

Decoding the Thucydides Trap: A Critical Examination of China's Military Capabilities

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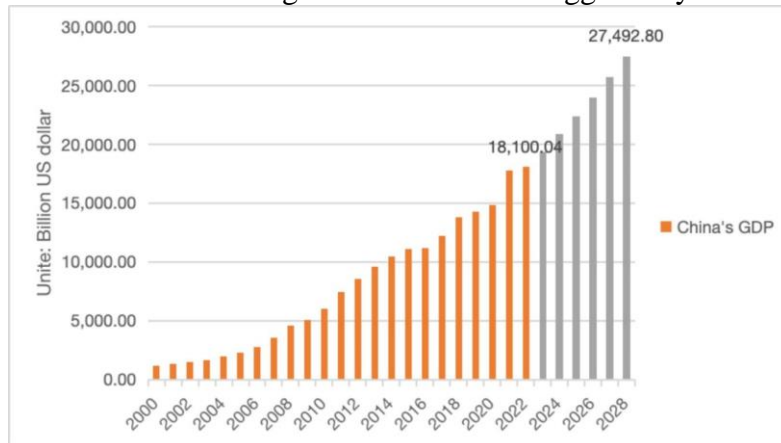
Abstract: This paper delves into the rise of China and examines the “China Threat” and “Thucydides Trap” discourse, which examines the possibility of military conflict between China and the US. As China's economy has boomed, surpassing Japan and nearing the United States in GDP, Washington's concern over its global influence have intensified. Graham Allison's “Thucydides Trap” theory posits a risk of war during power transitions, igniting debates on the likelihood of China threat and Sino-US conflict. However, dissenting voices argue that China's rise lacks evidence of expansionist aims and capability, emphasizing the prospects for peaceful coexistence. The paper explores China's military modernization efforts, revealing a substantial gap with the US. Examining naval, aerial, and missile capabilities, it underscores China's cautious defensive strategy, constrained by economic considerations and regional alliances. It also argues that while concerns and tensions exist, the likelihood of confrontation in the next decade remains low due to China's current military gap with the United States. Beyond the conventional narrative of the “Thucydides Trap,” the paper contributes a military perspective to the discourse on China's rise and its potential implications, navigating

1. The Rise of China and the “Thucydides Trap”

Over the past few decades, China's rise has markedly developed in international relations. Since the 1970s economic reform, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has experienced remarkable growth, with its economy often expanding at an average annual rate of around 9%, outpacing the world's 2%- 4% figure^[1]. Particularly after entering the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China lowered its tariffs and intensified its open market policies, leading to a rapid surge in its trade volume. This allowed China to surpass Japan in 2010, becoming the world's second-largest economy. In 2022, China's GDP rapidly approaches that of the United States, accounting for 70% of the US, making it an undeniable presence in the global economic landscape. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimation, China's GDP will reach 27.29 trillion dollars in 2028, increasing 1.5 times compared to 2022 (figure 1).

Due to its rapid economic development, China has gained significant status on the world stage, causing the apprehension of the United States^[2]. From the White House's view, China's rise has threatened Washington's global domination. The US government has criticized China's rising power, highlighted the potential “China Threat” to global security^[3], and predicted China's possible

intention to replace the US and become a global hegemony. For China's threat, Graham Allison^[4] promotes the “Thucydides Trap” to suggest this power transition that an emerging power is likely to challenge the ruling power, potentially leading to war. According to this theory, China's increasing power and growing influence in the international system could lead to a war with the United States as China seeks to expand its power. The power transition will be accompanied by blood. Since Sino-US relations have become strained in recent years, it may seem like blood and conflicts between the two nations are inevitable. Many scholars fear that the "China Threat" could become a reality, with the worst-case scenario being a third world war triggered by a Sino-US full-scale war.



