
Chinese Military Development and the Thucydes Trap: Evidence of Aggression?

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Introduction

During a period when China faced a significant power imbalance with the West, Deng Xiaoping famously proclaimed that China needed to “hide capabilities and bide time.”¹ Deng’s statement set the course for Chinese military development in succeeding decades and was reflected by China’s lack of global military presence and outwards foreign policy throughout the 1990s.² As the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) eventually gained strength under Chinese Presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, however, the PLA has increasingly projected its power on a global scale. Importantly, the PLA’s increase in strength has developed not from a quantitative increase in size, but a qualitative improvement in its might. As China’s military-technological development has deepened, so have China’s tensions with neighbors and the United States.

¹ Rush Doshi, “Hu’s to Blame for China’s Foreign Assertiveness?” *Brookings*. January 25, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/hus-to-blame-for-chinas-foreign-assertiveness/>.

² Doshi, “Hu’s to Blame for China’s Foreign Assertiveness?”

Concern exists today that China and the United States are destined for war. For example, some scholars have invoked the “Thucydides Trap,” a theory based in historical pattern that a dominant power will inevitably start a war to stymie a rising challenger.³ Others fear that China will use its power to reunify Taiwan by force, which might draw in the United States.⁴ However, it is unlikely that China will seek war with the United States. Regardless of how powerful China becomes, a war with the United States would bring unbearable costs in lives and resources for both countries. Due to economic interdependence between the two nations, war between the United States and China would also be catastrophic for the global economy.

In this article, I argue that Beijing does not seek war with the United States despite its concerted effort to develop and modernize its military. I will begin by analyzing the development of the PLA since 1990, then analyze how these changes have influenced China’s relationship with the United States.

The PLA and Military Development

The PLA’s structure and mission have changed profoundly since the 1990s. In 1991, the PLA had a large but technologically underdeveloped army, a reality that alarmed Chinese strategists after the swift destruction of Iraqi forces by the United States during the Gulf War.⁵ Compared with the Iraqi military in 1991, the PLA operated older and inferior warplanes and tanks.⁶ In terms of the Gulf War, Iraq’s quantitative advantage over United States forces was not enough to

³ Oriana Skylar Mastro, “In the Shadow of the Thucydides Trap: International Relations Theory and the Prospects for Peace in U.S.-China Relations,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 24, no. 1 (November 21, 2018) 25-45.

⁴ Mastro, “In the Shadow of the Thucydides Trap,” 30.

⁵ Robert Farley, “What Scares China’s Military: The 1991 Gulf War,” *The National Interest*, November 24, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-scares-chinas-military-the-1991-gulf-war-11724>.

⁶ Farley, “What Scares China’s Military.”

overcome the superiority of United States military technology.⁷ As a result, the PLA pursued military-technological modernization that contrasted with China's early approach towards achieving numerical superiority.⁸ To feel assured of victory in a possible confrontation with the United States, China needed to close the military-technological gap with United States forces.

Following the Gulf War, China bought advanced military technology from Russia and has since furthered its own military research programs, building counterparts to United States F-22 and F-35 stealth aircraft.⁹ Though Chinese aircraft are not as advanced as those of the United States, such as the Chengdu J-20 and upcoming Shenyang J-31, they are undeniable examples of Chinese military-technological progress. China paired these technological developments with steady increases in its defense budget. Between 1996 and 2015, China increased its defense budget by 620 percent.¹⁰ In 2019 alone, China increased its defense budget by 7.5 percent.¹¹ Evidence suggests this may not be the full picture, however, as experts from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute believe that "China spends considerably more" on defense than what it acknowledges.¹²

China has also paired military development with more outwards and international military strategy.¹³ In December 2004, Hu Jintao outlined "new historical missions" for the PLA, opening possibilities for the PLA

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ryan Henseler, "China's Super Weapons: Beware the J-20 and J-31 Stealth Fighters," *The National Interest*, August 01, 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/chinas-super-weapon-beware-the-j-20-j-31-stealth-fighters-13477>.

¹⁰ Mastro, "In the Shadow of the Thucydides Trap," 27.

¹¹ David Tweed, "China Defense Spending Set to Rise 7.5% as Xi Builds Up Military," *Bloomberg*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-05/china-s-military-spending-slows-as-economy-cools>.

¹² Tweed, "China Defense Spending Set to Rise 7.5% as Xi Builds Up Military."

