

Thucydides's Trap between the U.S. & China avoidable? by S.B. Woo

Table of contents

1. What is the Thucydides' trap?
2. Major elements that'll trigger the trap:
 - a. Fear
 - b. Honor
 - c. Interest
3. What'll trigger the Trap have changed in modern times.
 - a. Fear of nuclear war is a BIGGER fear
 - b. Technology has solved our sustenance worries
 - c. Jealousy & arrogance, irrational emotions, may have replaced fear as the main trigger for war
4. Ways to undo the Thucydides' trap
5. Epilogue

*Allison's Atlantic Magazine article:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/201509/united-stats-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

1. What is the Thucydide's trap?

- **Thucydides** was a Greek historian in 5th century BC who soulfully narrated the Peloponnesian War between Sparta, the established power, and Athens, the rising power. The war ruined both. “Fear, honor and interest”, were major elements that led to the war. Thucydides wanted future generations to learn from his work.
- “**Thucydides’s Trap**” was a term coined by Graham Allison, former Dean of Kennedy School of Government, Harvard. It hints that a war between the U.S. , the established power, and China, a rising power may be unavoidable. Steve K. Brannon thought the war was inevitable within the next “5 to 10 years”, according to Allison*.

*http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-xi-summit_us_58e52f20e4b064cb30e761a

Tell about my personal interaction with Allison when I was a Visiting Fellow at the Kennedy School.

1. Cont. 16 traps in the last 500 yrs, 12 ended in wars - Kennedy School, Harvard

No	Period	Ruling Power	Rising Power	Domain	Result
1	Late 15 th century	 Portugal	 Spain	Global empire and trade	No war
2	First half of 16 th century	 France	 Hapsburgs	Land power in western Europe	War
3	16 th and 17 th centuries	 Hapsburgs	 Ottoman Empire	Land power in central and eastern Europe, sea power in the Mediterranean	War
4	First half of 17 th century	 Hapsburgs	 Sweden	Land and sea power in northern Europe	War
5	Mid-to-late 17 th century	 Dutch Republic	 England	Global empire, sea power, and trade	War
6	Late 17 th to mid-18 th centuries	 France	 Great Britain	Global empire and European land power	War
7	Late 18 th and early 19 th centuries	 United Kingdom	 France	Land and sea power in Europe	War
8	Mid-19 th century	 France and United Kingdom	 Russia	Global empire, influence in Central Asia and eastern Mediterranean	War

1. Cont.

16 traps in the last 500 yrs,
12 ended in wars

9	Mid-19 th century	 France	 Germany	Land power in Europe	War
10	Late 19 th and early 20 th centuries	 China and Russia	 Japan	Land and sea power in East Asia	War
11	Early-20 th century	 United Kingdom	 United States	Global economic dominance and naval supremacy in the Western Hemisphere	No war
12	Early-20 th century	 United Kingdom <small>supported by France, Russia</small>	 Germany	Land power in Europe and global sea power	War
13	Mid-20 th century	 Soviet Union, France, UK	 Germany	Land and sea power in Europe	War
14	Mid-20 th century	 United States	 Japan	Sea power and influence in the Asia-Pacific region	War
15	1940s–1980s	 United States	 Soviet Union	Global power	No war
16	1990s–present	 United Kingdom and France	 Germany	Political influence in Europe	No war

2. Major elements leading to war

Gen. McMaster stated, “People fight today for the same fundamental reasons the Greek historian Thucydides identified : **Fear, Honor and Interest**” (emphasis added)

Sec. of Defense James Mattis similarly identified these as “the root cause of why a nation choose to go to hostilities”

Quoted from Allyson's Thucydides's Trap:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-xi-summit_us_58e52f20e4b064cb30e761a

2. Major Elements triggering the trap a) FEAR

- China's Fear: The U.S. may use its unsurpassed military prowess to contain China, denying China's legitimate desire to be a developed nation e.g. cutting off China's vital sea lane in South China sea; using THAAD to deter China's 2nd strike ability.
- U.S.'s Fear: (1) Too accommodating to a rising power may result in fanning the ambition of a rising power, (2) China's phenomenal increase in **capacity** (more on that later), and (3) The change in relative power could tip the balance in such a way that the U.S. may not recover.

