Thucydides Resurrected: Confrontation Between the US and China for Global Dominance

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Abstract

States pursue their own interests in international relations. Contemporary politics portrays the US and China as jostling against each other. The rise of China has dithered other smaller nations over whether to adhere to the hegemony of the US or not. Thucydides considered a rising power as a potential threat to the hegemony of superpowers, and such contestation eventually led to war. This article strives to bridge the current US-China contestation with the rivalry between Athens and Sparta and by drawing parallels from other case studies from the past. The initial portion of this article will discuss the US-China rivalry under the domain of prominent theories of international relations, such as realism and power transition theory. Second, it aims to unearth the potential reasons behind the contestation of these two large players. Third, it will focus on the strategic insights of Thucydides and its relevance to the current US-China rivalry. The last section of this article critically analyses the rise of China.

Keywords: Thucydides trap, US-China rivalry, Sino-US relations, military might.

Introduction

US-China relations are in the throes of one of their most unsettled times. The debate on US-China rivalry has now become pertinent in international political parlance. The end of the Cold War marked unipolarity, and the United States emerged as the sole superpower. However, it also marked the rise of China which started flexing its military muscle, threatening the interest of America in the East and Far East Asia. Today, the rise of China is an undeniable fact because of its ever-expanding markets, sheer increase in technological advancements that have gone beyond outer space, and most importantly, military advancement, which is consistently adding fuel to the fire. Two centuries ago, Napoleon predicted the rise of China when he stated: 'Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world.'[1]

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[1] HICKS Peter, 'Sleeping China' And NAPOLEAN,' *NAPOLEAN.org, www.napolean.org/en/*

The rapid rise of China has created a security dilemma and has instilled the fear of losing global hegemony in America, which is transforming into conflict. Graham Allison in his book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* used a more academic term for the insecurity engulfing the US, called 'Thucydides' Trap.' Thucydides, an ancient Greek thinker, explained that when a rising power threatens the dominance of a global hegemon, it makes both states vulnerable to conflict and creates war-like situations. He reached this conclusion from the confrontation between Athens and Sparta, where the rise of Athens instilled fear in Sparta, which eventually resulted in the Peloponnesian War in 5th century BC. Similarly, there is another connection between the Peloponnesian War and the current Sino-US rivalry, that is, the plague which afflicted Athens, in which almost 75,000 lives were lost in 430 BC[2], which equates with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic originating from Wuhan city in China, which has also taken millions of lives so far. This relationship underscores the enduring relevance of contagious diseases as catalysts of geopolitical tension, emphasizing the potential for heightened competition between the United States and China as a result of the Thucydides Trap.

In the past, China endured a century of humiliation, beginning with the Opium Wars in 1839 and lasting until 1949. During this period, China experienced a decline in both its military and economy. However, today's China is more powerful, technologically advanced and exceedingly well evolved. It is of concern to the United States that China is expanding militarily, economically, and diplomatically, resulting in its increasing global influence. A major concern is the possibility of disruption of the current global order as well as threats to American economic and strategic interests. In particular, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has raised concerns about its growing political power and changing trade patterns. In addition, the rapid technological advancements made by China have posed a threat to American monopoly in the domain of technology and has urged it to nominate China as a rival in its National Security Policy. Moreover, the confrontation touches new peaks as every move of the opponent country is perceived as a strategy to downgrade and relegate the other. In an annual report, the US accuses China of intellectual property theft and has banned Chinese companies' operations in its markets.[3] In the present

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[2] Michael A Peters, Benjamin Green, Chunxiao Mou et al.,'US–China Rivalry and 'Thucydides' Trap': Why This Is a Misleading Account,' *Educational Philosophy and Theory,* Vol. 54, No. 10, July 2022, p. 1501, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1799739

[3] Josh Zumbrum, 'U.S. Accuses China of Lax Intellectual Property Protection,' *The Wall Street Journal,* 27 April 2022,

article, the dangers associated with power transitions are explored, along with the necessity for early involvement and collaboration to navigate the complex challenges of the 21st century. It compares the historical confrontation between Athens and Sparta, which resulted in war, to the present dispute between the United States and China for global dominance.

