

Direct Military Conflict with China May Not Happen—and Why There Are Worse Outcomes

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The “Thucydides’ Trap,” a phrase coined by Graham Allison, is the dangerous dynamic between a rising power that threatens to displace a hegemonic power. Thucydides originally wrote about the Peloponnesian War between the Athens, the rising power, and Sparta, the hegemonic power. As Athens continued expanding its empire, Sparta became afraid for its independence and position. The war became inevitable once fear was so deeply instilled in Sparta. With China being a rising power and the United States being a current hegemonic power, it seems that war could be a high possibility. If media outlets keep spreading misinformation or twisting facts, a fear may be deeply instilled in either country, leading to war involving direct military conflict.¹ However, in Ancient Greece warfare was done by direct military conflict. They did not conduct cyberattacks, have nuclear weapons, or other means short of war that may not be as personal as bombs leveling buildings or killing individuals but could potentially hurt a nation even more. These types of attacks—not involving direct military conflict—are what China is better suited to conduct war over.

Direct military conflict with China may not happen, but we must be ready and prepared for it and other types of warfare with China. In 2000, China increased its military budget by more than 1,000 percent; whereas, the US military budget only increased by 230 percent during the same period.² In 2012, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) acquired its first aircraft carrier. China now has two aircraft carriers with a third nearing completion.³ However, a few aircraft carriers are not enough to command complete power. In 2013, China began construction of an artificial island in the South China Sea, nicknamed “The Great Wall of Sand” by former United States Pacific Commander (USPACOM) ADM Harry Harris.⁴ Beijing’s intention was to create a military base with airfields, and in that it was successful. The expansions that China has achieved with its military, specifically the PLAN, represents a large part of the rising tensions between the United States and China

These developments are tied with China’s national defense industry. In 2018, Beijing unveiled the Chinese-made DF-26, an intermediate-range ballistic missile that has a 1,553-mile range—capable of striking Guam. The press has

nicknamed this missile “The Carrier Killer.” The DF-26 also comes down vertically, making it difficult to counter the attack.⁵ China’s advanced missile technology is not meant to take down a Raptor or a Viper in air-to-air combat. Instead, these weapons would be used to target US and allied bases where aircraft and naval assets reside. Despite the significant developments to its weapons systems and the rapid growth of its national defense industry, China is unlikely to use these weapons against the West. China’s motivation for these weapons systems is antiaccess and area denial (A2AD), making it extremely difficult for Western powers to get anywhere close to China. Again, China’s motivation for these weapons systems is not to wage a war against Western powers but to deter such powers from interfering with China’s master plan to “reunite” China.

While China has one of the oldest cultures in the world, the country of China is relatively new. However, Chinese leaders view modern-day China as a continuation of the Middle Kingdom, which has a long history during which its borders changed multiple times. From this long history many different peoples were under Chinese rule and eventually emerged as their own countries—such as Vietnam and Taiwan. Today, the irredentist Chinese Communist Party looks to “reclaim” these lands, which it views as rightfully belonging to China. Naturally, this has led to many border disputes. Tensions have been rising along many of China’s borders, especially with India, whose border conflicts with China has resulted in numerous casualties.⁶ Beyond its land borders, off China’s coast, there are many territorial disputes. Nearby countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam are locked in the conflict whether they want to be or not. China’s motivation for most of these issues stems from historical territorial claims where China at some point claims to have had control.⁷ However, just because China had control at one point does not justify authoritarian rule now. In recent years, as China has tried bullying their neighbors into submission, the US Navy has been deploying aircraft carriers to patrol these waters.⁸ Simply put, China is growing and so is its reach, but the United States and other countries have taken notice of this quick and massive growth.

With China growing in power and influence, how long can its rapid growth go unchallenged by Western powers? How long can influence be sustained when integrity is left out of the equation? China has been targeting its neighbors and increasing conflict with these countries. This would serve as leverage against Beijing if China was to ever engage in direct military conflict with a Western power. For example, Japan and Australia have long been allies of the United States, and many other countries—Taiwan and India included—are furthering their relationships with the United States considering recent Chinese attempts at expansion.

