

The Truth About the US-China Thucydides Trap

by George Friedman - July 14, 2020

We remember Thucydides as a historian thanks to his documentation of the Peloponnesian War, but we often forget that he was also a philosopher. And like all great philosophers, he has many things to teach us, even if his teaching is inappropriately applied. Thousands of years after the war was fought between Sparta and Athens, observers argued that it showed that an authoritarian government would defeat a democracy. This was widely said in the early stages of World War II and repeated throughout the Cold War. In truth, what Thucydides said about democracies and oppressive regimes was far more sophisticated and complex than a simplistic slogan invoked by defeatists.

Jacek Bartosiak, [who wrote of the Thucydides trap for us last week](#), is never simplistic, but I think he is wrong in some respects. The error is the idea that China is a rising power. He is certainly correct if by rising he means it has surged since Mao Zedong died. But he is implying more: that China is rising to the point that it can even challenge the United States. The argument that the U.S. may overreact is based on this error. The U.S. is choosing to press China hard, but the risk of doing so is low.

The most important thing to understand about China is that its domestic market cannot financially absorb the product of China's industrial plant. Yes, China has grown, but its growth has made it a hostage to its foreign customers. Nearly 20 percent of China's gross domestic product is generated from exports, 5 percent of which are bought by its largest customer, the United States. Anything that could reduce China's economy for the long term by about 20 percent is a desperate vulnerability. COVID-19 has hurt and will continue to hurt many countries. But for China, if international trade collapsed, internal declines in consumption would come on top of the loss of foreign markets.

China faces a non-military threat from the United States, which relies on exports to China for about half of 1 percent of its GDP. If the U.S. simply bought fewer Chinese products, Washington would damage China without firing a shot. If China is a rising power, it is rising on a very slippery slope without recourse to warfare.

But the United States has even more devastating options. China must have access to global markets, which depends overwhelmingly on the ports of its east coast. The South China Sea is therefore a frontier of particular interest for Beijing. The military problem is simple. To access the

ocean, China must control the sea lanes through at least one (and preferably more) outlet. The United States does not need to control these lanes; it just needs to deny them to China. The difference is massive. The Chinese have to force the U.S. into deep retreat to secure access. The United States needs only to remain in position to fire cruise missiles or lay mines.

The U.S. Navy controls the Pacific from the Aleutians to Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Australia, giving Washington an old and sophisticated alliance system that China cannot match. And though allies can drag a nation into conflicts it doesn't want to be part of, having no allies deprives a nation of strategic options. If only one of China's littoral nations allied with it, China's strategic problem might be solved. The failure to recruit allies is an indicator of the regional appreciation of Chinese power and trustworthiness. Adding to China's strategic problems is that it borders some countries such as Vietnam and India that are hostile to its interests.

Hypothetically, China could forge an alliance with Russia, a nearby power with which it shares some common competitors. The problem is that Russia's focus must be on its west and on the Caucasus. It has no ground force it could lend to China, nor does it have a naval force that would be decisive in its Pacific operations. A simultaneous strike westward by Russia and eastward by China is superficially interesting, but it would not divide U.S. and allied forces enough to take the pressure off of China.

It's true that China is a rising power, but as I said, it's rising from the Maoist era. It has a significant military, but that military's hands are tied until China eliminates its existential vulnerability: dependence on exports. Under these circumstances, the idea of initiating a war is farfetched. More than perhaps any country in the world, China cannot risk a breakdown in the global trading system. Doing so might hurt the U.S. but not existentially.

The United States has no interest in a war in the Western Pacific. Its current situation is satisfactory, and nothing is to be gained from initiating a conflict. The United States is not giving up the Pacific – it fought wars in Korea and Vietnam as well as World War II to keep it. The U.S. can't invade mainland China or conquer it. It cannot expose its forces to massive Chinese ground forces. In this sense China is secure. China's fear is maritime – isolation from world markets. And that possibility is there.

There is of course evidence of advanced Chinese systems being prepared and claims that the U.S. is losing its relative share of power. But this is one of the great defects of military analysis: counting the hardware. In the U.S. military, I have noted people rolling their eyes when they hear about the superweapons being produced. The closer you are to weapons development, the more you are aware of its shortcomings. Wars are won by experienced staff, brave and motivated forces, and

factories that don't screw up. Engineering is part of war but not its essence. The question for any military is not what equipment it has but how long it takes to jury-rig the breakdown. Technology matters, of course, but it is only decisive in the hands of those with deep experience of the battle to be fought. China lacks that. For all its hardware and technology, it has not fought a naval battle since 1895 (which it lost). China has no tradition of naval warfare to compare to its experience on land. And tradition and lessons passed down from generation to generation of admirals are extremely valuable. The United States has been in combat frequently, launching aircraft against land targets, conducting active anti-submarine searches and coordinating air defense systems for large fleets in combat conditions.

It's on this point that I disagree with Jacek. He submits that China is rising, with a particular focus on a technological prowess with which the U.S. is not keeping pace. Maybe that's true. But **the U.S. is still the superior power**. It has an economic superiority, a geographic superiority, a political superiority in alliances, and a superiority of experience not only at sea but in air and space. Technology can only offset those deficiencies so much.

So I think the Thucydides concept, while valid, doesn't apply to this case. China is not pressing the United States in any dimension, and for this reason, American rhetoric is not matched by the frenzied production the U.S. puts in motion when it is concerned.

And so Jacek and I will continue to duel.

Author: George Friedman

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