

**A Coming War with China?**

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### **Abstract**

The United States and China are economically interdependent countries with interwoven futures. As China rises to economic parity with the US and rivals American military and geopolitical reach around the world, the relationship between these two global hegemony has begun to suffer from diminished cooperation and trust. The US has become concerned with the balance of power in East Asia while China has become wary of American tariffs and military encirclement. The economic interdependence between China and the US that continues to apex year after year has generated enormous wealth for capitalists in both countries. The wealthy elite in both countries will continue to benefit from friendly relations, a key factor that encourages mutual interest for preventing conflict that could upset that delicate balance. Thus, recognizing that these oligarchs and plutocrats exert disproportionate influence on their respective governments, this paper argues that the international relations theory of liberalism delineates why the possibility of war between the US and China will not materialize so long as these factors remain as they are.

## **A Coming War with China?**

This paper examines the potential for war between the United States and China. My analysis relies on those tools supplied by international relations theories that explain the economic and geopolitical relations between the US and China and how and why they might or might not deteriorate into conflict. Since World War II ended, the US and China have had a tumultuous, hot-and-cold relationship. In the past two decades, the two nations have become increasingly interdependent in terms of trade and commerce, a coupling which has catalyzed the PRC's rise as a global power. China's rise has seen the country assert itself around the world in ways that depart from US-led Western norms and sometimes challenge the US-centric balance of power in Asia. As China's power and influence has expanded, anti-Chinese sentiment in the US has increased, fanned by the Trump Administration's rhetoric and tariffs against China, not to mention the fact that the global pandemic appears to have originated in Wuhan, China, leading debate that the PRC may have manufactured the virus. These factors combined have set the stage for our current predicament: the rise of direct conflict between the US and China.

Certain theories of international relations can help us predict what will happen next. Liberal theory helps to predict that so long as the leaders of the US and China view economic prosperity and growth as their principal objectives, they will do as much as they can to prevent direct conflict. However, they must navigate Thucydides Trap, a realist concept that argues there is not enough room on the planet for two hegemonic powers, and that the PRC's encroachment on US global domination will inevitably be sorted out through war.

Fortunately we do not have any evidence that the US or China believes they can come out ahead in potential struggle or that they should go to war, rather both countries and their leaders seem to be satisfied with their mutual economic interdependence. While businesses in both

countries continue to enrich themselves, their governments have done little more than declare tariffs and order cyberattacks; the former was normal trade practice a couple generations ago and the latter has been mild in comparison to other actors. It is hard to believe we are seeing a prelude to war, and the liberal theory best explains why this is true.

### **Historical Context**

To comprehend the nature and scope of a potential war between the United States and China, one must start by analyzing and understanding the historical background of the relations between the two nations leading up to the current day. Since World War II, America's relations with China have evolved: seeing China turn to communism and ally with the Soviet Union; clashing with those communist ideals and militarily in the Korean War; diminishing interaction; reengaging through ping-pong diplomacy; increasing economic interdependence; and, now, feeling threatened by China's economic, military and geopolitical rise (Monroe, n.d.).

In 1945, soon after WWII ended, civil war between the Communists (led by Mao Zedong) and Nationalists (led by Chiang Kai-shek) erupted — and while President Truman decided to provide aid to Chiang Kai-shek's capitalist regime — the US largely stayed out of the Chinese Civil War. In October of 1949, after peasant-backed Communists defeated the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek, he and thousands of his troops fled to Taiwan. Now supported by the Soviet Union, the Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in mainland China after four long years of war. In response, American troops evacuated the city of Beijing; Western influence was vacating China after a lengthy century. However, in order to stop the spread of the communist ideology, even though the US left mainland China, it continued to support and formally recognize the Republic of

China as China's legitimate government. This would set the stage for many decades of limited relations and interactions between the US and PRC (U.S. relations...2021).

Simultaneously, the Cold War between the Soviet Union (USSR) and the United States started. Political and economic tensions grew between the two countries and their respective allies (Monroe, n.d.). This tension between the two superpowers caused widespread anti-communist fear and hysteria in the United States and was labeled the Red Scare. The rivalry created much tension and suspicion in the US, not only of the Soviet Union, but also of its communist allies such as China. Many citizens grew concerned of communist sympathizers and spies infiltrating the US, compromising the nation's security and defense. The loyalty of federal authorities and workers in many other industries were under suspicion (Red Scare...2010). Those with any relation to China — especially Chinese Americans — were heavily questioned (Monroe, n.d.). History was repeating itself. Just like Japanese Americans in the United States during WWII were treated with fear and suspicion, so was anyone correlated with China during the Cold War. There was an unmistakable climate of fear and suppression linked to the Red Scare during the Cold War — and it would only worsen.