Historical context

This is not the first time in history that a rising power has brought two governments to a point of war. In his book, *Destined for War*, Graham Allison identified 13 classic examples of conflicts in which rising nations challenged established powers, leading to war. In this study, three cases are discussed.

The first example is the war between France and Britain, when France was a rising power. As a result of Louis XIV's continuous quest for security, France became aggressive in the 17th century. He came into conflict with many European powers because of his aggressive nature. With the acquisition of buffer zones near its borders, such as Strasburg and Luxembourg, French territorial expansionist ambitions became more fervent. Britain, as a rising power, formed an alliance with the Dutch Republic and confronted French supremacy in a succession of wars, the Nine Years War (1689-97).[4]

The second example is from the late 19th century and early 20th century when Japan, as an emerging power, confronted both China and Russia, which resulted in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). Under Emperor Meiji, Japan built a formidable standing army and navy by increasing its military expenditure. It was because of the gains in military strength that the country's leaders began seriously considering territorial expansion in the Pacific Islands and even on the Asian continent, a challenge to Chinese hegemony and Russia's well-known policies in the region. Similarly, Tokyo's assertive policies towards the Korean peninsula ignited the First Sino-Japanese War.[5] Further, the growing western influence, specifically Russia in East Asia,

https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-accuses-china-of-lax-intellectual-property-protection-11651071601

4 'War of the British Succession: Nine Years War,' *National Army Museum, www.nam.ac.uk/explore/nine-years-war*

5 Hans Lengerer, 'A Pre-History of the Sino-Japanese War 1894-1895: Introduction and Summary,' *International Naval Research Organization,* Vol. 56, No. 1, March 2019, pp. 47-54.

corroborated the growing assertiveness of Japan, which resulted in the Russo-Japanese war lasting for one and a half years.[6]

Japan, overwhelmed by its victories in Sino-Japanese wars, became more confident and extended its influence over Korea and Taiwan. Japanese expansion threatened the America-led 'Open Door' order in the Pacific. In reaction, America tried to hamper the rise of Japan with sanctions. Japan attacked Pearl Harbour and catapulted the United States to World War II.[7]

The above-mentioned three examples clarify that a rising power has often created a competitive environment that eventually pushed both ruling and rising countries into war. By analysing the past, it can be generalized that the ongoing power conflict between the existing hegemonic United States and China is leading to a clash for global hegemony. This is manifested across the board in the South China Sea, Indo-Pacific Ocean, and other major regions of the world.

Theoretical concept

Realist perspective

Realism, being the dominant contemporary theoretical perspective, outlines US-China rivalry in a very insightful manner. With its key assumption that power is a major currency in International Relations, it has opened a Pandora's box between China and the US. This substantiates the ongoing rivalry that the two states are vying for hegemony in an anarchical world. According to Realism, states are unitary actors, with no overarching authority to regulate international affairs in contrast to domestic politics. Hence, states struggle to ensure survival. Simultaneously, realists see this world as more brutish and selfish, which makes it inevitable to rely not on other nations but on self-help.[8] Moreover, Kenneth Waltz, via his concept of neo-realism, argues that states exist in an anarchic system in a self-help atmosphere, with no central authority to secure them, while nations prioritize survival and security. As a result, states engage in balancing behaviour either internally (increasing their

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[6] Siobhan Peeling, 'Russo-Japanese War,' *International Encyclopedia of the First World War,* 7 January 2021, www.encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/russo-japanese_war

[7] 'Second World War,' *National Army Museum,* www.nam.ac.uk/explore/second-world-war

[8] Farhan Hanif Siddiqi and Muhammad Nadeem Mirza, *Introducing International Relations: Concepts, Theories, and Practices* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp.74-75.

own military capabilities) or externally (making alliances with other powers).[9]

China is increasing its military might by investing heavily in its advancement. In the realist paradigm, its ever-increasing military might be justified, but its myriad war ships make the American fleet insecure in the Indo-Pacific.

There is no denying the fact that in contemporary times, the US wants to sustain its hegemony, while China's rapid growth projects its revisionist aspirations to be the next superpower. Power in realism refers to the ability of a country to influence the international outcomes of military intervention, trade negotiations, and human rights violations, as per its own interests.[10] For example, the US has been the sole superpower and has manipulated many wars, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and has served its own interest.

