

A New Pattern of Rivalry: Reconsider the Future of Sino-U.S. Relations beyond the “Thucydides Trap”

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Abstract: As the most important bilateral relationship in the world at the present, the Sino-U.S. relationship has almost incomparable significance for global stability. This paper aims to examine the Thucydides’ Trap theory by Graham Allison and to explore another possible explanation for the future pattern of Sino-U.S. competition. Though agreeing with Allison’s emphasis on the importance of structural conflicts in shaping the future of Sino-U.S. relations and prediction on the trend in which competition becoming the main aspect of this bilateral relationship, this paper argues that a decisive and massive war as the Thucydides’ Trap suggests is very unlikely to take place due to nuclear deterrence. In lieu of Allison’s theory, this paper, through analyzing the current national strategies and behaviors of both states, intends to argue that the ongoing Sino-U.S. competition will take place in an unprecedented pattern: A comprehensive but mostly non-military competition that is centered on a phenomenon which this paper defines as the “securitization of the economy”.

1. Introduction: The Essential Elements of the Thucydides Trap and its Implication

There has rarely been such an academic International Relations (IR) theory that can suddenly attract such a large scale of international attention ever since its birth as the theory of “Thucydides Trap” came up with by Harvard scholar Graham Allison does. The tremendous success and popularity of Allison’s theory not only has demonstrated the fact that most scholars acknowledge the unparalleled importance the Sino-U.S. relations has in the contemporary world, but also reflects the unfortunate fact that many scholars do lack enough confidence toward the future of Sino-U.S. relations. Besides countless IR scholars, even Chinese President Xi Jinping pays his attention to this theory. In 2013, Xi argued that “we must all work together to avoid the Thucydides Trap.[1]” In 2015, Xi again denied the existence of the Thucydides Trap and advocated for a “new model of major-country relationship” between China and the U.S. [2]. The widespread influence of this theory definitely reflects its significance, but it does not academically prove the correctness of it. In this paper, through examining and refuting the Allison’s theory, I aim to argue that the Thucydides Trap theory has severe flaws and

it cannot be simply applied to the Sino-U.S. relations. While I strongly agree with Allison that the structural conflicts existing between the two states will cause a relatively cold relationship in the foreseeable future, Allison's prediction of a massive and decisive war is very unlikely to actually happen. In lieu of Allison's theory which desires to use the historical case of Peloponnesian War as the framework to forecast the future of Sino-U.S. relations, I intend to argue that the future rivalry between China and the U.S. will be a new pattern: A comprehensive but mostly non-military competition that is centered on the phenomenon which I define as the "securitization of the economy."

Allison's Thucydides Trap theory is indeed a grand theory that aims to explain the most fundamental problem of international relations: The interaction and structural conflicts between the existing hegemon and the rising power. Allison portrays a rather pessimistic picture: When the rising power challenges the ruling power, the ruling power's fear of being replaced would prompt it to react to the perceived threat, and thus wars would break out as tension increases. A famous quote of Greek historian Thucydides himself is probably the clearest presentation of this logic, "it was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this inspired in Sparta, which made war inevitable [3]." Many unfortunate historical cases support Allison's theory: According to Allison's research, in 12 of 16 cases over the last 500 years in which a rising power poses threats to a ruling power, the result was war [4]. As for four of those cases in which states successfully avoided war, "huge, painful adjustments in attitudes and actions on the part not just of the challenger but also the challenged" was required [5]. Although, unlike John Mearsheimer who upholds his Offensive Realism and argues that it is almost impossible for China to rise peacefully [6], Allison has never claimed that the Thucydides Trap cannot be avoid although his theory emphasizes on presenting the difficulties existing in Sino-U.S. relations and the possibility for war between the two countries.