Source: Report for Selected Countries and Subjects. (n.d.). IMF. Retrieved 19 May 2023, from <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/April/weo-report>

Figure 1: China’s Economic Outlook (Including Estimation).

However, objectors criticize the Thucydides Trap and believe the risk of direct conflict between China and the US will remain low and at a status quo in the next decade^[5]. So far, China's rise has no evidence to produce expansionist tendencies. Qing Yaqing ^[6] argues that the “China’s peaceful rise” theory will let China run in the current international order. In the existing international order, the potential for conflict between the US and China can be mitigated through international institutions and economic interdependence. So, the Sino-US war is a low probability. Although the debate about the possibility of a Sino-US war in the future is hot, academia still cannot agree. So, will the rise of China threaten the US in the next decade? Although the power transition is happening, the likelihood of China threatening the US militarily in the next decade is relatively low. China currently lacks the military strength to challenge the United States.

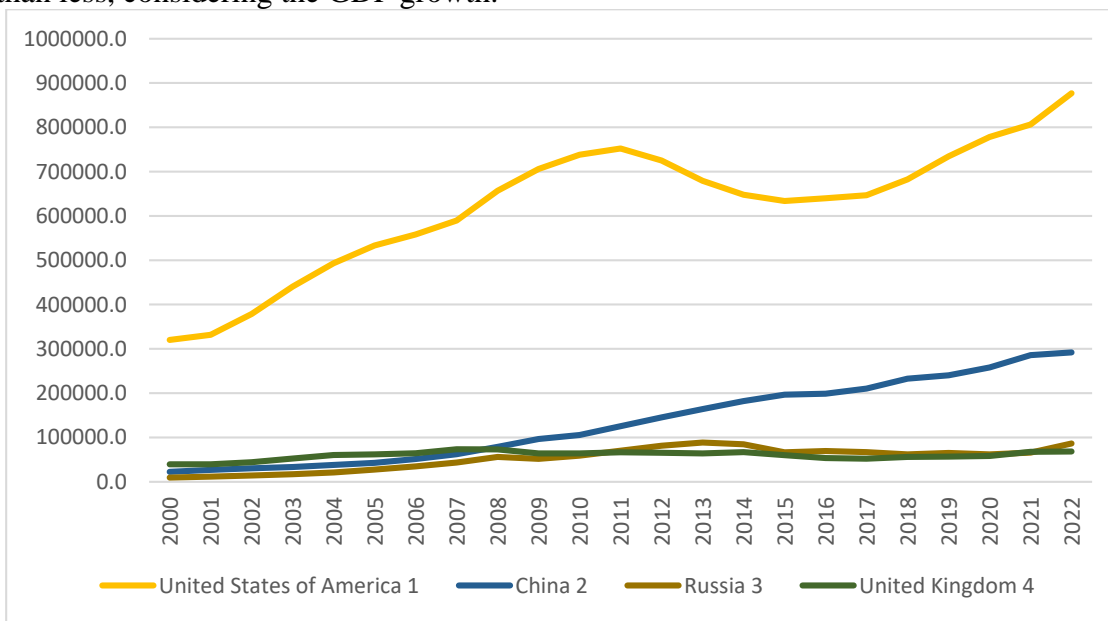
2. China's Ongoing Modernization Efforts and Military Gap with the US

The significant military gap between China and the United States cannot be ignored if the Chinese government attempts to threaten the United States. China has been modernizing its armed forces and increasing military spending for national security interests, but it still lags behind the US in many aspects. The US has the world's most powerful military, with advanced technology, equipment, and a global reach far surpassing that of other nations. Global firepower reports the world’s ranking of comprehensive military strength, with the US’s top, and China just in the third position and behind Russia. This military gap significantly discourages China from dealing directly with the United States.

