

Hegemonic Theory is not Dead: Regime Survival and Premature Hegemonic War – Impact of China’s Economic rise on the International System

Thomas Ameyaw-Brobbey¹

Abstract

Thucydides put forward the idea that, differential growth of power among states in the international system is the reason for great power wars. China’s economic rise in turn increases its power in the system which challenges the current American led order. How can we explain this dynamics between the United States and China vis-à-vis conflict, and peace? Using written sources and historical analysis, the central argument is that there is still a danger of hegemonic war between US and China even in an era nuclear weapons and economic interdependence because of two reasons: being the leader gives more benefits than a free rider and China’s domestic insecurity could force the regime into premature hegemonic war. This paper serves as a reminder to international relations on the existing strength of hegemonic war theory, the danger of future hostilities and need to avoid complacency on peace.

Keywords: USA and China; Premature Hegemonic War; Regime Survival; Rise and Fall; Nationalist Emotions

Introduction

American global leadership since 1991 has ensured universal peace albeit the threat of civil conflicts and wars, terrorism, environmental degradation, has not been absent. This leadership is under challenge in the 21st century by one of the key beneficiaries – China – accentuated by its rapid economic rise. Thucydides argued that differential growth in power among states is the cause of the dynamics in the international system and anytime such dynamics occur, the likelihood of war is high. If history is any guide, war has mostly resulted from the dynamics involving the rise of emerging power and the decline of an established power in the international system as 12 out of 16 cases in the past 500 years ended in a war (Allison, 2017, pp. 244-286). How does the theory of hegemonic war affect international relations vis-à-vis conflict, war and peace with the economic rise of China? How can we explain the outcome of this dynamics between the United States and China? Undoubtedly, factors such as nuclear weapons, global interconnectivity, and iterated multinational trade make condition of our time different from those of history. Moreover, China is undoubtedly rising fast but its rise is dependent on several exogenous factors that Beijing may not have control over such as foreign markets, research, innovation and technology and free riding advantage that it might not want to disrupt.

Despite these recognitions, the central argument is that there is still a danger of hegemonic war between US and China because of two reasons: being the leader gives more benefits than a free rider and China’s domestic insecurity caused by strong nationalist emotions could force the regime into premature hegemonic war to preserve the regime. The aim of this paper is to serve as a reminder to scholars and practitioners of international relations on the existing strength of hegemonic war theory, the danger of future hostilities and need to avoid complacency on peace. The analysis underlying the United States and China’s Thucydides trap is rooted in history.

¹ School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) Jilin University, Changchun, China. Email: qophi77@yahoo.com/
tamebrobb77@gmail.com Tel: 0086 13069120583

To utilize the explanation for historical events and situations in a theoretical and interpretative manner, the paper employed historical analysis as it focuses on “the relationships among issues that have influenced the past, continue to influence the present, and will certainly affect the future” (Lune & Berg, 2017, p.159). Secondary data from written sources were used to identify concepts to make explanations and meanings.

According to Li (2011), China will use institutions to grow and become influential in global governance and multilateral environments however it cannot achieve a complete overhaul of the order that the US has architected. Legro (2007) however believed that China’s intentions will depend on the dynamic doctrines that the country’s leaders will adopt to establish authority and therefore it will be difficult to ascertain the future intentions of China. With China’s lack of research, development and innovation and its difficulty to convert economic capacity to military strength against American’s military strength and stronger base for wealth creation, Beckley (2011/12) argued that the gap between US and China is huge for America’s edge to endure. From a similar logic, Brooks and Wohlforth (2015/16) argued that although change is afoot through China’s economic ascent, such change is systemically insignificant and the US power will long remain.

Despite this challenge, Mearsheimer believes that there has not been a time that any state has acquired global hegemony due to “the stopping power of water.” Great powers can only achieve dominion over their immediate neighbourhoods and those areas that could be reached by land and cannot venture into territories that could only be reached by ships as large water bodies on much of the earth’s surface divide up powers in the globe (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 114-118). Although the United States is not geographically situated in Asia, Nathan and Ross (1997, pp. 156-194) asserted that China is the weakest among the four competitors in Asia made up of USA, Russia, Japan and China.

The next section presents the theoretical framework. The third section discusses the distribution of capabilities between China and the US and its future implications. The fourth and fifth sections analyse the potential for US-China conflict from remote and immediate perspectives. This is done through a cost and benefit analysis of why been the leader and not a rising free rider is better and its associated threat of war as well as China’s case of how domestic insecurity caused by strong nationalist emotions and leaders need for survival could prompt premature hostilities. The penultimate sections present some current limiting conditions against the threat of war and why these conditions are not enough to prevent it, followed by conclusion.

Theory of Hegemonic War

Through historical sources, we know that great powers rise and fall (Gilpin, 1981; Kennedy, 1987). Documenting on the causes of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides advised inquirers who desire exact historical knowledge to help interpretation of the future that when changes occur in the growth of power among states that affect the vital interests of hegemon and its provision of public goods, the likely outcome is a war (Gilpin 1988, p. 591). Sparta’s fear induced by the rise of Athens, Thucydides believed was the main reason war ensued between Sparta and Athens as he wrote “the real cause...which was formally most kept out of sight” was “the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon [Sparta], made war inevitable” (Gilpin, 1988, p. 596).

