

The Rising Dragon: How Should the United States and the International Community Respond?

Maj Phillip Ferris

The Thucydides Trap

Course Paper

02 OCT 19

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, Department of Defense, or The Air University

Much has been made in recent years about the return to great power competition. Russia invaded the Ukraine in 2014 to forcibly take Sevastopol and the rest of Crimea; it has attempted to influence elections in Baltic states and even in the United States; and it extended its influence into the Middle East by getting involved in the Syrian civil war. Russia can be considered as a very near-term concern though, given its economy, extensive corruption, and other issues. The bigger, more long-term, concern is China. China has also taken territory and has meddled in internal affairs of several countries, and it is expanding its influence across the world into places like Africa. However, China's economy is booming as well with no signs of slowing anytime soon while they increasingly improve upon their military's capabilities. The question is how should the United States and the international community respond. Before answering this question though, one must take a look at international relations theory, historical case studies, and a complex overview of the current situation.

There are a multitude of international relations theories with corresponding subsets. However, history has shown that the world is more stable (and does not experience major wars) when there is a single hegemon at the top of the international order with no one country or bloc of countries to seriously threaten its overall power. This situation is essentially a hybrid of what is called the hegemonic stability theory and often called "preeminence."<sup>1</sup> One could argue that the Cold War consisted of a bipolar world with the United States and the Soviet Union jointly at the top, and that is why a major war never occurred. However, while the Soviet Union balanced the United States with respect to political-military power, the United States clearly dominated the economic realm and was more of a preeminent player in world affairs.<sup>2</sup> There were many crises that could have easily led to war but were instead skillfully avoided by the American and Soviet

leaders at the time. Having a preeminent power, and the relative peace it can maintain, is most clearly demonstrated by the Pax Britannia timeframe from roughly 1815-1914 and from 1945 to now with the United States.<sup>3</sup> Of course, there will always be smaller wars during these periods of preeminence, as the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War and the Korean/Vietnam Wars prove, but a major conflict between the preeminent power and other major powers is extremely less likely.<sup>4</sup> This theory holds true unless a rising power grows to near equality with the preeminent power and threatens to overtake it.

In 2017, the term “Thucydides Trap” was coined by renowned Harvard scholar Graham Allison in his book *Destined for War*. Essentially, the term refers to the Peloponnesian War that pitted Sparta against Athens in which, according to the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, the main cause was “the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta...”<sup>5</sup> Allison articulates the results of his deep study into why major wars occur and concludes that major war is more likely than not when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power. In fact, over the past five hundred years, there were sixteen instances where an ascending power threatened the established power, and war resulted in twelve of these cases.<sup>6</sup> Granted, a case can be made that some of the wars were regional and did not involve the world’s preeminent power at the time. However, this analysis is still cause for concern or for “alarm bells” to sound as Allison puts it.<sup>7</sup> Of all the instances he and his team analyzed over the past five hundred years, there is one case in particular that bears striking resemblances to today’s situation with the United States and China: the rise of Germany in the early twentieth century that challenged Britain’s and its allies’ land power in Europe and global its sea power.

Britain was the preeminent global power from roughly 1815 after the Napoleonic Wars to 1914 at the beginning of World War I. While some countries outpaced British industrial

production, Britain still wielded unparalleled naval power and had colonies around the world. The phrase “the sun never sets on the British Empire” originated during this time, and this global projection allowed Britain to exert incredible influence around the world.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, with its European mainland allies (namely France, Russia, and Italy), Britain was indeed the most preeminent power in the world. However, things began to change with the unification of Germany in 1871. Germany rapidly grew industrially, commercially, and militarily to a point where its total national power was greater than Britain, France, and Russia. Furthermore, Germany’s population soared from forty-nine million in 1890 to sixty-six million in 1913, which directly contributed to the country’s industrial expansion.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Germany pursued a navy equal to Britain and sought to expand its colonial empire. German leaders demanded that Germany have “its place in the sun” in comparison to the other empires.<sup>10</sup> These factors and bold proclamations created a dangerous state of affairs in Europe.

Britain felt that its navy was key to its empire’s survival and for global trade. All nations cherished the right to trade on the world stage, and Britain guaranteed that.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Britain secured treaties so that it could move most of its fleet to the North Sea area to counter Germany while also taking steps to avoid conflict.<sup>12</sup> In 1912, Britain asked Germany to cut the pace of its naval buildup in exchange for Britain’s help to acquire colonies for Germany to increase its power. Germany would only oblige if Britain agreed to remain neutral in a potential European war. Talks fell through, and the writing was on the wall: Germany wanted to be the new preeminent power. When war broke out in 1914, Britain had no vital interests in the Balkans.<sup>13</sup> However, it could not allow Germany to potentially forcibly take over European preeminence and ultimately threaten Britain’s global status, and Britain felt compelled to honor its alliances as well.

