

Inquiring Minds topic – 11 August 2017

Moderator: Melissa Butler

The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?

A recent book by Graham Allison asks the above question and then examines 16 cases where a rising power rivaled a ruling power. In 12 of those cases, war broke out. But in 4, it didn't. The article below, from *The Diplomat*, approaches some of the same questions and was a bit shorter. I'll post a couple of additional articles on the Inquiring Minds website for the overachievers in the group.

Questions for discussion:

Is the 21st century likely to be a Chinese century? Are we at a point where China is challenging US global leadership? How can that challenge be managed? How can war be avoided? What historical examples might we look to?

Is President Trump's approach to foreign policy more likely to maintain America's position as the world leader or to surrender that position to the Chinese?

Jared McKinney, "China-US: Avoiding the 'Improbable War'" *The Diplomat*, April 10, 2015

Might the U.S. and China be repeating the mistakes that led to the improbable wars of the past?

If the United States is the colossus that bestrides the world, its command to history is simple: Stop. The problem with America's imperative is, as distinguished Yale historian Paul Kennedy [remarked in 2010](#), "history, unfortunately, has a habit of wandering off all on its own."

A recent diplomatic episode shows that this is a lesson the U.S. remains uninterested in learning.... [I]n 2010, the IMF, with the support of the Obama Administration, passed a series of reforms that would shift member quota shares (and voting rights) to reflect the dynamics of a changing world economy, especially the economic growth of the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). For the past five years, the U.S. Congress has refused to ratify the IMF reform because many Republicans are [generally dubious](#) about international financial cooperation and because they [fear](#) it would give China more influence while decreasing U.S. influence (the second argument is *prima facie* spurious, as America would still remain the only

member state with veto powers). As a result of Republican intransigence on the question of reform, the IMF is becoming less relevant to world economic cooperation. This has led IMF chief Christine Lagarde to [proclaim](#) “I will do belly-dancing if that’s what it takes to get the US to ratify.” But not even that threat was able to sell reform to the Republican Senate.

This episode is telling because it reverses the [narrative](#) the U.S. has created about China’s rise. Since 2005 the U.S. has constantly pressured China to become a “responsible stakeholder.” U.S. President Barack Obama has accused China of being a global “free rider.” But as IMF reform makes clear, the U.S. – or more precisely, large political blocs within the U.S. – doesn’t actually want to share a stake of its power with China: It likes the division of world power the way it is and sees no reason to allow any change. China is rising. Rather than adjust structures and relationships to this reality, it is nicer to pretend nothing needs to change.

But the world is changing. Its bid for integration rejected, China has begun constructing its own system to [run parallel](#) to the U.S.-built system. In 2014 the BRICS nations, which comprise 3 billion people and around 20 percent of world GDP, launched their own \$100 billion New Development Bank. Also in 2014, China launched an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), another \$100 billion institution. More than 50 nations have applied to join the AIIB so far according to the [Global Times](#), and more will in the future, as Asia [needs](#) \$8 trillion in infrastructure investment this decade alone. Regional and global enthusiasm for China’s initiative peeved the U.S., which [pressured](#) its allies not to join the bank. It has now become clear that this pressure has failed spectacularly. Ignoring U.S. protests, [Britain announced](#) it would join. France, Germany, and Italy quickly followed suit (later followed by South Korea and Australia), provoking a cry of outrage from a “senior US official” who [insisted](#), “We are wary about a trend toward constant accommodation of China, which is not the best way to engage a rising power.”

It is this belief that brings us to the [newly published book](#) *The Improbable War: China, The United States and Logic of Great Power Conflict* by London School of Economics international relations professor Christopher Coker. Coker’s thesis is straightforward: War between China and the U.S. “is not inevitable, but nor is it as improbable as many experts suggest.” He argues that the kind of American attitude displayed above makes war more likely and that the leaders on both sides of the Pacific need to think carefully about the lessons of two other seemingly improbable wars in order to preserve peace today.

AD 1914 & BC 431

Why do historical analogies matter? Coker's view of history mirrors that of the great historian John Lukacs: History cannot teach us what to do, but it can show us what to avoid doing. No analogy is exact, but if history really does rhyme, then studying it can reveal some lessons in meter and form. In this spirit he writes, "If we are fated to always speculate about the future we are also fated to recall the past and the historical analogy that would seem most pertinent as we try to understand how Chinese-US relations might evolve remains that of the First World War."