By contrast, China projects soft power, mainly using the economy, as a tool to attract different countries. According to Joseph Nye, a country's soft power depends on three aspects of the state: political values, culture, and foreign policy.[11] It is easy to see how China is leveraging its soft power via its gigantic BRI by combining economic investments, cultural exchanges, and infrastructural development to expand its influence both inside and outside the region.

China's ever-enlarging market is fascinating for almost all developing and developed nations, and it is turning it into a good account. For instance, Australia, despite being a member of AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States of America), shows a leaning towards China because of its dependent trade volume with China. As reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia's exports to China in March 2023 reached 19 billion Australian dollars, a 28 per cent increase from the previous month and a 31 per cent increase from the same period last year. It had the highest monthly number since 1988, when the records began.[12] The dynamics presented here illustrate the complex interplay between the

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9 Stephanie Lawson, *Theories of International Relations: Contending Approaches to World Politics* (Malden: Polity Press, 2015), pp. 53-55.

10 Jennifer Sterling-Folker (ed.), *Making Sense of International Relations Theory* (Colorado: Lynne Riener Publishers, 2015), p. 15.

11 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition* (Cambridge: Springer Nature, 2023), pp. 3-7.

12 Laura He, 'Australia's exports to China hit record high as relations thaw,' *CNN* (Georgia), 5 May 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/05/economy/australia-china-exports-record-intl-hnk/index.html

power policy of the US and the soft power strategies of China in today's global landscape, along with the diverse strategies that these two countries employ to pursue their interests in an ever-changing international system.

Power Transition Theory

The debate on the ongoing rivalry between the US and China has brought the Power Transition Theory into focus. Kenneth Organski used this term for the first time in his book, *World Politics*. This theory focuses on two aspects. First, it discusses the remarkable increase in a rising country's national power in terms of both its demographic and territorial size. Second, it gauges the impact of emerging power on the existing dominant power in the international system.[13]

Power transition manifests itself in different ways. Some transitions are peaceful. For instance, if the US overtakes Britain, the transition will be peaceful because of the rising power's satisfaction with the existing global order. In contrast, some transitions might lead to war; for example, when a disgruntled power such as Germany gains power compared to the dominant power such as Britain, it might lead to conflict. In this situation, the fading hegemon can make an effort to lessen the rising challenger's level of unhappiness with the status quo, to lessen the likelihood of a power transition struggle between them. According to the theory of the transition of power, the United States and China will not engage in combat until the capabilities of the Chinese armed forces outnumber those of the United States.[14] It is interesting to note that China's vigorous military modernization programme in the late 1990s resulted in an average 9 per cent increase in military spending. It is estimated that by 2023, the value will be 224 billion US dollars, roughly four times what it is today.[15] Because of China's significant investment in new military technologies, it is evident that Chinese military capabilities are constantly being upgraded. In the future, this dynamic could have a significant impact on world geopolitical dynamics as the balance of power between these two countries will become increasingly important.

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[13] David Lai, 'The United States and China in Power Transition,' *Strategic Studies Institute US Army War College*, 2011, p. 5.

[14] Woosang Kim and Scott Gates, 'Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China,' *International Area Studies Review,* Vol. 18, No. 3, September 2015, pp. 220-222, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12113.7

[15] 'Of Battleships and Displacement', *The Economist* (London), Vol. 398, No. 8722, 13 May-19 May 2023, p.16.