The recent cooperation in the Indo-Pacific theater is illustrated by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) activities in the region. In addition, the United States

has recently signed multiple foundational agreements with India, including a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018, and the Industrial Security Agreement (ISA) summit that was recently held between 27 September to 1 October.⁹ The way China has used its growth may be its downfall. Simply put, if Beijing was to incite a war, there is a possibility that the countries it tried to bully into submission would team up against China.

This is not to say that China does not have allies, but, if history informs us, these relationships are unreliable. Take into consideration the relationship between China and Russia. In a meeting in Moscow, Chinese leader Xi Jinping called Russian president Vladimir Putin his “best friend.”¹⁰ Despite this claim, China continues growing its influence in former Soviet Republics, while Russia provides military arms to Vietnam and India.¹¹ Such relationships exist, but they are not rooted in loyalty or cooperation, since they deal arms to the other’s enemy. This is not the only example either. North Korea, a long-time Chinese ally, is too reckless and unreliable with its nuclear and ballistic missiles threats, which has forced China to sponsor UN sanctions on its ally in Pyongyang.¹²

Mentioning North Korea also brings up the topic of nuclear weapons, which are an even more lethal way countries could attack each other and carry global ramifications. One could argue that the biggest reason a war should be avoided at all costs is that both sides have access to ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. To wreak devastation with nuclear weapons, a country does not need all its nuclear supply. Moreover, with ballistic missiles, China could shoot down satellites from space. Also, China has not participated in nuclear arms talks with the United States or Russia to reduce the number of nuclear weapons.¹³ It may be worth mentioning, the first country to utilize its nuclear weapons would essentially be putting a flag in the air that reads “we are willing to destroy everything in order to win this.” A conflict that involves nuclear weapons is a conflict no one in the world will stay out of and one with many implications.

If the whole world gets involved and direct military conflict between China and the United States is avoided does that mean we are free from consequences? Frequent news articles and headlines related to China are fomenting fear within our already divided country. Perhaps, there are some fates, such as a cold war, which are worse than direct military conflict. Bombs, missiles, and tanks would cause damage to infrastructure but nothing that could not be rebuilt. An ideological war plants seeds of fear and destroys friendships, security alliances, and economic relationships.

For instance, despite all the talks about China as a physical threat, the US–China trade war is still happening despite COVID and its shutdowns. China’s business and economic relationships have grown to be the second-largest and are

on pace to surpass those of the United States.¹⁴ The United States' and China's economies, when combined, make up for more than one-third of the world's gross domestic product in both nominal and purchasing power parity.¹⁵ We have already seen devastating effects on the global economy from the US–China trade war. Goods and services trading have declined between the two countries, and the global supply chain has been rocked.¹⁶ Both countries are already trying to become less dependent on each other and working to become more independent by growing industries where the two countries are not intertwined.¹⁷ When that does not work, outright bans of certain companies could take place.

China has been restrictive and has even banned numerous American companies, for example Facebook and Google, to retain control of what its citizens consume and learn. The United States is doing much of the same now, banning Chinese companies such as Huawei. Part of the government control over Huawei is the high likelihood of Huawei technology being used for spying.¹⁸ Between these actions and a trade war, the United States and China are in what seems to be a cold war. The extent of how long this cold war type conflict will manifest will continue is not certain, but the fear of the potential for a different conflict grows every day. With no true allies and many enemies, any invasion China might commit would trigger numerous countries to become involved. It is unlikely that China could handle these many adversaries at one time.

Between having too many enemies to fight and developing its military technology toward deterring enemies instead of engaging and destroying them, China is unlikely to engage in direct military action with the West. It is also unlikely the West would start a war with China unless it is forced into war by one of its alliance commitments in the Indo-Pacific region. While nuclear weapons will always be in the back of everyone's mind, most conflicts are secondary to economic issues such as power, controlling valuable resources, money, or other types of warfare such as cyberattacks that can shut down banks and hospitals. ☹

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Notes

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