'Rebalancing to Asia', which were viewed by many as a counterbalance to China's growing power and ambitions in the Asia-Pacific.

The Obama administration also viewed with great suspicion China's BRI and the accompanying AIIB. From the US perspective, this is not a pure economic or development initiative, but a larger geoeconomic and geopolitical scheme in disguise, which aims to dislodge US influence and replace it with a China-centric order or influence over the Eurasia landmass and the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor (Perlez and Huang 2017; Rolland 2017). The AIIB was viewed as a tentative challenge and competitor to the US-

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dominated international institutions such as The World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Asian Development Bank (ADB).

On numerous occasions, government officials have talked about the five challenges the US faces today, namely Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and the terrorism and extremism in the Middle East. In its security calculations, China has jumped from a 'responsible stakeholder' to one of the main and long-term security challenges to the US (O'Rourke 2017: 8-9). As Green (2017: 5) observes in *By More Than Providence*:

If there is one central theme in American strategic culture as it has applied to the Far East over time, it is that the United States will not tolerate any other power establishing exclusive hegemonic control over Asia and the Pacific.

Trump in many ways is the opposite of Obama. But, at least in one area, they have much in common: viewing China as a competitor to be dealt with seriously. In the presidential campaign, he constantly talked about Chinese challenges in the economic area, and vowed to rebalance the economic and trade relations, even suggested naming China a currency manipulator, and imposing as much as 45 per cent tariffs against its goods (Talley 2016). After entering the White House, he has become a bit moderate in his criticism, but still complains about the unfair and unbalanced trade relations, and threatens to take unilateral actions if China does not take steps to seriously deal with the imbalance.¹

On the issue of North Korea's development of nuclear and ballistic missiles, Trump has claimed that China has much more leverage than others over Pyongyang, and has not done enough to influence it (Erickson 2017). On the South China Sea issue, he has

¹ Editor's Note: The latest round of trade talks between the US and China ended in June 2018 (while this book was going to print), with the latter warning that all progress between the two economic superpowers could be lost if the US pushes ahead with trade sanctions, including tariffs announced by the White House.

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given the Defense Department much more discretion and authority in its freedom of navigation operations. In his first longest foreign trip to Asia, Trump articulated a tentative strategic framework to the Indo-Pacific: a free and open Indo-Pacific, spanning from the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean, with India as one of the guardians in the West end of this expansive geographic area (Nelson 2017). Using India as a counterbalance to China is the pivotal factor of this strategic framework, as was Obama's rebalance to Asia.

Is the Thucydides Trap Unavoidable?

Graham Allison, Director of Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, after examining the 16 power transition cases for the last 500 years, found that 12 of the cases ended in war, with only four of them transiting peacefully. He argued:

When the parties avoided war, it required huge, painful adjustments in attitudes and actions on the part not just of the challenger but also the challenged (Allison 2015).

Based on his observation, he cautioned that:

War between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not (Ibid.).

The analysis above seems to confirm Allison's arguments. Xi's nationalist 'China Dream' does not fit well with Trump's nativist 'America First' agendas. China's growing power and expansive ambitions are eclipsing and eroding the US leadership in the Asia-Pacific, and China's initiatives are competitors or even alternatives to the US programmes, institutions and even order in the region. An increasingly assertive rising China bent on realising

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its dream seems doomed to collide with a watchful, grudging US nostalgia for its power and prestige.

However, for all the challenges and alarms, there is still room for optimism for the future of China-US relations. First, Xi's 'China Dream' does not necessarily collide with Trump's 'America First.' In a nutshell, Xi's idea is fundamentally based on domestic development and modernisation, and he is bent on reforming China's economic structure to make it more domestic-driven and consumption-oriented. And as China's middle class grows in numbers and wealth, it is becoming a huge consumption market for US goods and services. China-US economic relations are not zero-sum, but a win-win set. Furthermore, Xi's aspiration of a powerful China capable of safeguarding its national interests is basically a defensive posture, not a call for outside adventure or hegemonic ambitions, which is explicitly ruled out and opposed in Xi's 19th Congress report.

Second, China does not seek to displace US power and influence in the Asia-Pacific. On numerous occasions, its leaders have signaled to US counterparts that Beijing is not aiming at displacing US influence in Asia-Pacific, instead, the Republic respects the US' traditional interests in the region. In his 2015 visit to Washington, Xi reiterated China's position in the 'Outcome List of Xi Jinping's State Visit to the United States,' which reads:

China respects the traditional influence and practical interests of the United States in the Asia-Pacific and welcomes the United States to continue to play a positive and constructive role in regional affairs (MoFA PRC 2016).