¹³ Doshi, "Hu's to Blame for China's Foreign Assertiveness?"

to take on greater global presence.¹⁴ This vision represented a dramatic departure from historical position that the PLA did not pursue global presence. For example, China has increased its power projection through the purchase and development of aircraft carriers. It purchased its first aircraft carrier, a 30-year old warship from the Ukraine, which was refitted and renamed the *Liaoning* in 2012.¹⁵ Although the PLA Navy (PLAN) thoroughly modernized the warship's electronics and sensor technology, the *Liaoning* is still smaller and less advanced than United States aircraft carriers. Critically, the *Liaoning* is not nuclear-powered, so its range and endurance are limited compared to the United States Navy carriers. However, China does not intend to stop with one carrier. The PLAN will soon commission its second carrier, the more advanced *Shandong*, and intends to keep building more.¹⁶

PLA Development and Sino-American Relations

The PLA's development now presents a significant threat to the United States, and Chinese military power will only continue to increase. It is this fact that underlies the "Thucydides Trap" identified by international relations scholars, which posits that rising and established powers are likely to go to war as the rising power risks overtaking the established power.¹⁷ In this case, the "Thucydides Trap" implies that war between China and the United States will become inevitable as China approaches parity with the United States, either due to United States paranoia about the prospect of Chinese global military dominance or Chinese overconfidence in its newfound strength.¹⁸

¹⁴ Eric Heginbotham, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996 – 2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015). Summary, xx.

¹⁵ David Axe, "China's First Aircraft Carrier Is Back in Action." *The National Interest*, January 23, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-first-aircraft-carrier-back-action-42262>.

¹⁶ Axe, "China's First Aircraft Carrier is Back in Action."

¹⁷ Mastro, "In the Shadow of the Thucydides Trap."

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

In Graham Allison's *Destined for War*, Allison discovered 16 cases when rising powers challenged established powers for global hegemony as described by the "Thucydides Trap" theory. In 12 of those 16 cases, the result was war. Allison concluded from this historical pattern that China and the United States are, as the title of the book suggests, destined for conflict. Oriana Skylar Mastro extended upon Allison's analysis to produce a seven-variable framework in the context of United States-China relations to analyze the likelihood of conflict. Mastro defines these variables as "degree of dissatisfaction of the rising power, economic interdependence, and institutional constraints; the nature of the relevant domestic political systems, alliances, and nuclear weapons programs; and the sustainability of the rising power's growth."¹⁹

Although Mastro's article concludes that, based on the identified variables, China and the United States are in danger of heading toward war, several factors indicate that war is not likely.

Despite Chinese military development, a key factor reducing the likelihood of war is the degree to which the United States and Chinese economies are interconnected and interdependent. China is the United States' largest trading partner and foreign direct investment between the two countries increased in recent years.²⁰ While the Trump administration's trade war has strained Sino-American economic relations, China and the United States still recognize that their economic relationship is mutually beneficial. For example, Chinese manufacturing allows United States consumers to buy products, and the United States provides a critical market for Chinese products.²¹ As a result, the broad scope and sheer volume of Sino-American trade means

¹⁹ Ibid, 28.

²⁰ Ibid, 25-26.

²¹ Yu Yongding, "Trump's Trade War Helps China," *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 01, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Trump-s-trade-war-helps-China>.

that a disruption of their economic relationship would have disastrous consequences for both powers.

The next most compelling factor that reduces the likelihood of war between the United States and China is the direct consequences of conflict. Although China has made significant technological strides, the United States continues to hold a qualitative advantage in most areas such as aircraft, ships, and missiles.²² Although a hypothetical conflict between the United States and China would likely take place in the South China Sea (giving China a geographic advantage), this would be insufficient to allow China to overcome the United States' technological strengths.²³ Demonstrating the utility of Chinese technological development, however, China's progress has deterred the likelihood of conflict. Furthermore, defeating the PLA today would likely require far more resources than the United States would be willing to devote.

Future Challenges: Taiwan

Although war is unlikely, the United States-China relationship will face continual challenges as China pursues military parity with the United States. For example, China's rising power is creating concern among China's neighbors. Taiwan continues to purchase weapons from the United States, the most recent example being a \$330 million arms deal to upgrade Taiwan's F-16 fighters in October 2018.²⁴ The year before, Taiwan signed a \$1.4 billion deal with the US to improve its missiles and torpedoes and to obtain United States technical support.²⁵ These deals antagonize Beijing and will likely to continue to do so in future.²⁶ Furthermore, as the PLA becomes more powerful, Taiwan will continue

²² Heginbotham, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard. Introduction*, 21.