In 1950, a year after the People's Republic of China was established, the Korean War broke out. Backed by the Soviet Union, the North Korean army invaded South Korea. The US and UN supported South Korea in response. During the war, American troops approached China because of its border with North Korea. This caused China to finally join the conflict, supporting North Korea and its Soviet ally in the war (Monroe, n.d.). Nearly four million deaths later, the three nations signed an agreement in 1953 and the conflict finally ended in a stalemate (U.S. relations...2021). As China and America fought for the first time since the 1899 Boxer

Rebellion, anti-communist hysteria in America only heightened — at the same time, anti-American sentiment began to take rise in China (Chronology of...n.d.).

In August of 1954, just one year later, yet another conflict arose between the US and China. When the US lifted the navy blockade of Taiwan after the 1953 armistice, the Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek sent thousands of his men to different islands in the Taiwan Strait. In opposition, the PRC's military gathered along the coast opposite Taiwan and shelled the islands (Chronology of...n.d.). The US immediately intervened, supporting the Nationalists and threatening the use of nuclear force on mainland China. With Chiang Kai-shek's newfound support, the PRC agreed to negotiate. Again, just three years later, the PRC attacked Taiwan. The US once again threatened a nuclear attack, and the PRC backed down a second time because they had no nuclear weapons to threaten the US with — but they would not stay this way for long. In October of 1964, China underwent its first atomic bomb tests, and was successful. A new nuclear power now entered the game (Monroe, n.d.).

Around the late 1950s, after the first Taiwan Strait Crisis, fear of the Soviet Union and the spread of communism lessened — the Red Scare was ending. At the same time, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward, which was an attempt to rapidly mobilize the people for a massive effort to speed economic growth and achieve a classless society. With the aim to dramatically increase industrial output, it was an economic disaster (Monroe, n.d.). In the late 1950s, relations between the Soviet Union and China also began to deteriorate. There became clear differences in the goals and ideals of the two countries, and when the USSR didn't provide military aid to China during the Taiwan Strait Crisis, things took a turn for the worse. In the early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split officially occurred — to some extent, the Soviet Union was now

more of an enemy to China than America was. This split allowed the US and China to move towards reconciliation after a long period of conflict (Chronology of...n.d.).

Relations between China and the US took a turning point for the better in 1971. When the US accepted an invitation from China for their ping pong teams to play against each other, a door for diplomacy was opened. Known as Ping Pong Diplomacy, the invitation signaled China's want for warmer relations with the Western nation. Not long after the two teams met, the United Nations recognized China as the People's Republic of China instead of Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China located in Taiwan (U.S. relations...2021). The next year, President Nixon — ending two decades of separation and reopening ties — visited China for two purposes: opening up dialogue and improving relations between the two nations, and agreeing on joint opposition against the USSR. Trade and travel between the US and China would now increase as it marked the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two nations (Chronology of...n.d.).

In 1976 Mao Zedong passed away, and Deng Xiaoping took his place as the leader of China. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping began to open up China by launching a series of economic and social reforms, opening up to foreign trade, and even allowing Chinese citizens to open their own businesses. Now that China was finally opening up its markets and engaging with the international community, the US and China interacted more than ever before. In the year 2000, at the turn of the century, President Clinton granted China permanent Normal Trade Relations with the US. This also paved the way for China to join the World Trade Organization the very next year (Monroe, n.d.).

It has taken several decades for the US and China to be joined economically in a complex web of direct commerce and investments (Micallef, 2020). China's economy has grown to become the world's second largest, and China has become one of America's largest trading

partners, owning the greatest amount of IOUs that the US needs to repay. It was uncommon until modern times for two nations on opposite sides of the planet to be so connected economically as the US and China are, and now that their economies are so intertwined, it is difficult to imagine a future in which they are unattached. Unraveling those ties will not be easy, and will come with significant cost. In the short term, it will be almost impossible to change. However, as their economic interdependence has increased, political relations have again begun to deteriorate between the two countries as the US has grown to view China as a significant geopolitical threat to American hegemony around the world. Territorial disputes in the South China Sea, China's human rights violations, and a noticeable increase in Chinese military spendings has made many in America wary of China's next moves, and these "threats" compose America's list of pretexts for disengaging from China. At the same time, China has much to fear of the US as Chinese borders are surrounded by a noose of American bases that are aiming missiles, bombs, and warships straight at them (Klare, 2021). Some American commentators dismiss this American strategy as a healthy way to contain Chinese ambitions, and they even add that the two countries are experiencing a healthy amount of conflict as any two interdependent countries are bound to experience. Others believe we are leading up to another Cold War, and that war between the two nations is inevitable. Whatever the case, the history of Sino-American relations plays a major role in influencing the status of relations today, and that relation has become more important than ever in ensuring the prosperity and security of the world. Like a couple that needs each other and is afraid of divorce, the relationship could either go on or it could go down in flames.