Third, China does not seek to export its version of development or governance model. While the country is proud of successfully pioneering a new way for developing countries to catch up and emphasises the importance of fostering stronger confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of Socialism with Chinese characteristics, nevertheless, China has never sought

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to export its model to other countries. On the contrary, China even hesitates to describe its way of development as a kind of 'model', which implies maturity or rigidity, for it thinks that its way of development is still an experiment in process, though very successful so far. Furthermore, China thinks that every country should explore their own way of development, which may fit well into their own particular national history, stage of development, and national characters. And in this way, China can be an example for them to learn from, but not a model to be imposed upon.

Fourth, China actively seeks to live peacefully with the US and constructively manage differences. In his first summit with Obama in 2013, Xi formally put forward the concept of building a new model of major country relations between China and the US based on 'no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation,' to strike a new way for rising power and ruling power to live peacefully together and manage constructively differences between them. Though the Obama administration was lukewarm and grew watchful of the concept, it showcased China's attempts and eagerness to build stable and peaceful relations with the US.

Lastly, for all the complaints and worries, the US has not so far aimed at containing China. It realises that to try and contain Beijing will impose unacceptable cost to itself given the intimate economic interdependence between the two countries. Besides, the US allies and partners in Asia and around the world will not follow suit given their interests in developing more close economic relations with China. What's more, containing a China which is not bent on conquering or displacing the US influence in Asia and beyond will not command the moral high ground as it did in the Cold War and will attract few followers. Partly for those reasons, the US government and strategic circles have not advocated the containment of China, instead called for seeking a clear-eyed, and result-oriented relations, to cooperate where their interests overlap, and balance where American interests dictate so.

The Challenges Ahead

The Thucydides Trap may not be the destiny of China-US relations, but it does not mean the way ahead will be smooth or conflict-free. For the near future, there are at least four challenges lying ahead.

How can China and the US reduce their trust deficit?

It goes without saying that there is increasing mistrust as China grows wealthier and stronger. While the US worries about China's revisionist ambitions, the latter suspects the former of encirclements and containment. The on-and-off bellicose words from both countries' hawks only exacerbate the worry and concerns.

How can China and the US rebalance their economic relations?

For the past several decades, China has grown into a manufacturing hub in the Asia-Pacific, and even the world. As a foreign-oriented economy, China exports large volumes of its manufactured goods around the world, especially into the huge American market. The US views with great concern this growing trade deficit, and Trump has made it the defining issue in his dealing with China. If Xi and Trump cannot find a practical way to deal with the issue, it will be a constant thorn in their relations.

Can China and the US cooperate on the North Korea issue?

North Korea is a top priority in Trump's foreign policy consideration in the Asia-Pacific. The essence of Trump's emerging North Korea policy is to forge a united diplomatic front and cut off its oil import and financial connections with the outside world. The underlying logic is that a diplomatically isolated, and especially financially strangled North Korea will finally be forced to come to the negotiation table seriously. And the key to success is China, which Trump thinks has much more leverage and has not done enough in this regard. From the Chinese perspective, however,

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China does not have the kind of influence as the US thinks it has and has done what it can. What's more, China thinks that the US also bears some responsibility for the current situation on the nuclear issue, and should try face-to-face dialogue.² That said, in recent years, China has been more willing to work with the US to impose much harsher sanctions, which may lead to fruitful cooperation between the two countries.

How will China and the US manage the issue of Taiwan, and to a lesser degree, the South China Sea?

With Taiwan's pro-independent Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in power and its leader Cai Yingwen elected, and the controversial telephone call between Trump and Yingwen, the once cooled-down issue of Taiwan raised its head again. For China, the Taiwan issue is its core interest and cannot be negotiated away; any signs of change of policy on the part of the US, or Yingwen's potential pro-independence activities will be viewed with great concern and met with harsh responses. The good news is that Trump has realised the sensitivity of the issue and reaffirmed the US 'One China' policy, and Yingwen is relatively moderate in her tone and activities concerning the issue of independence.

The issue of South China Sea has steadily calmed down since the summer of 2016, and China and the Philippines have conducted talks on the issue of joint development of resources in the disputed area. Besides, China and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) reached a framework concerning the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, which is a crucial step forward in implementing the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea signed in 2002. These steps will contribute to stability and peace in the region, and be conducive in resolving disputes.

One remaining issue is the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FNOPs) of which China and the US have different

² Editor's Note: As this book went into print, Singapore was gearing up to host a historic summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

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interpretation. So far, the Trump administration has conducted five rounds of FNOPs, and China sent its Navy to monitor and accompany these each time, and expressed dissatisfaction. But given the known positions of both countries concerning these operations and the agreements on avoiding unplanned encounters, the possibility of clashes at sea or accidents has reduced.

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