Thucydides' four strategic insights applied to contemporary Sino-US relations

1-*Rising power always makes the hegemon insecure*

The Peloponnesian War made it evident that a rising power makes an established power insecure to the extent that rivalry eventually morphs into war. The Spartans had a huge advantage at the ground level because their force was greater than that of Athens, but Athens had a strong advantage at sea because of its connection with the port of Piraeus through the Long Walls, which enabled it to import supplies almost at will.[16] The situation seems quite similar, as the strategic contestation between the US and China is gaining momentum in the Indo-Pacific region. China possesses certain advantages because of its geographical proximity to the sea and its territorial claims in the disputed South China Sea, and it is promoting these advantages by advancing its naval capabilities. Similarly, America vociferously claims that 'the Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for America's future.' It pursues China's containment policy in the South China Sea and Indo-Pacific via AUKUS, QUAD, Five Eyes, and many other pacts and initiatives to reduce the influence of China at sea. China, while responding to these alliances, has tagged America with the 'Cold War mentality.' Chinese former foreign minister, Wang Yi, has vehemently criticized the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America (AUKUS) and has ensured a knee-jerk response from China in any conflicting situation.[17] However, internationally, America has portrayed itself as a redeemer, a father-figure in psychological parlance, someone who could fix everything or at least promise to do so. It is generally believed that America is in decline, and mostly favours protectionism and withdrawal from what it considers overstretched international engagements.[18] Similarly, it has already been overtaken by China on most indicators which has become one of the world's leading manufacturing powerhouses, of ships, textiles, aluminium, smart phones, and computers. Undoubtedly, a country's population is directly proportional to its economic stability. It is generally believed that since China's population is larger than the American population, it is more likely that the Chinese population would be more productive. Graham Allison stipulates that, in comparison to American

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[16] Mark Cartwright, 'Peloponnesian War,' *World History Encyclopaedia*, 2 May 2018, https://www.worldhistory.org/Peloponnesian_War/

[17] Giles Gibson, 'AUKUS partnership shows 'Cold War mentality' says China's Wang Yi', *CGTN,* 29 September 2021, https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2021-09-29/AUKUS-partnership-shows-Cold-War-mentality-says-China-s-Wang-Yi--13VYjF8GLjq/index.html

[18] Joseph S. Nye, op.cit., p. 3.

productivity, China's productivity is 1/4th that of America. If China reached half of American productivity, it would surpass the threshold of American economic growth, and if it equalized, it would be three times greater than the entire American economy.[19]

In a larger context, China is rising exponentially in all three major spheres: the economy, military, and technology. It is more likely that it will overtake America in these spheres which could potentially lead these two giant states towards conflict which the above mentioned case studies have depicted.

2- *Vitality of economic and military might*

Thucydides, being a realist, focused mainly on power, saying 'the strong do what they can, the weaker suffer what they must.'[20] In the past, power mainly emphasized military might, where the army used to be the means and territorial expansions were considered the end. In contrast, today's globalized world does not completely support that argument. Modern political pundits believe that economic stability is a prerequisite to ensure military might because, in the global context, the economy shapes alliances and friendships.

In particular, with the US-China rivalry, military conflict is the most likely path which many smaller states fear the US and China are headed for. The military strengths and postures are dramatically different between the US and China. In 2020, the US spent more than the next nine countries on defence technologies and maintenance. (US 801 billion dollars and China 270 billion dollars).[21] US troops not only operate in their territory, but their military presence can be seen around the globe. In an interview with The International Schiller Institute, Col. Richard H. Black (ret.), a former state senator of the US claimed that it had 900 overseas military bases, while China and Russia collectively had 35, and China had only five overseas bases.[22] A major chunk of the US defence budget is

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[19] Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap* (London: Scribe Publications, 2017), pp.7 and 9.

[20] Kori Schake, 'The Summer of Misreading Thucydides,' *The Atlantic,* 18 July 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/the-summer-of-misreading-thucydides/533859/

[21] 'U.S. DEFENSE SPENDING COMPARED to OTHER COUNTRIES,' *PETER G. PETERSON FOUNDATION*, 24 April 2023, https://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053_defense-comparison#:%7E:text=The%20United%20States%20spends%20more,%2C%20and%20South%20Korea%20%E2%80%94%20combined

[22] Col. Richard H. Black (ret.) 'U.S./Ukraine 'Disinformation Boards' Are 'Instruments of Tyranny," interview with *The International Schiller Institute*

allocated for research and development, and the overall budget allocated for the air force and navy is seven times greater than that allocated to ground forces, while the funds allocated to space technology are double those allocated to the military.[23] This demonstrates the US military's evident preference for long-range global operations and high-tech forces.