The main lesson Coker derives from WWI is the danger of optimistically assuming war is unlikely. He extensively critiques Norman Angell's belief that war was irrational, though not always convincingly. But his principal point cannot be questioned: "just because something is irrational does not mean it cannot happen." Coker agrees with Christopher Clark's recent [magisterial telling](#) of WWI in which Europe's leaders sleepwalked into war. To this account he adds that the optimism that war was not probable allowed Europe's leaders to ignore the tensions in the system, allowing disagreements to fester. When the crisis finally broke out in July 1914, no great power sought to manage it. As a result, war came.

The second analogy Coker considers is that of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), the ancient fratricide between Athens and Sparta that ended the Athenian Golden Age. The Peloponnesian War matters both because it has an important lesson to teach and because that lesson is often misunderstood. Consider the 2012 [remarks](#) of Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

"Well, first of all, I think it's probably worth mentioning where I see our future with China. I mean, we're bouncing – we're bouncing ourselves back into the Pacific. That's not a containment strategy for China. In fact, I don't know how many of you study history, but Thucydides, the Greek historian, described what he called the "Thucydides Trap," and it goes something like this: It was Athenian fear of a rising Sparta that made war inevitable.

"Well, I think that one of my jobs as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and as an adviser to our senior leaders is to help avoid a "Thucydides Trap." We don't want the fear of that emerging China to make war inevitable. So Thucydides – we're going to avoid "Thucydides Trap." And I think there's more opportunities than liabilities for us in the Pacific."

Though it is a welcome occurrence for a figure as important as General Dempsey to consider the lessons of history, as a simple matter of fact he confused the position of Athens and Sparta: it wasn't a "rising Sparta" that was at issue but a rising Athens. Thucydides' famous line is "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which

this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable” (Thucydides 1.23). But either way, this sentence of Thucydides is often taken to be the final explanation for the war: a shift in power caused fear, making war became inevitable.

Coker eloquently remedies this highly simplified reading of Thucydides, arguing that the actual lesson of Thucydides is: Do not allow your state to be manipulated into war. This accords with the story Thucydides actually tells: Neither Athens nor Sparta sought war, but somehow war came. Athens was convinced by another city-state, Corcyra, to protect it from the interference of a Spartan ally, Corinth. The Corinthians then convinced the Spartans to intervene on their side against the rapacious Athenians, and thus a “war like no other” began. A shift in power may or may not have been a necessary condition for the Peloponnesian War. But the way in which Athens and Sparta were manipulated by their lesser allies surely was.

The Path to a US-China War

Are the U.S. and China walking the road to war today? Insofar as the U.S. insists that the status quo should not be adjusted, and insofar as China seeks assertively to change the status quo, Coker thinks the answer is yes. This is what he means by the title of his book. War is certainly not inevitable, but two questions Coker asks should worry statesmen in both countries: “Can China accept and continue to negotiate with a country that wants the Chinese regime to change and considers any government model but its own largely illegitimate? Can the United States deal constructively with a China which is so resentful of its past and confident about its future?”

Chinese leaders seemingly understand the potential danger their nation’s rapidly rising power poses for the stability of the global system and have, because of the lessons of history, proposed constructing a “new model of major country relations” with the U.S. According to Coker, American leaders and scholars have responded to this call with either hostility or consternation. Hostility because the U.S. would prefer not to think of China as its equal, and consternation because the Chinese have not been able to specify of what their requested “innovations in diplomatic theory and practice” would consist.