The seemingly gloomy picture of future Sino-U.S. relations that Allison presents has attracted large scale of attention, but it is not welcomed by many scholars and especially politicians in both states too. It is extremely clear that the leaderships of both states, especially that of China, desire to avoid the so-called "Thucydides Trap." While both states are all aware of the increasingly acute conflicts in the bilateral relationship ever since the end of the Cold War, many high-ranked officials on both sides count on the liberal theory of economic interdependence and expect the enormous economic relationship to hinder the possibility for war. The Chinese government, official media, and most scholars phrased the economic ties between China and the U.S. as the "ballast" of the Sino-U.S. relationship and treated this point of view almost as a consensus before the China-U.S. trade war broke out. This idea was also echoed in the U.S. Michael McFaul, American ambassador to Russia, also regarded the economic interdependence is the ballast of the Sino-U.S. relationship which makes this bilateral relationship more robust than the Russo-American relationship[7]. In order to for a war like the Peloponnesian War to break out, there must be a "zero-sum situation in which one side's gain is by necessity the other side's loss [8]," which is argued as unlikely to happen in a globalized world. As for now, much evidence suggests that the remarkable economic cooperation and the catastrophic outcome of a possible war have prompted all rational leaders from both China and the U.S. to try to avoid direct military conflict, and this shared willingness to avoid wars could definitely provide a sense of security and a certain degree of consolation.

Indeed, the interdependence theory does have certain degree of value. The influence of economic interdependence as a positive factor is Sino-U.S. relations, however, is overestimated. The last time when human beings claimed that the economic interdependence was unprecedentedly high so that

wars would never broke out again was during 1870-1913, period of the first wave of globalization, but the catastrophic result of the World War I has proved that economic interdependence cannot guarantee preventing the emergence of war [9]. As Allison points out, whether the Chinese and American leadership wish to avoid war or not is not as important as one may think. As the case of WWI has demonstrated, Kaiser Wilhelm's friendliness toward England failed to prevent the two states from engaging in war because the structural conflict, specifically the rapid shift in the balance of power, eventually dragged two states into war regardless of their wishes [5].

Despite the controversy over his statement about the "destined war," Allison's presentation of the challenges to the Sino-U.S. relations does fit the reality. In fact, the structural conflict has already pushed both states into increasing tensions. Certain scholars tend to attribute the current tension between China and U.S. solely to the Trump administration, but in fact this increasing tension between China and the U.S. had already been taking place with Obama's "pivot to Asia" strategy. The U.S., as a ruling power that felt threatened by rising China, started to doubt the correctness of the so-called Engagement policy and many American politicians and scholars argued in favor of a more hawkish China policy [10]. According to scholar David Shambaugh, a "toughened" China policy has become a "new American bipartisan consensus [11]." In the National Security Strategy of the United States of America report published by the White House in 2017, the U.S. not only labeled China as a "revisionist power" and a "strategic competitor," but also even treated China as a larger strategic rival than Russia is [12]. In 2018, the ongoing trade war and the increased military tension in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait again demonstrated that the U.S. has already regarded China as its most important strategic competitor. Meanwhile, China, pursuing its "China dream" which means a perpetual rupture with its past "one hundred years of humiliation" and the achievement of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," demands revising the current world order into a new one reflecting her new status in which she can enjoy more international respect. In addition, as Henry Kissinger points out, both China and the U.S. lack the experience of dealing with another world power with equal status: China is a country which its proud history would prompt it to "inevitably find it impossible to play the role of junior partner [13]" and the U.S. lacks the experience "interacting on a sustained basis with a country of comparable size, reach, and economic performance embracing a distinctly different model of domestic order [14]." Therefore, the "huge and painful adjustments" that Allison mentioned above are not easy to happen, and the structural conflict between a rising power and a ruling power will exist for a long time. Simply a concept of "new types of great power relations" cannot fully solve this structural conflicts, and the future of Sino-U.S. relations remains a challenge for both states [15]. It is very likely that two states would engage in intense competition until both states realize the necessity to settle down the tension after exhaustion.