²³ Heginbotham, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard*.

²⁴ Kinling Lo, "Taiwan to Get Upgraded F-16V Fighter Jets after US Arms Sale Approved," *South China Morning Post*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2170443/taiwan-get-upgraded-f-16v-fighter-jets-after-us-arms-sale>.

²⁵ Lo, "Taiwan to Get Upgraded F-16V Fighter Jets after US Arms Sale Approved."

²⁶ *Ibid.*

to seek military aid from the United States to ensure that it can deter or defend from an attack by mainland China. Furthermore, Beijing will continue to see Taiwan's military procurement as a provocation and encourage China towards further military development.

Future Challenges: Maritime Disputes

Maritime disputes present another challenge to the Sino-American relationship in the context of military development. For example, Beijing feels that its claims over the South China Sea are threatened by United States "freedom of navigation" operations.²⁷ In the words of the Peking University South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative, the United States is "constantly exploring the grey zones between peace and conflict" and will "inevitably push the threshold of small-scale armed conflict and war."²⁸ Furthermore, the South China Sea dispute is complicated by the presence of United States allies which have competing interests with those of Beijing, such as the Philippines.²⁹ China and the Philippines each want control over regions of the South China Sea that contain substantial oil deposits. Control over the area and oil resources is also disputed by Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Vietnam.³⁰

The United States has opposed Chinese attempts to gain control of the region by increasing its ties with regional partners and conducting freedom of navigation missions in the South China Sea. Some have also posited that China's true motivation is military as well as economic. Former CIA analyst and current Pentagon strategist Matthew Kroenig

²⁷ Zhen Liu, "US, China 'at Greater Risk of Military Incidents' in South China Sea," *South China Morning Post*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3005439/us-china-greater-risk-military-incidents-south-china-sea-think>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Robert D. Blackwill, Jerome A. Cohen, and Elizabeth C. Economy, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea | Global Conflict Tracker," *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

³⁰ Ibid.

argues that China hopes to use the South China Sea as an operating area for its submarines armed with ballistic missiles because the South China Sea's waters are deeper and more survivable than China's shallow coastal waters.³¹ As a result, this theory suggests that China is pursuing to develop its nuclear deterrent.

This reality does mean that conflict is more likely, however. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union each held the capacity to obliterate one another, but nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction prevented this from occurring.³² The principle of mutually assured destruction continues to apply between the United States and China. China would not engage in a nuclear war with the United States because of its strong second-strike capability. Worse still, China's second strike capacity is uncertain, putting China at a severe disadvantage.³³ The lack of a guaranteed second strike capacity also makes China less likely to engage in a conventional conflict with the United States, as China would be vulnerable in a scenario of nuclear escalation.

Though China has faced criticism for its island construction in the South China Sea, but China has contained its aggression in this regard. China has long claimed sovereignty over the South China Sea.³⁴ While it has ignored other countries' protests, it is China's perspective that it is defending its own borders. If China truly aspired to the status of a regional or global hegemon, it could be far more aggressive than it has been. China's current strategy has been relatively restrained, as

³¹ Wesley Morgan, Minnie Chan, and Bryan Bender. "How U.S.-China Tensions Could Get a Lot Worse." *POLITICO*. December 13, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/13/us-china-south-china-sea-disputes-1061811>.

³² Earle, Katie. "Is Mutually Assured Destruction Back? It Never Left." *Georgetown Security Studies Review*. Georgetown University Center for Security Studies, July 22, 2019. <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2018/03/19/is-mutually-assured-destruction-back-it-never-left/>.

³³ Mastro, "In the Shadow of the Thucydides Trap," 37.

³⁴ Shiffrinson, 73.

evidenced by its response to incursions in what it sees as its territory. While there have been tense moments with United States ships and aircrafts on freedom of navigation missions, no Chinese forces have attacked United States assets. Instead of striking aggressively, China is taking a deliberately cautious approach to its dealings with the United States. For example, there has been no equivalent to the infamous Francis Gary Powers incident, such as there was with the Soviet Union.