On the other hand, China has an estimated two million active military members, while the United States has 1.3 million active military people,[24] which shows that China's interest in military development is more localized. For China, it is the need of the hour because it shares borders with three nuclear powers (Russia, China, and Pakistan) and North Korea, and is engaged in several territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The recent surge in the Chinese defence budget has raised the eyebrows of those sitting in the high echelons of power in the United States. However, if we look back into the early 1960s, we see Mao Zedong in favour of human power and morale rather than relying on military advancement. For him, the military was an important but not a decisive factor.[25] However, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) under Xi Jinping is more assertive than ever before. Between 2006 and 2016, the Chinese defence budget was raised by 10 per cent.[26] In the 2022 fiscal year, China raised its military budget by 7.1 per cent which equals 230 billion dollars.[27] The increasing military expenditure of China is reminiscent of the Japanese enhancing military expenditure and formidable standing army, which threatened the interests of China and Russia and resulted in the First Sino-Japanese War

(Washington, DC) as reported by The International Schiller Institute (Washington, DC), https://schillerinstitute.com/blog/2022/08/24/interview-with-col-richard-h-black-ret-u-s-ukraine-disinformation-boards-are-instruments-of-tyranny/

23 Kimberly Amadeo, 'U.S. Military Budget, Its Components, Challenges, and Growth,' *the balance,* 3 February 2022, *https://www.thebalancemoney.com/u-s-military-budget-components-challenges-growth-3306320*

24 Avery Koop, 'U.S. Military Spending vs Other Top Countries,' *Visual Capitalist,* 30 July 2021, https://www.visualcapitalist.com/u-s-military-spending-vs-other-top-countries/

25 Ashley J. Tellis, *Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in South Asia* (Massachusetts: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), p. 9.

26 Timothy R. Heath, 'Why Is China Strengthening Its Military? It's Not All About War,' *THE RAND BLOG*, 24 March 2023, https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/03/why-is-china-strengthening-its-military-its-not-all.html

27 ZHAO LEI, 'China to raise military budget by 7.1% this year,' *China Daily,* 6 March 2022, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202203/06/WS62245064a310cdd39bc8aacb.html

(1894-95) and Russo-Japanese (1904-5) War, as mentioned above in the historical concept.

On the other hand, the economy plays a vital role in the stability of a state. In the post-Cold War period, China began to rise relentlessly without engaging in any major conflict with America. Although China is still lagging behind the United States in nominal terms, it is rapidly catching up. From a mere 4 per cent of global GDP in 1960, by 2019 China had risen to16 per cent of global GDP, while the United States had decreased from 40 per cent in 1960 to 24 per cent of global GDP.[28]

Similarly, the BRI, the China-US Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the Asia-Pacific Investment Bank (AIIB) are three key highlights of China's 'peaceful rise' policy. In order to strengthen China's power and to expand its reach, the BRI seeks to integrate Asian, European, and African economies. In light of its goal of creating alternative trade routes and investment channels that could challenge traditional US-led global economic systems, the BRI is viewed as a strategic tool to counterbalance the dominance of the United States. The growing expansion of the BRI and its potential geopolitical impacts have increased the hostility between the US and China. Similarly, the TPP was a massive trade agreement signed in 2016 by twelve Pacific Rim countries, including the United States, which together comprised 40 per cent of the global economy. This was seen as Washington's new major push towards engaging in Asia. However, President Trump's isolationist tendencies resulted in the US withdrawing from the agreement in 2017. Interestingly, all Pacific Rim countries were part of the agreement, while China and Russia were excluded, clearly indicating its geostrategic stance. However, instead of pursuing competitive real politic, China signed the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) economic agreement in 2016 which has 105 current members and 14 prospective members.[29] The organization strives to facilitate the advancement of infrastructure and regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region as well as to promote long-term development and economic integration among members of the organization.

Precisely, China's economic rise is diminishing US global importance. These drastic changes in the international political arena are like the Sword of Damocles hanging over American hegemony, which is driving

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[28] Govind Bhutada, 'The U.S. Share of the Global Economy Over Time,' *Visual Capitalist*, 14 January 2021, https://www.visualcapitalist.com/u-s-share-of-global-economy-over-time/

[29] Rebecca Bailey, 'What Is The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank?,' *Barron's, 15 June 2015, https://www.barrons.com/news/what-is-the-asian-infrastructure-investment-bank-ec220ac4*

these two countries towards a path from where there is no return except war.