2. Flaws of the Thucydides Trap and the Economy as the New Focus Area of Competition

Agreeing with Allison's point of view that the Sino-U.S. relationship faces severe challenges caused by structural conflicts, however, does not mean agreeing with his theory of the Thucydides Trap. In fact, I do not believe that the Thucydides Trap theory can be accurately applied to the Sino-U.S. relationship. The historical case of Peloponnesian War does not match the current reality between China and the U.S., and as scholar David Welch points out, perhaps IR scholars should stop using Thucydides' words to speak for debates which Thucydides knows little about [16]. The Thucydides

Trap theory contains two central arguments: First, direct military conflict would be the ultimate means to solve the structural conflict between the two states, and states would either successfully defend its ruling status or acquiring the ruling status through war; second, this military conflict must be a decisive and massive war and the result of this war would totally determine the power dynamics and world order on the international stage. This type of massive and decisive war, like the Peloponnesian War or World War I, is extremely unlikely or even impossible to happen between China and the U.S. at this moment for one reason: In the nuclear age, this type of massive and decisive war would eventually exacerbate to a nuclear war, and the result would be the annihilation of the entire society for both sides.

Indeed, 12 of the 16 cases Allison studied ended with war, and this seems like powerful evidence in favor of the danger of the Thucydides Trap, but one must notice that none of those cases in which there was a war broke out in the end happened between two major nuclear powers. Nuclear weapons have fundamentally different political significance than conventional weapons, and it can generate an unprecedented fear for war between two nuclear powers [17]. As Kenneth Waltz, one of the most famous experts on national security in relations to nuclear weapons, points out, nuclear deterrence is not only easy to maintain but also very effective [18]. Waltz argues that the existence of the nuclear weapon not only made traditional strategies to defend national security, such as gaining territories as strategic buffer zones or forming alliances, not necessary anymore, but also created unconquerable states, which remarkably reduced the motives and possibility for war [18]. According to Waltz, the severe conflicts between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. could have already caused a massive war, but the existence of the nuclear weapon and both states' deep fear of the annihilation of their entire society prevented a war from taking place and maintained sustainable peace [19]. The evidence of the Cold War definitely supports Waltz's point of view. According to a study conducted by Richard Betts, the U.S. used nuclear blackmailing for more than 20 times as a way to gain strategic advantage against its adversaries during the Cold War [20], but a massive war still did not break out between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. Except few outliers who dream about gaining victory [21], most politicians and scholar recognize the common sense that a nuclear war will have no winners, and thus rational politicians would avoid any massive war with a major nuclear power. Even for the critics of Waltz's theory, Waltz's flaw is only about his idealist perception on terrorist organizations and so-called "irrational" states such as the DPRK and Iran [22], but no one would deny that the Sino-U.S. relationship case is more similar to the Soviet-U.S. case: Both states do not share borders; both states recognize the legitimate existence of each other; both states have the nuclear ability for mutual destruction; and most importantly both states are governed by rational leaders.

Indeed structural conflict exists in the Sino-U.S. relationship and will continue to exist or even exacerbate in the future, but it is by no means more severe than the Soviet-American conflict. Unlike the Soviet Union, China does not have and does not intend to form its own bloc to confront the U.S., and it is very unlikely that Chinese or American allies might drag two states into war as the Peloponnesian case [23]. Since even the Soviet Union and the U.S. could avoid a massive war, it would be very unreasonable for one to argue that the Sino-U.S. conflict cannot be solved through non-military means.

As aforementioned, I concluded that the structural conflict between China and the U.S. will continue pushing two states into a phase in which competition, not cooperation, will be the main aspects of the Sino-U.S. relations, but a massive war as a means to solve the structural conflict is

extremely unlikely to take place in foreseeable future. It should be noted that I do not claim that smaller scale military conflict caused by strategic miscalculation can never happen, but military conflict will definitely not be the focus of Sino-U.S. competition. If so, what will be the new focus of this coming strategic competition? In my opinion, the coming Sino-U.S. competition will be a comprehensive one that is centered mostly on a phenomenon which I phrase as the “securitization of the economy.”