The theory stipulates that changes in the international system caused by the differential growth of power among states create challenges for the dominant power as its cost of maintaining the system increases in relation to its capacity to pay; and opportunities for the rising power as its gains increase. This enhances the rising power’s efforts of changing the system. The dominant power must solve this problem that has led to the discrepancies between its relative power and resources and its commitment in the system. It can either increase the resources that it uses to maintain its commitments and position in the system or reduce its existing commitments and associated costs these commitments engender. History gives us a roadmap to resolve the imbalance in the international system: eliminate the reason for the increasing costs by weakening or destroying the rising challenger whose rising power capabilities and demands put pressure on the system (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 188-189). It is a preventive war that suits the dominant power while relative military strength and capabilities are still on its side.

The exact cause of war is the changes that have occurred over a long period in the system due to the uneven growth and development of states; and on one hand, the assertiveness and self-importance, and on the other, fear and anger such changes have induced. It is more of a remote and less of an immediate cause of war and the more importantly, it changes and reshapes the structure of the international system (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 198-200). The major concern is the impact the rising state can have on the dominant state in terms of its vital interest and sphere of influence.

Changes can occur in the hierarchy of the system and states are permitted to move up and down of the international ladder but it is the changes that threaten the vital interest and sphere of influence of the dominant power that have a likelihood of war and instability. Sparta and Athens were locked up in this trap. How will the United States and China fare?

Determinants and Measurement of Superpower Capabilities

We can talk about China and the United States vis-à-vis the possibility of future conflict and cooperation through the distribution of capabilities between them. A discussion of these capabilities is not solely about who is powerful today but a combination of past and present to make projection into the future. Here, I will focus on three overlapping indicators – economic, technological innovation and military capabilities. Each interacts and reinforces others in various ways, thus having enough of one without a corresponding amount of others renders it insufficient.

Economic Strength

Bergsten et al. (2008, p. 9) noted that a precondition for a global economic superpower is that, the country “must be large enough to significantly affect the world economy... dynamic enough to contribute importantly to global growth... sufficiently open to trade and capital flows to have a major impact on other countries.” Being rich increases a state’s bargaining power, reduces its reliance on others, increases its ability to influence others, fund technological innovation and embark on military modernization. One standard way to measure a state’s economic strength is through its GDP and more recently, PPP. PPP “provides the best available starting point for comparisons of economic strength and wellbeing between countries...generally regarded as a better measure of overall wellbeing” and “the best benchmark – and not just for assessing relative economic strength [but] especially for the purpose of assessing comparative military potential” (Allison, 2017, pp. 10-11).

In 2005, the United States GDP was \$13.1 trillion, 5.7 times that of China’s \$2.3 trillion. China closed the gap after two years for US and China GDP figures to stand respectively at \$19.4 trillion and \$12.0 trillion and it is estimated that by 2029, China will overtake the US in GDP (Scott & Sam, 2018). The IMF estimated the sizes of US and China’s economies in 2014 at \$17.4 trillion and \$17.6 trillion respectively, knocking off the US from its perch as the world largest economy (Allison, 2017, p.10). China was the only great power that came out of the 2008 financial crisis stronger as “the Chinese economy grew 8% annually throughout the global financial crisis, and its reported debt-to-GDP ratio was only 19%” (Beckley, 2011/12, p. 60). This has reopened the argument between liberal economic theories of development and socialist nonmarket economies because China is “still a nonmarket economy – one in which the government makes major decisions on prices and allocating goods and services – to an important extent” (Bergsten et al., 2008, p.10). Subramanian (2011, p. 67) thus argued, “China’s dominance is a sure thing.”

However, others contend that mere economic size does not make China a contender for superpower and its rise does not mean the United States is in decline “after all, China was the largest economy in the world throughout most of its century of humiliation;” UK established imperial rule over a quarter of the world but without having to be the world largest economy; and Luxembourg’s per capita income is twice as the US but nowhere near a superpower (Beckley, 2011/12, p. 58). The argument is that, the conditions that propelled China economically to this stage might not last. For example, the Chinese one-child policy from 1970-2013 has encouraged an aging population and more pensioners, withering away the advantage of sufficient cheap labour while the US working population is young and still developing with the working population expected to grow 17% over the next 40 years. Moreover, businesses and corporations that stimulate China’s economic growth are foreign as wholly-foreign owned enterprises provide 70% of FDI that flows into China while joint ventures between Chinese and foreign firms has declined from almost 50% in 1980s to less than 5% in 2009 (Beckley, 2011/12, pp. 62-63).

Going forward, the United States advantage is that American corporations account for the most dominant profit-shares in the world and U.S. investors also own considerable amount of the shares of corporations in other countries, for example the twenty largest European firms while Chinese ownership of non-Chinese based firms are highly negligible (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/16, pp. 28-30). Understandably, a discussion of economic capability is not solely about who is richest today but also who can sustain its wealth into the future from various avenues.