3-*Alliances and coalitions shaping the new world order*

As a rising power, Athens was engaged in cultural expansion, especially through the building of the Parthenon, which was dedicated to the goddess Athena and served as a symbol of the power and democracy of the Athenian people, allowing them to explore other cultures and help them to make alliances.[30] Similarly, in contemporary Chinese foreign policy, cultural diplomacy is the key pillar reinforcing harmonious relations and enhancing the international community's knowledge via the worldwide networks of Confucius Institutes.[31] In the current epoch, the world is headed towards multipolarity, where the main actors are the US, China, Russia, and India with the help of its gigantic market is making its place in the great game. As a new economic power, China offers another power centre for smaller states to join. One reflection of China's efforts to forge a regional alliance is the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001, which can be seen as its parallel alliance network. SCO has nine member states, four observers, and six dialogue partners.

Along with regional diplomatic efforts, China is also increasingly participating in international affairs by facilitating dialogue and mediation processes. In March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran resumed their diplomatic ties after eight years which was mediated by China.[32] It clearly depicts that China is planning to expand its BRI project to Middle-Eastern countries, and it does not want to make it susceptible to Saudi-Iran hostilities in the future.

Previously, the US had an intense involvement in the Middle East, which now seems to be fading after China stepped into the melting pot. A similar trend is occurring in Europe, as it continues to assert itself somewhat independently of the US, as evidenced by its insistence on the Paris Climate Agreement and JCPOA with Iran, despite the US withdrawal from both. As Europe became increasingly frustrated with the

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[30] Graham Allison, op.cit., p. 32.

[31] 'China's Cultural Diplomacy: Strategy, Policy, and Implementation,' *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace,* 17 April 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/04/17/china-s-cultural-diplomacy-strategy-policy-and-implementation-event-4807

[32] Parisa Hafezi, Nayera Abdallah and Aziz El Yaakubi, 'Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to resume ties in talks brokered by China,' *Reuters,* 11 March 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-saudi-arabia-agree-resume-ties-re-open-embassies-iranian-state-media-2023-03-10/

Trump administration's policies, several European countries criticized the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021.

Moreover, alliances matter in the Indo-Pacific and South China Sea, and their vitality is endorsed by the famous Admiral of the US Navy, Alfred Thayer Mahan, 'Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean will be key to the seven seas in the 21st century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.'

The Sino-Russian détente is making US-China relations more vulnerable to conflicts, as relations between the West and Russia have been deteriorating soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The historical baggage carried by Russia and its ideological differences with China in the past, shows that a deep-seated psychological threat perception exists between both as competitors for leadership of the 'anti-West' alliance. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Sino-Russian détente would turn into a strong bonhomie in the foreseeable future.

Similarly, another acronym, BRICS, can be clearly heard in the international political arena since the last couple of years. It is mainly comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, but some rising states such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia are showing an interest in joining BRICS, and this development would be a paradigm shift. The BRICS members make up 23 per cent of the economy and 18 per cent of the trade in the global economy,[33] and the increasing temerity of BRICS has left the West with nothing but hand-wringing. China's increasing involvement in international affairs and strategic alliances reflects that both nations are vying for power and dominance in a rapidly changing world.

4- *Interest, fear, and honour*

Thucydides pointed out three main drivers that could potentially lead to conflict: fear, honour, and interest. A sense of fear results from the perception of one's threat, interests, security, or position, which may lead one to defend or take preventive measures. While honour is concerned with recognition, prestige, and reputation, it can be a source of conflict and influence behaviour. The term interest refers to the pursuit of one's own self-interest and the desire for power, assets, or safety.[34] In international politics, the only thing that matters is national interest. As a rising power,

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[33] Mohammed Al Asoomi, 'UAE and Saudi Arabia Joining in BRICS will be game changing,' *Gulf News,* 26 November 2022, https://gulfnews.com/business/analysis/uae-and-saudi-arabia-joining-in brics-will-be-game-changing-1.1669211706316

[34] Graham Allison, op.cit., p. 39.

China inundated a miasma of fear over American hegemony. Both states strive to maintain their territorial integrity and, in pursuit of their national interests, are locked in a fierce confrontation.