The U.S., according to my research, has a relatively longer history of treating economic developments as national security issues and this historical tradition provided soil for the seed of “securitization of the economy” to grow. Although the contemporary U.S. mainstream tends to emphasize its liberal ideas on trade issues, one must admit the fact that this “Wilsonian” approach, as Walter Mead defines [24], is only a relatively modern idea. From Alexander Hamilton’s famous Report on Manufactures [25] and Henry Clay’s well-known speech on “American system [26],” one can clearly see that including economy as part of national security strategy has a deep historical background in the U.S. With the rise of Trump, the dominant neoliberal trade theory has been largely dismissed by the White House, and this historical tradition aforementioned is leveled up to an unprecedented degree. Trump’s rise is widely regarded as a “return of Jacksonianism [27].” For Jacksonian politicians, “self-reliance” has always been the central part of their economic strategy [28]. Stressing on the importance of self-reliance reflects Trump’s belief that economic dependence is a national threat to the U.S., and economic issue, specifically trade issue, is now taken as not merely a commercial conflict but as a national threat. When Trump even regarded Canada, a state that does not pose any military and political threats to the U.S., as a “national security threat [29],” one must realize that economic interests has now become a part of “national security” and the concept of “national security threat” has extended. Such as huge stress on trade deficit and other economic conflicts has never happened among major powers in the twentieth century, and I define this phenomenon as the “securitization of the economy.”

The Trump administration’s perception of the so-called “China threat” serves the best example of the “securitization of the economy” and it plays a crucial part of American foreign policy on China. Throughout U.S. history, the debate between “free trade” and “fair trade” has always existed [30], but never have there been such a phenomenon in which economic frictions become the central national security strategy. Trump’s economically controversial opinion regarding trade deficits as being “taken advantages” is not a new idea, but there has never been a U.S. President who is willing to make huge diplomatic sacrifice to solve this issue. In a report named “Assessing and Strengthening the Manufacturing and Defense Industrial Base and Supply Chain Resiliency of the United States” released by the Department of Justice, the once widely acclaimed economic interdependence between China and the U.S. is labeled as a “national security threat” to the U.S [31]. In the “How China’s Economic Aggression Threatens the Technologies and Intellectual Property of the United States and the World” report published by the White House in June, 2018, the White House used the word “aggression” to describe the Chinese economic competition with the U.S. and even labeled China’s dominant role in manufacture field as a type of “aggression [32].” Shortly after the publication of this report, the U.S. put its words into action and launched the trade war against China, which still persists until today.

At the same time, this phenomenon of “securitization of the economy” is also taking place in China. Since it entered the period of industrialization much later, China has a relatively shorter history

of dealing with the relationship between economy and national security issues in a modern context. In the Maoist period of the People's Republic of China (PRC), self-reliance was pursued as a way to defend the PRC's independence, but political and military power were always regarded as the most concrete pillars of China's national security. During the administration of President Xi Jinping, however, the importance of the economy as a means to exercise China's international influence has become unprecedentedly enhanced and the phenomenon of "securitization of the economy" can be seen in Chinese policy too.

In terms of Chinese domestic foreign policy, this phenomenon can mostly be seen in China's ambitious determination to promote its industrial development in order to lead the next industrial revolution. China, as a socialist state, has strong governmental intervention in its economy and it strives to direct its economy to modernize and to "promote indigenous innovation [33]." The most famous project is the "Made in China 2025" plan, a similar industrial guiding plan as Hamilton's Manufacture Report, which desires to promote Chinese competitiveness in advanced industries. This ambitious plan was one of the most important targets of Trump in the Trade War, and it is also regarded as the core interests by the Chinese.