What this suggests is that although China is presently growing faster than the US, the US has a much stronger economic base than China for future sustainable growth and there are opportunities for investment and faster growth in the long run. The US prospects for continue economic growth might be higher than that of China. However, it cannot be underestimated that Chinese businesses and entrepreneurs are making great strikes in foreign markets especially with the Chinese government supported “go out” policy and the new Belt and Road Initiative. These policies would continue to assist Chinese businesses and entrepreneurs to compete and capture foreign markets. From a long term perspective, Chinese would have significant inflow of foreign capital from businesses and investment abroad albeit such investments are popularly in the developing countries.

Strength in Technology and Innovation

A state’s ability to create products through research and development, production and manufacturing also generates wealth for the country and improves the military strength. Undoubtedly, innovation and technological growth depends on education, national resources devoted for research and development, production and training of doctors, scientists, designers, engineers, among others. Over the years, the United States has led in this sphere but today, China has not felt bad and seems ready to overtake the US in this regard. China now produces more science and engineering doctoral degrees per year and employs them than either the United States or any other country and Chinese scientific articles have accordingly increased. Although the United States might have the larger number of top science and engineering universities in the world, Tsinghua University passed MIT as the number one engineering university in 2015. China also ranked 6th in Mathematics while the US ranked 39th in 2015 (Allison, 2017, p.16).

Chinese scientific research is supposed to continue its tremendous growth due to government efforts at research and development with a decree that by 2020, research and development will form 2.5% of the country’s GDP and China will rank among the top five countries in terms of scientific research articles (Beckley, 2011/12, p.64). In this regard, China’s annual spending on research and development increased from \$25billion to more than \$200billion between 2000 and 2011 while the US increment was much smaller from \$260billion to \$425billion (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/16, p. 23). The Chinese government has also initiated a program such as the new entrepreneur visa that seeks to attract foreign students and scholars in the field of science and technology.

However, Beckley (2011/12, p. 64) believes that Chinese official statistics of China’s scientific resources spending on research and development are inflated because they are based on the purchasing power of the RMB which does not give much effect since research equipment are purchased abroad, and many engineers are auto mechanics of two-year vocational training. In fairness, this cannot be accurate because there is no technical university that runs a two-year engineering related course. However, the sheer size of scientists, doctors or engineers a country produces per year, I reckon is insignificant and cannot propel a rising state towards the path of superpower status if their outputs are low and do not significantly affect the country’s technological innovation. Despite China’s rapid increase in annual research and development spending China is merely 3% of US overall level of human capital (Brooks & Wohlforth 2015/16, p. 23). This means that although technological spending is increasing, the individual skills level of the Chinese people to apply technology to innovate is relatively low compared to Americans.

While we can discuss that size is not as important as sophistication, it is important to note that technological innovation needs years of research, development and practice and the first point of start is resource allocation to produce the needed personnel, who through learning and copying over a long period, could come out of genuine innovation. Thus China’s efforts although today might not surpass US, can be effective in the long term. Although arguments are against Chinese mass production of scientists and engineers with low quality, the Chinese state is now the world’s leading high technology exporter becoming an “advanced-technology superstate [and] the world leading technology based economy” (Beckley, 2011/12, p. 68). Nevertheless, foreign firms drive the Chinese economy and technological sector.

More than half of Chinese exports consist of “export processing” where components are imported into China, assembled into finished products and exported and about 84% in 2010 of these exports were controlled by wholly owned foreign firms or through joint ventures so exporting technology is quite insignificant (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/16, p. 24). China might have improved this statistics because it filed almost twice as total patent applications than US in 2015 and became the first to generate more than a million patent applications in a year (Allison, 2017, p. 17).

Military Capability

Military capability is by far the most important determinant for superpower status. The US since 1991 has dominated global military strength. It has been able to provide security cover for many states including allies like Japan and Israel, issue threats to adversaries like North Korea and Iran and fought wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while ensuring its own security interests and providing global public goods. In 2010, the US defence budget alone was about eight times greater than China's even without Iraq and Afghanistan wars funding although China has engaged in conscious efforts to double military spending from 1989 to 2009. Growing economic strength could also affect military strength. The Chinese regime is embarking on programs of restructuring and modernizing its security forces including the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Chinese People's Armed Police, the militia, and reserved forces to enhance the abilities to fulfil diverse military tasks, uphold combat capacity standard, make the armed forces smaller but more efficient with capabilities to fight and win.

According to President Xi, these reforms are necessary to be able to "take into account the broader international picture, size up our own conditions, and properly deal with the profound and complicated changes in the world" (Xi, 2017, p. 441). It is important to note that the actual military spending of the Chinese regime is shrouded in secrecy. However, what is known is that, China's military expenditure has sharply increased through the course of its military modernization especially since the year 2000 while that of the US has correspondingly decreased at least since 2010. China military spending grew by 920% from \$23 billion in 1991 to \$228 billion in 2017 (Gilli&Gilli, 2018/19a, pp. 171-172). This increment might not be as significant as it appears to be, because from 2002 to 2011, China's average defence budget was 1.365% of GDP.² Despite these increments, China's military budget and capabilities is still a pale shadow of the United States military budget of just under \$716 billion for 2018 (Fernando, 2018).