Where does this leave the U.S. and China in regards to the path to war? “The precondition of a Sino-American war is most likely to be the rivalry between a dominant power and one that seeks to take its place; the precipitant, China’s attempts to undermine the relationship between the U.S. and its allies/client states; but the trigger could well be naval spats, bullying that goes too far.” In short, though 2015 is a very different – and in most ways better – time than 1914, many of the conditions for conflict are currently present. U.S.-China competition has been obviously present since the 1995-6 Taiwan Straits Crisis. Since 2010 China has been seen as growing

more “assertive.” In 2011 the U.S. “pivoted” to Asia, a concentrated political, economic, and military effort to contain China’s growing power in all but name. Nationalism is on the rise in China and Japan, and it is imaginable that a dispute between these two countries over rocks in the East China Sea, fueled by nationalism and historical antagonism, could cause a crisis that **forced** the U.S. either to escalate a conflict with China or surrender its so-called “credibility.” Obama has already drawn a red line by stating the U.S.-Japan defense treaty covers the Senkaku islands. What would happen if China were to put the line to the test like Assad did in Syria? Would the pressure of American hawks be too much to resist a second time?

The Path to a US-China Peace

Yet if there is a path to war, there is also a path to peace in East Asia. Though it is not a popular position today, Coker believes that if U.S. is serious about avoiding war then it must negotiate with China to revise the current international system. “All the lessons of history suggest that the US needs to share the burden with China if both countries are to avoid a conflict; the two sides urgently need to enter into a dialogue to also decide which if any of the ‘rules’ need to be changed.” What specifically does this mean? Coker provides only the hint of an answer: What would the U.S. think if China stationed crack soldiers in Venezuela, established bases around America’s continental and maritime periphery, conducted maritime intelligence patrols just outside of America’s 12-mile territorial waters, and negotiated a massive new trade deal that included all the major regional states except the U.S.? Undoubtedly America’s leaders would not tolerate this. In any new negotiated system, it is this sort of behavior Americans will have to eliminate.

More broadly, Coker suggests six ideas for moving the U.S. and China down the road to peace. Both sides should place less faith in the regional actor model of political decision-making; they should realize that humans are not good at deciding what is in their best interest and often make mistakes; the two nations should conduct cultural dialogues and exchanges; they should avoid a naval arms race like the one that preceded the Great War; neither side should militarize space; and both sides must think carefully about cyberwar so as not to be caught by surprise in the event of a conflict.

Is It Enough?

Coker **thinks** the U.S. and China have a 50/50 chance of avoiding war. Needless to say, this is not an optimistic projection and not one that makes war sound particularly “improbable.” Consider Coker’s explanation for how, while reflecting on the Great War, he came up with the criteria for what makes a war “improbable”:

Jack Beatty, one of the leading figures in the ‘new school’ of historians, distinguishes three stances with regard to the origins of the war—avoidable, improbable and inevitable. War would only have been ‘avoidable’ if the political leaders had set out to do everything in their power to avoid it. They did not do so, in part because they thought it so unlikely. War would only have been ‘improbable’ if they realized how only remarkable crisis management skills could have kept the continent at peace given the tinder box nature of European politics. It therefore follows that war was largely ‘inevitable’ because the politicians did not take the prospect of war seriously enough.

Though Coker does not make this connection, this threefold division corresponds nicely to the [three ways](#) to manage conflict. You can (1) resolve the issues in dispute through negotiation and compromise, therefore eliminating the cause of conflict; (2) work to control conflict by creating crisis management protocols and practices, therefore working to ensure a crisis does not become a war; or (3) you can reduce the consequences of a war through arms control and the spread of norms, therefore (hopefully) lessening the lethality of war when it breaks out. Within elite American circles today, almost all emphasis is placed on the second option: crisis management. During the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, emphasis was also placed on the third option. Option two can only make war “improbable” while option three can only reduce the consequences of war. War can only be made avoidable if both the U.S. and China pursue option one: Working to overcome the disagreements that are the cause of contemporary friction by negotiating a new great power consensus.

Making war avoidable should not be dismissed as a utopian pursuit. The U.S. has chosen to be a colossus that bestrides the world and says stop. But nothing forces it to adopt this position. Realizing that history does indeed wander off on its own, that power shifts, that the status quo cannot be enshrined as holy, and that it is time to build a new consensus with China would permit American statesmen to begin stepping off the road to war and onto the road to peace. If you are unconvinced of these points, I suggest you read Coker’s book. If you are convinced, it is time to move to the next stage of the argument: *How* should a new consensus be built? Upon what principles should it rest? Does history offer any examples of great-power cooperation that could become models for constructing such a new consensus today? The precondition for making war avoidable instead of improbable is answering these questions.

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