The United States is the world's new Britain and is the most preeminent power in the world. However, "alarm bells" are going off once again as China threatens the United States's status on the international stage. The world has moved to what Robert Gilpin called a state of disequilibrium in his book *War & Change in World Politics* as China looks to exploit the current situation in the United States, to steadily increase its power, and to challenge the international order. According to Gilpin, dominant powers often decline after reaching an equilibrium where "the costs and benefits of further change and expansion is reached."<sup>14</sup> The United States has reached this point and is consequently dealing with multiple internal and external issues causing disequilibrium around the world. The cost of maintaining a military that can "police" the world and protect its allies is continuing to rise especially as the United States prepares for a possible great power conflict and is upgrading its military assets. Therefore, some in the American political establishment are questioning why the United States spends so much overseas. Even President Trump has questioned the country's commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and has publicly pushed other countries to contribute more. Meanwhile, while the American economy continues to grow around 2% per year, China's economy is growing at an incredible rate with their production/technology growth outpacing the United States.<sup>15</sup>

These factors have led to China being able to significantly close the economic and military gaps between it and the United States and to pursue more aggressive policies to meet its objectives. For example, China is building and militarizing islands in the South China Sea (despite its assurances in 2015 that it would not) in order to expand its territorial waters and to control this major international trading thoroughfare.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, these activities are infringing upon other Asian nations' claims in the South China Sea to include neighboring

countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, an ally of the United States. China is also spending more on its military than all of the countries in the region combined, and it is expanding its influence outside of far east Asia to include building a military base in Djibouti to help ensure it can continue to exploit critical resources from the continent.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, China owns twenty-five to one hundred percent of over twelve major ports in Europe to include owning eighty-five percent of Bruges's port.<sup>18</sup> China is even directly targeting the United States. China consistently steals technology from the United States and others, and it has tried to influence American state and federal politicians for its benefit while imprisoning Chinese members of American journalists' families who are critical of the Chinese state, along with a host of other internal and foreign policy issues. Moreover, China has paid American newspapers to run articles that are critical of American governmental policies and/or favorable to Chinese interests.<sup>19</sup> Like Germany's rise over a hundred years ago, China today threatens the current international order, and its actions concern the United States and its allies. This precarious situation does not have to lead to military conflict between the two parties though.

Many may ask why the United States should care at all about a rising China. There have been cases where a peaceful transition has occurred between a declining preeminent power and a rising one (Britain and the United States in the early twentieth century), so why can this not occur again? China, though, is not the benign international power most of the world appreciates with the United States who has traditionally been admired for what it has done at home and abroad.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, while America's power is based on alliances, China's thus far is based on various forms of military or economic coercion. Thus, as the world's preeminent power, the United States has a moral obligation to respond; however, it should not do it alone. American leaders must reassure its allies instead of calling into question alliances like NATO and raising

doubts in their allies' minds concerning American resolve overseas.<sup>21</sup> Currently, one hundred of the world's largest one hundred and fifty countries lean to the U.S. while only twenty-one lean against.<sup>22</sup> The United States must strive to at least maintain this ratio as its power and standing in the world is based on these relationships.<sup>23</sup> While the United States does have several internal concerns, China could be deterred from doing anything too egregious if the United States leverages its allies to accomplish joint, mutually beneficial, goals. By empowering other countries, its allies can meet American goals without the United States expending too many resources.

“Great power competition” has become a popular buzz term. The phrase is consistently in the news; it is referred to in the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy; and American military officers are consistently studying it in professional military education.<sup>24</sup> Countries should be concerned with China's recent rise and the way it has conducted itself. One look at history shows that there are not many comforting examples where a rising power threatens the preeminence of an existing power that does not lead to war. While the United States should take a look in the mirror and alter its actions especially with respect to its allies, there may not be much that can be done to prevent a future conflict with China. China has proven to be willing to pursue its agenda aggressively, and it is only a matter of time before it ruffles a country's metaphorical feathers too much. While China will be unlikely to attack the United States or unexpectedly invade a country like Taiwan anytime soon, the chances for China and the United States to stumble into a war are high. China's South China Sea activities may lead to Vietnam or the Philippines to attack a Chinese vessel in order to protect their territorial waters, or maybe China will conduct information warfare and other unconventional operations with Taiwan to make public opinion more favorable to an invasion of Taiwan. Whatever the

case may be, one can only hope that the world is able to skillfully navigate these perilous situations in order to avoid another major war.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 13-14 and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Is the American Century Over*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 13.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>3</sup> Nye, *Is the American Century Over*, 6,
- <sup>4</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017), 42.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.
- <sup>9</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 210.
- <sup>10</sup> Allison, *Destined for War*, 66-71.
- <sup>11</sup> Perceptions of German Foreign Policy in England before WWI: The Crowe Memorandum (January 1, 1907), 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Allison, *Destined for War*, 72.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 57 & 79.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 156-157.
- <sup>15</sup> Nye, *Is the American Century Over*, 44, 77-78.
- <sup>16</sup> Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy Toward China, The Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C. (October 4, 2018).
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Dr. Jared Donnelly, "Gray Zone Warfare" (lecture, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, AL, 1 October 2019).
- <sup>19</sup> Remarks by Vice President Pence.
- <sup>20</sup> Richard Haass, "How a World Order Ends: And What Comes in Its Wake." *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 1 (January 2019): 26.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
- <sup>22</sup> Nye, *Is the American Century Over*, 67.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>24</sup> Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2017) and Jim Mattis, *National Defense Strategy*, (Washington, D.C.: The Pentagon, 2018).