Military spending is one way to measure the developments of military albeit it is argued that "the amount that a state decides to spend on its military is a choice, and it may be misleading to use such numbers to capture something that is supposed to be constraint on choice" (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/16, p. 18). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that accumulated investment in military through research and development, training, modernization, and acquisition of logistics can improve military capabilities over a long term. A state should be able to translate its economic wealth and technological innovation into military strength and in 2013, Liff and Erickson (2013, p. 807) agreed that defence spending by China over the past two decades has significantly improved its military capabilities. China cannot at least in the immediate and medium term, match the US "command of the global common" made up of sea command (aircraft carriers, nuclear attack submarines, ships, cruisers); space (satellites that provides vital information for conducting military operations); air (drones and military aircraft for air combat); and infrastructure (military bases, transport ships, tankers, and aircraft carriers) and it is likely to remain so for many decades (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/16, p. 19).

There is a historical tendency for the military technologies of the powerful state to be diffused to other states and through globalization, American research, development and technology are diffused into China and through copying it should be able to technologically augment its military because "hardware is often easy to acquire [and] it is not difficult to copy ... specific technologies" (Gilli&Gilli, 2018/19a, p.148). However, a huge limitation on China's military is that modern complexities and sophistication of military technology render it incapable to easily imitate American technology. Imitation and copying are only possible when imitation is cheaper than innovation with a low entry barrier and easier diffusion of the foreign know-how.

However, modern technological complexities increase the incompatibilities and vulnerabilities of copying and imitating, making it difficult for China to imitate American modern military technology (Gilli&Gilli, 2018/19a). For this reason, "China has struggled tremendously in imitating US 5th generation jet fighters" because applying technology to military development "is a long, difficult, and expensive process" and "there is no substitute for the industrial capabilities and experience necessary to develop [such] advanced military platforms" (Gilli&Gilli, 2019b, 1-3).

²Author's calculation based on figures presented by Liff and Erickson (2013, p. 810).

Cost-Benefit Analysis of Leading the Line and War

International order is achieved with the presence of a dominant power known as the hegemon to bear the cost of providing public goods in a form of international stability and must be militarily and economically powerful to extract support and ensure compliance from other states (Stein, 1984, 356). This sort of grants the dominant power a right of forming a kind of a quasi-government, albeit not authority. Without a hegemon performing such role in the world of anarchy, the world would be in disarray. The hegemon – United States – allows itself to be exploited by the rising power – China – through hegemonic burden and globalization. Through globalization, free market and trade, US research, development and technology are diffused across other national boundaries. This has enabled China to benefit from US technology and businesses through foreign direct investment aiding China's catching up and American decline process. The rising power does not only free rides, but "engage[s] in sabotage, erecting diplomatic and economic obstacles to U.S. initiatives" (Beckley 2011/12, p. 45). Diffusion of US technology and development through globalization allows China to adopt modern technology without having had to invent them by itself to catch up with the US through imitation and mass production while saving funds that would have been used for research and development to improve other sectors or improve upon the existing technology while avoiding the mistakes of the US. This exploitation through imitation and theft and free market and trade has been key part of China's economic success (Bergsten et al., 2008, p. 106; Allison, 2017, p. 17). The argument is that, "the unipolar order of the last two decades is waning not because of Iraq but because of the broader diffusion of power across the world" (Zakaria, 2008, p. 43).

If leading the line is costly and increases the US decline, why would the US want to hold on to this position and why would China want to occupy it? What is the interest or the material benefits why China would want to occupy this position if it benefits from free riding? We can argue the US hegemonic burden from a more positive perspective. Although the dominant power provides the public goods, it does not do so out of altruism but it has a major interest in the production as its efficient economic and political institutions enable it to receive the full benefits of the system (Snidal, 1985, pp. 587-589). The United States power and hegemonic role enables it to gain complete competitive advantage in the global environment and gain the most out of the global engagements, extracting the lucrative economic ventures and manipulating international system to its advantage which is far more than the exploitation and free riding benefits of China (Babones, 2011).

The position of the US enables it to set global agenda to suit its national interest and further its own objectives, set the choices available to states and in some cases decides on which options others can make and shape the framework within which the world should revolve. In effect, the US acts as a kind of the world shadow government. Being the number one state and controlling global trade and economy, the US can distort international markets in its favour that could create opportunities for American firms through foreign economic policies and diplomatic leverages (Bhagwati, 1994; Stremlau, 1994/5). Although hegemonic burden and globalization allows China to free ride and exploit the US, this position enables the US to play the role of a system maker and as well enjoy enormous privilege within it which far overshadows the benefits China enjoys. Rather than declining, the US further increases in strength and "in fact it is now wealthier, more innovative, and more militarily powerful compared to China than it was in 1991" Cold War ending (Beckley, 2011/12, p. 43). It is for these enormous advantages that could be exploited by been the number one power that encourage China to seek the position as they clarified in 2002 that "we know we have to play the game your way now but in ten years we will set the rules" (Bergsten et al., 2008, p. 9). It is now seeking new ways to create institutions with Chinese characteristics such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that could serve as a coequal or challenge already established US dominated institutions and attaches public goods characteristics to these institutions.