2. a). U.S. FEAR – China’s increase in **capacity** illustrated

It’s **not the behavior** but the capacity of China that a “realists” like Steve Brannan pays attention to. **SCARY!** It is this kind of “realism” that may make war inevitable. The following numbers were provided by Graham Allison**.

	China, as % of U.S.	
	1980	2014
GDP (PPP)	10	101
GDP (US\$)	7	60
Exports (US\$)	6	106
Reserves (US\$)	17	2800

**Allison’s Atlantic Magazine article:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/201509/united-stats-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

2. Elements leading to war b) HONOR

US: We must **honor** our mutual defense treaty obligations. (30 strong + 10 weak) Any action by China that triggers our treaty obligations could lead to war.

China: China suffered 150 years of humiliation by western colonial powers and Japan. So defending the integrity of China's sovereignty is **a matter of honor**. The areas including Taiwan, Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku in Japan) in East China Sea, and islands within the 9 dotted lines in the South China Sea. China has 1 weak mutual defense treaty with N. Korea.

2. Elements leading to war c) INTEREST

Both sides have actually managed interest conflicts rather well

- Trade: China promised to decrease US trade deficit
- Currency manipulation (not true nowadays according to most economists)
- Taiwan: Arms sale is now less of a problem
- Diaoyu (Senkakus) Islands: tension but no sparks
- South China Sea: China's attempt to reach bilateral agreement with conflicting claims seems working
- THAAD* (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) – **unsettling**. S. Korean Pres. Moon may cool it down.

DIGRESSION: How THAAD could trigger the trap:

Introduction: THAAD in S. Korea gives U.S. earlier warning on some of China's second strike launch. It shifts the strategic balance **slightly** in favor of the U.S.

How US & China see THAAD – how war starts

(A) Both are Self-Righteousness

C1) China is the first and only nuclear power to clearly state “no first use” (**NFU**). The U.S. should know that China's international statement is always true.

US1) The US and all NATO nations oppose NFU for strategic reasons against the aggressive Soviets with a massive army. China should know that the U. S. is the most peace-loving nation.

DIGRESSION: How THAAD could trigger the trap

(B) Both sides see things from its own interest only

C2) Why would U.S. want earlier warning of China's retaliatory missiles? It must be that the US wants to lessen the damage of China's 2nd strike in preparation of a 1st-strike against China, when China is still relatively weaker.

US2) China is not serious about putting pressure on N Korea, it is buying time to be stronger than we are. China shall not be serious, unless we show China that it has its own security at risk for tolerating N. Korea when we have installed THAAD.

DIGRESSION: How THAAD could trigger the trap
(C) Again both sides see things from own interests

C3) If THAAD is aimed at N. Korea, why will the U.S. not agree to shorten its detection range.

US must be preparing for a 1st strike. China goes on high alert.

US3) China is just bitching, because China has plenty of missiles outside the detection range of THAAD. China can't be that naïve to think that the U.S. will be willing to sustain the damage from China's remaining second strike.

DIGRESSION: THAAD How War Could Start

A false technical signal that the US has launched missiles against China could kick off China's retaliatory strike, because it is at high alert. **War starts.** Both nations and the world will be ruined.

ATTENTION: Such an incident almost occurred in 1983. The Soviet's radar system malfunctioned and detected incoming US missiles. It almost launched its retaliatory strike against the U.S., but for the intervention of a Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Yevgrafoviche Petrov. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1983_Soviet_nuclear_false_alarm_incident

2. Elements leading to war c) INTEREST China's policy

China's policy towards the US: “nonconflict, nonconfrontational, mutual respect and win-win cooperations,” as stressed by Pres. Xi of China.

China's two recent big economic initiatives are inclusive: U.S. may join, if it wants to.

i) Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)
– rivaling the world bank and

ii) One belt and one Road - an economic development project for nations along the ancient silk land and marine (belt) roads.

Many European nations have joined.

2. Elements leading to war c) INTEREST U.S. policy

U.S. policy towards China – seemingly more friendly under Trump. Here is a comparison:

Under Obama: (1) US is the leading force to establish TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) which **excluded** China,
(2) install THAAD (a radar system) in S. Korea

Under Trump: (1) backed out of TPP.