Looking Towards the Future

The core reason that China will not seek conflict with the United States can be reduced to the fact that China has nothing to gain through conflict. As a rational actor, China will continue to analyze the costs and benefits of conflict with the United States. While relations may be strained as China continues to grow more powerful, neither side will seek to fight a war. Fears of conflict, however, will continue to grow.³⁵ Polls indicate that Americans are concerned about China's growing military and economic power. As of 2018, less than 4 in 10 Americans held positive opinions of China.³⁶ Americans are also skeptical of Xi Jinping's role as a world leader, with 50 percent of survey respondents saying they had "no confidence" in Xi to do the right thing "regarding world affairs."³⁷ The majority of Americans indicated tensions between China and its neighbors and between China and Taiwan were serious problems. Americans were also highly concerned about how much the United States owes China economically, with 89 percent rating it as a "serious problem."³⁸

The Trump administration has also taken a hard line against China, with his administration designating China as a "revisionist power that

³⁵ Kat Devlin, "Americans Leery of China as Trump Prepares to Meet Xi at G20," *Pew Research Center*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/30/Americans-leery-of-china-as-trump-prepares-to-meet-xi-at-g20/>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.”³⁹ The 2018 United States National Security Strategy is explicit, stating that China seeks “Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”⁴⁰ This paranoia stems primarily from China’s more outwards foreign policy and the growing strength of the PLA. China’s growing economic and military strength have alarmed United States leaders into thinking that China seeks to replace the United States as the global hegemon. As a result, the United States has taken aggressive economic and military measures. For example, by 2020, 60 percent of the United States Navy fleet will be based in the Pacific.⁴¹

China’s increase in military spending does not indicate revisionist intent. Chinese military spending has increased proportionately to China’s overall economic growth. In fact, China spent a much larger proportion of its GDP on its military in the late Cold War period and in the early 2000s.⁴² Even if China spent triple its stated budget, it would also not come close to United States military spending. As of 2018, the United States spent 3.5 percent of its GDP on defense, far more than China’s 1.9 percent.⁴³ While some sources claim that China outspends its military budget, the potential overruns are highly unlikely to equal United States military spending— China’s military budget for 2019 is

³⁹ Joshua Shifrinson, “Should the United States Fear China’s Rise?” *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (January 24, 2019): 65-83.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴³ NATO, Public Diplomacy Division, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2011-2018),” News release, July 10, 2018,

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_07/20180709_180710-pr2018-91-en.pdf.

\$177 billion.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the United State National Defense Authorization Act allocates \$717 billion to the Pentagon for 2019.⁴⁵

International concerns also extend from the rapid development of the PLA's military technology. Although China's growing military strength may cause anxiety in the international community, the fact that China's military is becoming more technologically advanced is not inherently provocative. From China's perspective, gaining the capability to contend with technologically sophisticated nations on an even footing is not warmongering. While China's growing power may appear threatening, China does not desire war with the United States. Rather, the Gulf War was an informative experience for China, demonstrating where its weaknesses are as it seeks to protect its own interests. Having an outdated military put China at an unnecessary disadvantage in any hypothetical conflict with any power.⁴⁶ Given that China could afford it, modernization was a logical solution to China's vulnerabilities rather than a provocation. Historical examples reveal that rival powers' growing military strength does not necessarily lead to war.⁴⁷ A notable example is that of the Soviet Union. Although the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in an arms race from the end of the Second World War to the fall of the Soviet republic, the Cold War never led to a "hot" war between the two superpowers.

Ultimately, China's military development should be seen as catch-up strategy as opposed to any project of global domination. China continues to assert itself in the South China Sea and to grow its military

⁴⁴ Kelly Olsen, "China's Defense Spending Is Growing More Slowly. But That Doesn't Mean Military Tensions Are Easing," *CNBC*, March 05, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/05/china-defense-budget-slowing-growth-in-2019-military-spending-.html>.

⁴⁵ Jim Garamone, "President Signs Fiscal 2019 Defense Authorization Act at Fort Drum Ceremony," *U.S. Department of Defense*, August 13, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1601016/president-signs-fiscal-2019-defense-authorization-act-at-fort-drum-ceremony/>.

⁴⁶ Farley, "What Scares China's Military."

⁴⁷ Mastro, "In the Shadow of the Thucydides Trap." 31.

power. This is unlikely to change. However, China is also unlikely to challenge the United States as its power grows. China understands that war with the United States would be a lose-lose scenario. This reveals China's underlying strategy: to deter conflict through modernization. While military development might improve Chinese chances of victory, China understands such a victory would come at great cost.

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