Between 2014 and 2017, President Xi argued that "global economic growth requires new drivers" and that, "China is ready to provide more public goods ...through connectivity" of its Belt and Road Initiative to "rebalance the world economy by fostering new demand and ensuring effective supply particularly in the current situation where the world economy has remained sluggish" (Xi, 2017, pp. 546-550). The AIIB is a multilateral monetary institution that seeks to pioneer Asian and the world's development through softer loans. In simple terms, the AIIB is a Chinese version of the World Bank and IMF.

The US could solve this imbalance by either increasing the resources that it uses to maintain its commitments and position in the system to achieve enhanced liberal system that it can exploit; or reduce its existing commitments that seeks to reduce China's free riding benefits to stifle its growth. The current US administration sees hegemonic burden as waning American power and has opted for the reducing commitments with trade war, immigration restrictions, lesser interests in international institutions evidenced in its posture to the Paris Conference on Climate Change and Global Warming, etc. This is the basis of President Trump's "America first" rhetorics which convinced Americans and continue to do so that the US and its people would be better and stronger if the country do less abroad and focus on issues at home. However, this rather expands China's influence while US reduces its own competitive advantage. This decision indicates the US currently does not see the good in leading the line and wouldn't mind if China takes over if that means making "America great again." However, what needs to be noted is that President Trump is only a domestic issue not structural, which could at any time be solved. A presidential change at the end of eight years or second term or an electoral loss could easily see US foreign policies reversed. The US, fear of losing its role of leadership, could aim to eliminate the reason for the increasing cost, attempt to weaken or force China back in line at a time it still has economic, technology and military competitive advantage prompting hostilities that none could back down.

Communist Regime Survival and War

Nationalist sentiment is associated with particularistic features such as ethnicity, norms, traditions, language and religion which prompt people to agitate for equal status with others leading most often to aggressive war or conflict causing behaviours. Chinese nationalism could be traced well into history where all others but Chinese were 'Barbarians' and they would be treated "humanely and compassionately in proportion to their attainment of Chinese culture and their observance of rituals connoting submission to China" (Kissinger, 2011, pp. 18, 24-25). Chinese nationalist sentiments increased with the "centuries of humiliation" from Western intrusion and the Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-1860) with its associated 'unequal treaties' and Japanese occupation until unification in 1949 (Cohen, 2000, pp. 249-263). Today, Chinese do not think of their culture and values as universal principles but nationalists aim for something that could serve as the immediate cause for hegemonic war – Taiwan unification and Japan's apology – and believe it is only after dealing with these matters that officially end the centuries of humiliation. Shirk (2008, p. 77) wrote that:

The foreign policy issues that receive a lot of attention are treated symbolically, as issues of principle instead of problems to be solved: the principle that Japan must atone for its historical sins, the "one China" principle that Taiwan must accept.

Chinese strong nationalist emotions on the issues concerning Taiwan and Japan were stimulated by leaders themselves to achieve public support and became "the *lingua franca* of successful politics in the twentieth-century China"(Zhao, 2000, p. 4) but has now reached a point where it is difficult to control or back down because such action means "a mass protest movement could rise up and overthrow them" as it would be interpreted as a weak government that failed "to defend the nation against foreign aggression" (Shirk, 2008, p. 7). The US maintains alliance commitment to Taiwan and a military force against Taiwan could draw in the United States and its allies. However, the strong unification nationalist sentiments of the mainland and nationalism of the island for independence means that the Communist regime must demonstrate its effective resolve against Taiwan's independence including the use of force of arms because if it "allows Taiwan to declare formal independence without a putting up a fight, the outraged public will bring down the regime" (Shirk, 2008, p. 2).

The US has many allies in Asia and across the globe and its commitment and resolve is been watched. It cannot afford to abandon democratic Taiwan to the control of authoritarian China. For example when China threatened Taiwan in 1996, the United State quickly moved in aid of Taiwan. Moreover, the US would not abandon Taiwan because China might have ambitions that go beyond Taiwan for if the US "abandon Taipei to Beijing, China's global challenge to America and the region would persist and grow" (Friedman, 2013, pp. 226-228).

Chinese nationalist emotions against Japan that Japan must atone for its imperial occupation in China including the 1937 Nanjing massacre, in which thousands of Chinese citizens were killed by Japanese, are the ones that are the most difficult for Communist regime to handle (Christensen, 2001, p. 15).