(2) Sec. of State Tillerson **echoed** Xi's statement in describing our policy towards China.

(3) The THAAD issue may be resolvable under the new S. Korea President Moon, Jae-in. He may propose to reduce the range of THAAD.

3. What'll trigger the TRAP have changed

- **Human nature** hasn't changed much. We are probably as loving and hateful; as generous and greedy; as wise and childish, and as war-loving and peace-loving as 2500 yrs. ago, when Thucydides lived.
- **Technology** has advanced beyond any sage's imagination, including
 - a) **nuclear weapon's** ability to destroy the world,
 - b) **artificial intelligence** and robots' ability to make less do more and provide resources for human sustenance and pleasure.

3 a. Fear of nuclear war is a BIGGER fear

Chance of a war decreases, because our fear of a nuclear war is **BIGGER** than our fear of our opponent.

Evidence? (1) The cold war with the Soviets from 1940s to 1980s didn't end in hot war. (2) Even a 3rd tier power like N. Korea has successfully stymied the combined power the U.S., China and Russia to force it to give up its nuclear weapons.

3. b. Ample resources make “Interest” less important

- The day of “Singularity” is expected to arrive around 2040, only 23 yrs from today. It is the time when artificial intelligence will surpass human intelligence.
- Most work, including writing software, will be done by robots more intelligent than we are. That’ll lead to an **explosion of knowledge AND new resources** that will again decrease the chance of a war.
- Technology is self-accelerating, so conflicts over resources will likely NEVER be a cause for war again.

3. c. Jealousy and arrogance could still trigger the trap nowadays

Arrogance in the rising power, and jealousy in the established power could still trigger the trap nowadays. That is because jealousy & arrogance are irrational emotions. Such emotions may be more likely to lead to miscalculations than fear, thereby triggering the Thucydides Trap.

Jealousy: The French resentment towards Americans after WWII and people's common resentment toward the "nouveau riche" are examples. Jealousy is caused by "insecurity, fear, concern, and **anxiety over an anticipated loss of status**" which result in anger and resentment.

3. c. Jealousy and arrogance could still
trigger the trap nowadays

- **Arrogance**, often the emotion of the citizenry of a rising power, is a range of mental disposition to disregard the proper rights of others, typified by haughtiness, self-assumption. Remember Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe at the U.N. and shouting, “we’ll bury you.”?
- The Chinese government has not shown arrogance. However, Chinese bloggers have.

4. Ways to undo the Trap

- It's incumbent upon the rising power to ensure that the reigning power receives significant benefit from its increasing capacity to produce & consume. That is China needs to open its growing consumer market to the US **much more**. It is a smart way to avoid the unthinkable cost of a war. It's a "win-win cooperation" as Pres. Xi of China suggested. In short, increase mutual economic dependence & benefits.
- "Make painful adjustments in attitude and action not just of the challenger but also the challenged ... by leaders and citizens alike*" – Graham Allison
- **Will you suggest find more ways to undo the trap?**

4. Ways to undo the Trap Continued

- Find projects that are **so difficult and yet so beneficial to both** that the U.S. and China will **want** to work together. The best hypothetical example is when Martians invade the earth*. The best real example may be predicting climate change far into 2037. Current human ability is to predict 14 days in advance in a given location**.
- **A Concrete Example:** To predict the annual temperature increase on earth **from now to 2037**. The worth of this project can be checked against the annual empirical data. To do this job in time to save ourselves or to reject global warming as a fallacy. This will require the combined best scientific minds and supercomputers of both nations & perhaps much more. It's pragmatic, and it may help to undo the trap.

** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Numerical_weather_prediction. Part of the problem may be in its dependence on solar radiation, which requires the prediction of sun's behavior.

5. Epilogue

The FEAR of a nuclear war and the HOPE of unimaginable advance in technology solving our sustenance problems will likely combine to make the triggering of Thucydides Trap **less likely**. However, leaders and citizenry of both nations will need to pay careful attention to irrational emotion such as **jealousy** and **arrogance** which could nevertheless trigger the trap.

I like to acknowledge Thucydides and Prof. Graham Allison, because their work is “a possession for **all time.”**

Thank you. (The END)