More importantly, the "securitization of the economy" can be seen from Xi's foreign policy, specifically the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other projects such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The BRI, announced by President Xi in 2013, is an ambitious project which is planned to "involve potentially 65 countries and 4.4 billion people [34]." Besides its economic importance, the BRI has remarkable geopolitical significance: This is the first time in the history of the PRC in which China uses massive economic project to actively construct a more favorable international environment for itself. First, China desires to use economic projects to enhance its relationship with neighboring states and to expand China's soft power in East Asia, Central Asia, South East Asia, South Asia, and even further in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. The "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" has strengthened the already close China-Pakistan relationship, and the "silk road on ice," or arctic development [35], has provided a remarkable new basis for China-Russia cooperation and has further strengthened the quasi-alliance relationship between China and Russia. The BRI has also alleviated the tension in South China Sea and enhanced China's relationship with the Philippines, creating a better strategic environment for China in South China Sea [36]. Second, the BRI is used as a means to confront threat from the U.S. As Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Colin Flint argue, the BRI could either facilitate the competition between the rising China and the established power U.S. or construct "a new form of political economic development based on interconnectivity or flows rather than territorial control [37]." Either of those possibilities can facilitate the rise of China and create a safer international environment for her. In addition, the BRI reflects China's strategy to minimize the economic threats from the ongoing trade war. Zhou Xiaochuan, the former governor of the People's Bank of China, advocates for a "route" of China's exports from the U.S. to other states to decrease China's interdependence with the U.S and its loss in the trade war [38]. The BRI, started slightly earlier than the rise of Trump, reflects China's "securitization of the economy," and the trade war at this moment has again stimulated this phenomenon and makes it unprecedentedly important for China's national security. Interestingly, the phenomenon of "securitization of the economy" in both states emerged at about the same time and the developments of it in two states are accelerating each other.

3. Protracted “War” of Attrition: A Possibility of Future Sino-U.S. Competition

The emergence of the phenomenon of the “securitization of the economy” mentioned above has deeply re-shaped the Sino-U.S. relationship, and serves as a new platform of competition between the two states at this moment and I argue in the future too. In 2018, one of the most significance changes in Sino-U.S. relationship is the changing roles of economic issues. The previous rhetoric about economic issues serves as the “ballast” of this bilateral relationship no longer fits the new reality [39]. On contrary, the conflict between China and the U.S. mostly concentrated in the economic sphere. Washington has triggered a comprehensive competition with China, and besides the traditional political and military aspects, economic aspects now pose unprecedented significance in the grand strategy: The U.S. does not only desire to solve the imbalance of trade between the two country, but also attempts to hinder China’ rapid development in advanced technology and even to change China’s own industrial policy and economic model. Those strategic goals have been push into actions: First, in order to prevent advanced technology from flowing to China and to reduce American national defense industry’s dependence on Chinese manufactures, the U.S. is pushing for partially unhooking economic cooperation with China. Second, rather than engagement, an economic and social “containment,” such as imposing more restriction on Chinese investments, restricting the so-called Chinese cultural “infiltration,” and even restricting the number of Chinese foreign students in the U.S., has taken place. Third, the U.S. has imposed sanctions, isolations, and other sort of pressure on leading Chinese technological companies such as the ZTE and Huawei in order to hamper the “Made in China 2025” plan. Fourth, the U.S. has vehemently criticized Chinese economic system as so-called “state capitalism” and demanded China to change its economic system and industrial plan. Meanwhile, China has retaliated with economic means and desires to use its economic relations with its neighboring states and its BRI to create a more favorable international environment and to confront the pressure from the U.S. Apparently, the “securitization of the economy” has become the current new focus of Sino-U.S. competition.

Different from some scholars who attribute this new reality solely to Trump’s influence and regard it as only a temporary phenomenon, I argue that this new pattern of competition will be the new norm in future Sino-U.S. competition as well. Indeed, it is Trump who pushed the “securitization of the economy” into an unprecedented level, but it was not Trump who started it. Using economic means, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), to contain China is a consensus of the American establishment too, and this phenomenon will continue to exist even after Trump’s presidency. The structural conflict between the two states again illustrates why this phenomenon will persist: For the ruling power U.S., to hinder China’s rapid development is the only way to maintain its hegemony, and China’s economic advantages would definitely be the best target; as for the rising power China, being denied the developments of the advanced industries means the same as being denied from rising, and Chinese economic model, as a part of Chinese sovereignty, cannot be dictated by foreign intervention. Therefore, this conflict is not a minor friction, but a structural conflict regarding the destiny of the two states, and this conflict is not only an economic friction but a competition between two types of models of development as well. This conflict will continue to exist in the foreseeable future, and thus the “securitization of the economy” will become increasingly important. In a situation in which a massive war is unbearably costly but structural conflicts hamper the possibility of reconciliation, protracted economic “warfare” becomes the most probable alternative.