Nationalist emotions against Japanese are so strong that even grade two pupils know that Japan is an enemy. Beijing might argue that “its main objective is to build a politically, economically, and culturally united nation-state when foreign and largely Western influences are seen as eroding the nation-state’s very foundation” (Zhao, 2000, p. 14). However, the more this unity is achieved economically, the greater nationalists remember historical wrongs with “a rallying cry for Chinese everywhere...that after a century of humiliation ...China's time has come” to challenge those who historically wronged them because they are now stronger (Lilley, 1996). The Communist Party gained respect and rose to power because it fought Japanese imperialism and it cannot play soft now to be seen as unwilling to stand up against oppressors.

The attention Chinese public give to these issues means that Chinese leaders can contemplate risking war with the United States who maintains alliance commitment to these states to improve national image of toughness, avoid domestic humiliation and protect historical legacies as patriots hoping to avoid the fate of historical national outcasts such as Lin Zexu, Qi Shan and Li Hongzhang that could affect their families and generations unborn. When pushed into corner by assertive nationalism against Taiwan and Japan, Chinese leaders are likely to choose conflict than refraining from it even if it involves the likelihood of US military intervention because it is more related to regime security than national security. Refraining from conflict would be more costly because they are:

Concerned first and foremost with their own political survival. They don’t have to stand for election, but they face other political risks that democratic leaders do not have to worry about. A rival leader could try to oust them. A mass protest movement could rise up and overthrow them...an opposition movement could defeat them (Shirk, 2008, pp. 6-7).

One would argue that China would not be able to take on American military itself let alone a combination with other allies in Asia. However, since it is related more on regime security, when Chinese leaders are torn between using force outside even when they face higher certainty of fatal consequence, and refraining from force to face the wrath of domestic nationalists, they would opt for the former because fighting and losing against rivals like US, Japan and Taiwan would improve domestic legitimacy, strength and respect. A counterargument could be that, recent constitutional amendments that extend President Xi’s term of office indefinitely, with unprecedented central government powers and control; regime’s anti-corruption campaigns and polices that ostensibly purge or get rid of anyone powerful enough to cause a challenge, as well as the rapid evolution and spread of technology erase any concern of regime insecurity as these factors have enhanced and entrenched the regime’s surveillances and intelligence mechanisms over the citizens including those in Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang. However, since technology evolves, human actions and complexities evolve in turn and individual leadership would not also be permanent and hence these limitations could not be permanent to negate an argument for regime insecurity.

Recent occurrences in 2019 could give indications into the extent Chinese leaders take nationalist emotions into consideration. China’s state broadcaster – CCTV – indicating the behaviour “hurt the feelings of the Chinese people” dropped a high profile English Premiership game between Arsenal and Manchester City and subsequent Arsenal games in December 2019 as public and social media anger erupted when Arsenal star – Mesut Ozil – comment on China’s treatment of Uighur Muslims. China had earlier backed out of NBA games in October 2019 and Chinese sponsors of NBA cut ties after Houston Rocket’s General Manager – Daryl Morey – supported protesters in Hong Kong for the same reason of nationalist sentiments (Datoo&Karve, 2019). China’s economic needs or the US and its allies’ military strength would not save us if nationalists’ anger erupts over Japan or Taiwan.

The Fate of Hegemonic War in an Era of Nuclear

Generally, states fight when the intended benefits of victory outweigh the costs. However, in our days, nuclear weapons through technology are believed to impose costs that outweigh any intended benefit as one scholar believes that “technology that made war possible also limited its scope” (Kissinger (2014, p. 232). The peace in nukes is associated with its mutual deterrence purpose. The possibility that two nuclear powers would be mutually annihilated in a fight by their nukes is seen as the reason why hegemonic war in our time is unlikely. Nukes define peace and stability as a situation “in which neither side would use its weapons of mass destruction because the adversary was always able to inflict an unacceptable level of destruction in retaliation” (Kissinger, 2014, p. 233). Nuclear states are believed to be able to persuade each other to refrain from taking actions such as an armed attack that is viewed as dangerous to the interest of either side by making each other fear the products of his behaviour and some associate this with why the Cold War for example, never became hot (Nye Jr. & Welch, 2012, p. 45).

Although no war has erupted between two nuclear states since its inception, it is quite doubtful a war between the US and China would be prevented because of nuclear weapons. The evolution of nuclear weapons has not necessarily changed the nature of international relations. Strict structural alliances in the first half of the 20th century that culminated in the world wars prior to the nuclear evolution are emerging in Asia Pacific. We should see changes in world politics if nuclear weapons have changed the nature of international relations and made hegemonic war unlikely. The behaviour of leaders still suggest that national interest and security takes precedence over all else in anarchical self-help system.