China has been increasing military spending and modernizing its armed forces for national security. In terms of military modernization, the country undertakes much effort. In 2019, Chinese President called on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to achieve modernization and develop

world-class military powers^[7]. China's military budget has increased rapidly over the past few decades and is currently the second largest in the world after the US. China has also focused on upgrading its naval and air forces and developing advanced missile systems and other high-tech weaponry. For example, China developed its newest and largest aircraft carrier, the Fujian, in 2022. This represents a milestone for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) as it was designed and built by China, showcasing the country's growing capabilities in shipbuilding and military technology^[8]. This is the third China operational aircraft carrier, followed by Liaoning and Shandong.

However, compared to the United States, China's army still has a long way to go due to limited military expenditure. Even if it seems to grow rapidly, military spending is still behind the US in total. Based on official data, China's military expenditure saw a significant rise, growing from 170 billion yuan in 2002 to an impressive 1.04 trillion yuan in 2017^[9]. But compared to the United States, China's military expenditure only constituted 37.65% of that of the US in 2017^[10]. In 2023, although the Beijing government announced that military expenditure would grow by 7.2% compared to last year, military spending in China is just under one-third of that of the US (Figure 2). In the same year, China's military expenditure comprises 1.6% of the GDP, lower than the world's 2.4%, not to mention the US's 3.7%. So, military expenditures seem large, but China should spend more than less, considering the GDP growth.



Source: SIPRI Milex. (n.d.). Retrieved 19 May 2023, from <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>

Figure 2: Military expenditure by country, in millions of US\$, 2000-2022.

3. China's Aerial and Missile Power Disparities with the US

Regarding the naval force, China is inferior to the US, which has a much larger and more advanced fleet of aircraft carriers when the two go on the battlefield. Aircraft carriers are essential for power projection and maintaining military dominance in the Pacific. Compared to China's three, the US has 11 operational aircraft carriers. Moreover, the US carriers are significantly larger and more advanced than China's, boasting more powerful engines, advanced electronics, and a broader range of weapons and aircraft. China's newest aircraft carrier, the Fujian, is just close to the configuration but still inferior to the US Navy's top-tier Ford Class, the most advanced USS aircraft carrier. The US carriers are also supported by extensive support vessels and aircraft, offering additional capabilities such as air defense, electronic warfare, and logistics support^[11]. Once China

chooses to initiate a war with the United States, not only is China inferior in aircraft carrier numbers, but it also cannot match the US in capability.

The gap in military power between China and the US is not limited to naval domains but also includes air and missile systems. The PLA has invested in advanced air and missile systems, such as the J-20 stealth fighter and the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile^[12]. These systems are designed to counter the US military's technological advantages and provide China with more significant deterrence capabilities. However, the US has an advantage in its long-range strike capabilities, with the B-21, B-2A, B-52H, and B-1B bombers in service constantly being upgraded to meet the needs of future wars. Additionally, the US has advanced missile defense systems capable of intercepting and destroying incoming missiles, while China's missile defense capabilities are still developing. China has made notable progress in developing advanced hypersonic missiles DF-ZF, capable of traveling at speeds of Mach 5-10 and a range of 2500 km, whereas the US can reach Mach 17 with up to 8000 km range^[13]. So, while China's military capabilities are advancing rapidly, they still have not reached the level of the US military and are also hard to surpass in ten years prediction.

Besides, China's military is not enough even if the weapon surpasses the US in the next few years, considering the US has many ally countries. The US has long maintained a military presence in the region through its alliances with Japan, South Korea, and other countries. In recent years, the US has sought to strengthen these alliances and expand its military partnerships with other countries, such as India and Vietnam. These alliances aim to contain China's military expansion and regional influence. Once China initiates a war with the United States, what China will face is not just the US army, but other ally countries. Besides, any military conflict with the US or other major powers would have serious consequences for China's economic growth and national security, so the country has generally been cautious in its military actions and has focused on deterrence rather than confrontation. Therefore, China's defensive military strategy, combined with its emphasis on economic development and peaceful rise, means that China will not threaten the US in the following decade.

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