Therefore, the future of Sino-U.S. conflict will not be the Thucydides Trap, but will be a novel and unique type of relationship which one can hardly find any perfectly comparable examples in history. This relationship contains several unique characteristics: First, these two states will maintain a remarkably close economic interdependence and a total disconnection of those economic ties would be too costly to happen, but the main aspect of this bilateral relationship will be competition rather than cooperation. Second, there is a possibility that smaller military conflict, such as in Taiwan Strait or in the South China Sea, would take place but massive military conflict as Thucydides Trap argues would be extremely unlikely to happen. Third, a comprehensive competition will take place but this competition will be centered on non-military, especially economic, competition. The “securitization of the economy” will continue to be the new focus of Sino-U.S. conflict, and a protracted economic “war” of attrition is likely to take place. Fourth, domestic politics will play a larger role and the victory of this competition will largely be seen from the sustainability of the domestic prosperity of each state.

It is important to mention that this type of competition is not another Cold War. To simply divide bilateral relationship between two states into war, cold war, and peace is too simplistic and incorrect. The Cold War was a specific type of relationship in which both the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. formed an alliance and desire to spread their own ideology in the world. Such a relationship is far from the Sino-U.S. relationship today, since China does not have and does not even strive to form an ideological alliance to spread its model.

Unlike the global ideological competition between the U.S.S.R and the U.S, the result of the competition between China and the U.S. will be largely determined by the domestic governance of both states [40]. China must deal with its onerous domestic preoccupation in order to become a developed and great power, and meanwhile the largest challenge to the U.S. is also its own political, economic, and social issues [41]. Facing serious challenges, both states must reform their own establishment, and the result of this protracted large reform will not only determine their future comprehensive strength but also largely determine the result of this shift in the balance of power.

As aforementioned, this unique type of relationship is unprecedented and one cannot find a satisfactory example in history to simply compare. The structural conflict between China and the U.S. is severe, but the interdependence between those two countries is also unprecedentedly large and the result of a fundamental break-up would be catastrophic for both. This complex relationship makes the future of Sino-U.S. relationship uncertain and difficult to predict. Yet, certain historical examples could probably provide more similar picture than the Thucydides Trap: In cases such as the competition between the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire or that between the Song Empire and the Jin Empire in ancient China, a massive war was not the ultimate solution to the structural conflict, and the bilateral relationship is a complex one involving close economic connection and protracted smaller conflict of attrition. Indeed those examples cannot perfectly match the Sino-U.S. relationship, but they can provide an alternative perspective other than the Thucydides Trap.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Allison’s Thucydides Trap theory correctly points out the significance of structural conflicts between the ruling power U.S. and the rising power China in Sino-U.S. conflict, but the prediction about the possibility of a massive war is extremely unlikely to happen because of the positive effects of the nuclear deterrence. The Sino-U.S. conflict will be more leaning toward

competition in the future, but the new focus of the competition will be centered on the phenomenon of the “securitization of the economy” rather than military conflicts. The future Sino-U.S. relationship will be an unprecedented and unique relationship in which both states will engage in a comprehensive competition but a protracted economic “war” of attrition, not military conflict, will be the major aspect of this strategic competition, and the result of domestic governance will play a large role providing the source of international legitimacy and influence for both states.

Although competition will be the major aspect of Sino-U.S. conflict in the future, as scholar Jonathan Kirshner warns, both China and the U.S. should strive to avoid “a full-blown confrontation” and the U.S. should “encourage and accommodate” China’s peaceful rise [42]. In this crucial period of power transition and transformation of the major aspect of Sino-U.S. relationship from cooperation to competition, any imperious and careless argument supporting a more hawkish military conflict between the two states would be extremely dangerous. China and the U.S. must enhance their ability to manage the differences and to explore a new basis of cooperation and means of peaceful competition in order to prevent this unsatisfactory but mostly benign relationship from exacerbating into a zero-sum one.

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