Asia-Pacific for example “is on the cusp of major changes in its strategic environment” and these changes are engendered by the economic growth of China (Ghosh, 2008, p. 282). Due to threat perceptions of these changes, India and Japan sought to leverage China’s supremacy with strategic partnership with a hint of alliance: “I see India and Japan as an alliance, linked by their philosophy and moved by their values” (Mukherjee, 2018). Alongside is the Japan-Australia bilateral security cooperation where in 2013, the two democracies deepened their security cooperation with the signing of three high-level security agreement (King, 2016, pp. 177-180). There is also India-Australia close security partnership encompassing eight areas of shared security interest. These countries are linked by the United States in a coalition strategy of likeminded democracies through which the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) was initiated by Japan in 2007, albeit opposed by China who termed it as Asian NATO. Nevertheless it was enhanced in 2015 and 2017. China concluded that “no one is going to protect North Korea if it continues with its bad behaviour [nuclear programs]” but it has no option than to hold on to North Korea due to Asia-Pacific emerging alliances that is leaving it isolated (Feng, 2009, p. 46).

Moreover, war could be fought in our era by states with wide range of nukes without resorting to them. After the horrors of the two world wars, global leaders have become concerned with the future of the mankind and the universe and cannot afford to destroy it. Undoubtedly, nuclear weapons would have a much greater effect today than in 1945. Nevertheless, the fear of societal destruction or global apocalypse serves a greater barrier to the leadership in Beijing and Washington in using nuclear weapons in an event of a clash after all who would they become the leaders to, if the world is destroyed? Nuclear deterrence alone was not the reason why the Cold War for instance never became hot but “superpowers’ own concept of deterrence rested on apocalyptic risks” because “...except for the Cuban missile crisis...neither side approached their use, either against each other or in wars against non-nuclear third countries” and “since then, the number of strategic nuclear offensive warheads has been reduced” due to the risk of destruction of societies (Kissinger, 2014, pp. 233-234).

The moral and ethical constraints of use of nuclear weapons have been persuasive throughout the course of history since its first usage. Weapons usage is limited by universal values on the sanctity of life and restrictions against doing harm to human being. Nuclear usage has gained global notoriety that, leaders whether democratic or authoritarian who will seek global consent for leadership after war would not be able to use nuclear weapons for warfare. Universal public opinion against nuclear usage means that leaders who would employ them would not be able to secure global legitimacy. With the development of global normative prohibitions against nukes, ideas, values and beliefs held by the people of the world would influence the conscience of statesmen and military personnel and constraint either US or China (Tannewald, 1999).

Fearing international public opinion, President Eisenhower retorted “we can’t use those awful things against Asians for the second time in less than ten years” (Nye Jr. & Welch, 2012, p. 167). During the Second World War, military organizations were shaped by global values and norms to the extent that “mutual restraint in chemical warfare was preferred throughout the war” by all the major players of the war even at the point of defeat (Legro, 1996, p. 126). These analyses indicate that the limiting effect of nuclear weapons on hegemonic war or any widescale global war through mutual deterrence is less powerful than we are made to believe.

Hegemonic War in an Era of Iterated Economic Interdependence

Since the end of the Cold War, networks of economic interdependence have increased. Through trade, states, governments and people of the world have affected each other – a development that has aided Chinese growth as the preceding sections demonstrated. Businesses and corporations that stimulate China’s economic growth are either wholly-foreign owned multilateral enterprises or joint venture enterprises between Chinese and foreign firms.

China is now the world's leading high technology exporter and the world leader in computer, semiconductors, communication equipment, etc. because of export processing where components are imported into China, assembled into finished products and exported. Liberal theories of economic interdependence and export explain that economically interdependent world have increased understanding among states and peoples and helped to prevent war. Opportunities for trade and export have transformed states and their leaders to prefer a stable global environment as a stable global environment help export-oriented states to maximize profits of their exports (Uriu, 2001). In effect economic gains and wealth have made peace because there's a transnational interest of trade and investment (Russet, 1993, p. 28).

To start with, there is little evidence to support the notion that economic interdependence leads to peace. Of course, interstate commercial activities have increased since the end of the Cold War and no major war involving great powers have ensued but this cannot be credited to non-stop commerce. In 1914, Germany went to war with Britain and Russia who were its two largest trading partners and the economic environment in Europe prior to the war was largely open. Similar pattern prevailed prior to World War Two between Germany and Soviet Union but the two fought at opposite ends during the war. During the entire period from 1870 to the end of that century and the decade that followed, international trade between Europe's major powers continued to grow and there was no sign of protectionism. Stein (1984, p. 372) wrote that "the rate of trade growth, averaged annually over the entire period, exceeded that of domestic growth for many countries, and the degree of openness...was remarkably stable for the United Kingdom, Germany, and France."

From 1870 to 1910, external trade and openness for Britain ranged from 52.8% to 46.1% of gross national product (GNP) with a ten-year average of 52.8%; that of France, whose external trade was less than 10% prior to 1850 shot up, ranging from 24.1% to 33.0% with a decade average of 28.36%. From 1880 to 1910, Germany's figures ranged from 33.9% to 35.8% with a decade average of 33.35%. Again, these states relied heavily on customs revenues as a source of government revenue. For example, from 1870 to 1910, Germany's customs revenue as a percentage of total government revenue ranged from 52.2% to 44.2% with a decade average of 52.08%, higher than Britain's average of 21.74% for the same period. Finally, the degree of protectionism (custom revenues as a percentage of total import value) for the same period was record low with decade averages for Britain 5.21%, France 6.62% and Germany 7.5%.³ These countries fought World War One but the greatest levels of international trade were achieved in the years preceding the war and these levels were not seen again until 1970.