The Taiwan crisis was a recent tension between the US and China, on which both countries stood up rolling up their sleeves. The tension ignited by Nancy Pelosi, the former speaker of the US House of Representatives, visited Taiwan on 2 August 2022. In response to her visit, China held the largest live drills in the Taiwan Strait.[35] It can be traced back to the Shimonoseki Treaty of 1895 between China and Japan, wherein China recognized Korea, paid indemnities to Japan, and ceded more territory to them, including Taiwan.[36] It is important to remember this humiliating moment in China's history to understand China's sensitivity to the Taiwan issue.

The American policy towards Taiwan has been ambiguous. In the beginning of the Cold War, the US vehemently denied the Chinese Communist Party's manifesto about Taiwan. Later in 1972, Richard Nixon, during his visit to China endorsed the 'One China' policy which vociferously denies an independent Taiwan.[37] On the one hand, the American government has a nodded acquaintance with the 'One China' policy, and on the other hand, it ensures Taiwan's strategic support. The Taiwan crisis, as part of the US-China rivalry, illustrates how fear, interest, and honour can act as catalysts for heightened tensions and potential conflicts as a result of the intertwined factors of fear, interest, and honour. Managing the broader dynamics of the struggle for global dominance, while navigating this contentious issue, requires a delicate balancing act.

Critical analysis of China's rise

China's rise has made the global hegemon insecure, as its cultural engagement and influence over the world is gaining more importance. However, its influence on developing nations has raised several concerns. In 2017, an India-based think tank made a meme, 'Debt trap diplomacy,'

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[35] Yimou Lee and Sarah Wu, 'Furious China fires missiles near Taiwan in drills after Pelosi visit,' *Reuters,* 5 August 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/suspected-drones-over-taiwan-cyber-attacks-after-pelosi-visit-2022-08-04/

[36] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Treaty of Shimonoseki | 1895, China-Japan,' *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Shimonoseki

[37] James Mann, 'How Nixon's fabled trip to China, 50 years ago this week, led to today's Taiwan Crisis,' *Los Angeles Times,* 21 February 2022, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-02-21/richard-nixon-henry-kissinger-trip-to-china-50th-anniversary-taiwan-vietnam-war

that received much affirmation, and later on, the default of Sri Lanka made this narrative more coherent. Currently, the Western media accuses China of entangling developing nations in a debt trap. Similarly, as a result of a study published in the *Journal of Development Economics* in 2019, the Chinese financing of African countries increased in the run-up to elections, particularly in countries with important political leaders. In addition to circumventing regional labour and environmental regulations, these loans facilitate access to vital resources and assets for the government, which empowers state-owned or state-directed companies.[38]

Xi Jinping being elected as the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party for the third time posits some of the dictatorial tendencies of the Chinese governance structure. Moreover, there are serious human rights concerns in Xinjiang, where Muslim Uyghurs are killed or illegally detained. According to the Human Rights Watch report 2023, almost half a million Uyghurs are imprisoned by Chinese authorities.[39] These issues not only highlight the economic and geopolitical dynamics, but also the differing values and ideologies that contribute to tensions between the US and China. To navigate the obstacles and possible flashpoints within the rivalry, it is essential to understand these intricacies, which affect the trajectory of global power dynamics in the quest for dominance between the United States and China.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the rise of China in the light of Thucydides' strategic insights and by drawing parallels with other case studies from the past. Just as the rise of Athens in 431 BC made the powerful Sparta furious, China's rise is making the global superpower sensitive to its hegemony, and the contestation for global supremacy could possibly lead to war. Similarly, by analysing case studies such as the Sino-Japanese War, the Sino-Russo War, Britain and the Dutch Republic's Nine Years War against France, we have established that a rising power instils fear in the ruling power which can potentially lead to war. Hence, diplomacy is the only peaceful means to avoid conflicts. Our pandemic hit and climate-impacted world is not ready for another world war.

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[38] Samantha Power, 'How Democracy Can Win: The Right Way to Counter Autocracy,' *Foreign Affairs,* March/April 2023, pp. 32-33.

[39] 'China: Events of 2022,' Human Rights Watch, 12 January 2023, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/china