Iterated economic interdependence itself does not ensure peace because "we can determine when interdependence will drive actors either to peace or to conflict. If trade expectations are positive, dependent states will expect to realize the positive benefits of trade into the future, and [might] be more inclined toward peace." If they are negative, "fearing a cutoff of vital goods or the continuation of current restrictions, the negative expected value for trade will push them toward aggression" (Copeland, 2003, p. 324). China holds US dollars and bonds and the US accepts huge Chinese imports while it exports little to China making trade between the two asymmetrical soaring up the US trade deficit. Although trade between US and China is asymmetrical in China's favour, China is more vulnerable than the US as it has strong domestic incentives to export to the US market while the US could purchase those goods it gets from China elsewhere.

Of course, China would not want to damage US economy and weaken its market base in US for its exports. It is also not incorrect that the economic relationship between China and the US is important and neither can afford to rock this relationship. However, trade practices show that the states have become less interested in their absolute gains from trade than relative gains – how relatively greater gains of the other state and how it might use to hurt him – evidenced in US-China trade war. Per Trump's rhetorics and tweets, the current trade wars are the United States means to contain China's growth and in the eyes of US, the undue advantage China gets in the asymmetric trade as the US is concerned with the relative economic gains of China.

Interdependence should suggest that the US would be better off if China is better off and vice-versa and an injury to one's economy affects the economy of the other. However, relative gains consideration is engendering trade restrictions. Economic interdependence has increased but its limitation on hegemonic war is limited.

³ Averages are based on author's calculation from data presented by Arthur Stein (1984, pp. 362-74).

Conclusion

The theory of hegemonic war is characterized by two components – rise and fall. The rise engenders self-importance and assertiveness while fall engenders fear. From the discussion of distribution of capabilities, there is no doubt that China is rising but it is limited in many respects in relation to the United States. Anyhow we look at it, what is clear is that the US is superior in technology and military than China and would remain so for some decades. China would attempt to catch up in the long run in economic development but in a situation where it takes research and innovation motivation from the US in a form of imitation, cyber espionage and reverse engineering means that whatever it would develop would be countermeasures and counter-innovations which could only limit the competitive advantages the US derives from its military technology but not necessarily surpassing the US.

China's military modernization is on course with cuts in noncombat personnel, expansion of military facilities and logistics including a launch of its domestically built second air craft carrier in December 2019. However, a holistic look at the China's "defense establishment is still more suited for fighting a Vietnam-era conflict than a 21st century engagement" (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/16, p. 34) and therefore it is "not until China has overtaken the US in the development and application of technology can they envisage confronting the US militarily" (Allison et al., 2013, p. 12).

The differential growth of power among states is undoubtedly instigating changes in the international system. Like Athens, the new found strength of China has engendered self-importance, prestige and self-assertiveness. Like Sparta, the US might view Chinese assertiveness as a sign of disrespect of American power and ungrateful of America's leadership and attempt to solve this imbalance through increased trade war, or eliminate the reason for the increasing cost of providing public goods since the US still has the military strength in its advantage, in a way that could engender hostilities. China's inability to project force in relation to the US does not mean that there is no danger of hegemonic war between the two, even in this era of nuclear weapons and greater economic interdependence.

China could prematurely go to war with the US even when it knows it will not only fail but completely be humiliated, if such decision involves regime security. This humiliation is only in the international realm which the regime would care little about but domestically, it achieves great success. We cannot count on economic interdependence, nuclear revolution, and supremacy of US military technology prevailing over communist leaders need for survival if nationalists' anger erupts over Japan or Taiwan or any of the neighbouring US allies. This might be an immediate cause of war but underneath will be a more remote cause: the changes that have occurred in international system due to the differential growth of China and the US that increased the hegemonic burden of US and reduced its leadership benefits. Although the ensuing war might be limited to Asia, the international system will be shaped or reshaped from whatever outcome emerges – a show of an enduring strength or a showcase of intent. Even in an event of a fortunate scenario of non-clash, the heating rivalry and mistrust for each other at peak levels will cause some costly distractions. But amidst both situations is China's greatest gain – strength and respect at home.

One limitation with the application of this theory is that, it cannot readily predict who would initiate the war. If it is only about the fear that the rising state engenders, then we could assume that the established state may initiate the first attack. However, conditions such as domestic survival and miscalculation of a rising state's own capabilities, the shifting blames and increasing stigmatization and discrimination against Chinese nationals over coronavirus (COVID-19) could engender it to initiate the first attack. Moreover, the theory does not predict the outcome – who will win. Therefore, the argument I presented here is not about who will win a conflict between China and the US. It is about whether a conflict would occur or not. In all, what is certain is that, the war would largely be due to remote cause than the immediate cause. It is in this view that we can talk about the hegemonic war theory as just been quiet for a moment but not dead.

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