### **The Potential Conflict with China from a Theoretical Perspective**

The theory that best determines the possibility of the US going to war with China is liberal theory. Liberals believe that economic interdependence and the global market has become

a crucial facet in modern society — states no longer are the sole decision-makers in our world — international, nongovernmental, and multinational corporations and wealthy individuals are now just as important. In one book, the author Genest writes that the liberal theory “emphasizes economic ties between nations as a basis for establishing and preserving order within the international system.” He asserts that “Interdependence has dramatically increased the incentives for cooperation, not only among states but among all international actors” (Genest, 2006). Liberals believe that economic prosperity, international stability, and the enhancement of wealth in the capitalist world market — not increasing one's power and dominance — are the main driving forces of international politics and US foreign policy, ensuring harmony between nations.

In order to comprehend the role economy plays in regards to the decisions the American government makes, it is crucial to understand that the wealthy elite class in America has large influence in US foreign policy and therefore a substantial influence on decisions the US instill that may or may not lead to war with China. As Shoup put it, “The U.S. plutocracy, a ruling capitalist class with vast wealth and power, is small in number but extremely well organized to defend its own interests. Made up of families possessing at least tens of millions of dollars in assets, it is a class in itself and a class for itself.” Shoup’s article takes a closer look at the Biden-Harris Administration and their connections to the American elite class in three different parts: if they are associated with any one of the four think tanks that guide US foreign policy, are related to a strategic advisory group, or are connected to wealthy corporations. It was found that “Well over half (nineteen, or 63.3 percent) of the top thirty Biden team members are known to be closely associated with these four think tanks. These include most of the key economic and foreign policy decision makers for the Biden team.” Additionally, private strategic advisory groups, in return for large sums of money, use their connections to help private corporations and

their wealthy owners benefit from government contracts — and a reported ten of the 30 members on Biden's team are connected to them. Corporations are able to generate vast wealth for their plutocratic owners, whether it be through government contracts or the production of consumer goods, and an outstanding 43.3% of the Biden team members are closely connected to plutocratic corporations. President Biden has clearly chosen a team of influential and wealthy people that are part of the American plutocracy (Shoup, 2021).

An example of the American elite class influencing US foreign policy through its ties in the government was the war on Iraq. The war on Iraq was privatized to a greater extent than any other war in world history. Over 100,000 American private contractors such as Halliburton and Blackwater were working in Iraq and the surrounding area to perform functions (such as interrogations) that only the US government and military should have led. Those contracts also provided a private military and sold large amounts of military weapons and supplies to the US. Because of their longstanding ties in the government through ex-government officials and large sums of donations, these private companies were able to make hundreds of millions of dollars from the Iraqi war — even when caught scamming the American people and government (Greenwald, 2006). In summary, America chooses to go to war with certain countries and it chooses to maintain friendship with others depending on its economic gain. Those with economic power are narrowly concentrated in a small group tightly linked to the state — and they make decisions on war based on their own interests. They are able to gain profits for themselves and other businesses through their role in the US government.

It is true the US and China are economically intertwined, particularly at the level of oligarchs who rely on the same global financial system to accumulate and maintain their wealth. We must now establish that the two countries economically benefit from each other as trade

partners. Data shows that between 1980 and 2004, trade between China and America rose from five billion dollars to 231 billion dollars (U.S. relations...2021). In 2010, China became the world's second largest economy with a current GDP of 14.3 trillion dollars. The World Bank estimated that when in 1960 China's GDP was 11% of America's, it has now increased to a remarkable 67% — unsurprisingly, China is on track to surpass America as the world's largest economy. China is also one of America's largest export markets (owing approximately \$1.1 trillion of US debt), and America is China's largest trading partner — in 2019, the U.S. and China were reported to have transacted \$634.8 billion. In total, bilateral trade between the US and China has amounted to 4.6 trillion dollars. Chinese firms and corporations have invested hundreds of billions of dollars in US companies and vice versa — companies in both nations are dependent on each other to make profit. China also makes up a huge consumer market that supports popular brands in the West. World affairs author Micallef stated, “From Nike-branded apparel to Jack Daniels to American sports entertainment and films, China represents a significant and lucrative market for Western goods. Denying access to that market represents a significant loss to American firms, one that many will fight to reverse” (Micallef, 2020).

China's economy has been rapidly growing because of trade and investment with the United States, and it has not benefited only their economy. In a particularly polarizing statement regarding Sino-American relations, former President Donald Trump stated, “We can't continue to allow China to rape our country, and that's what they're doing. It's the greatest theft in the history of the world.” However, according to the US-China Business Council, “The combination of bilateral trade, investment, and supply chain integration has supported economic growth, consumer choice, and job creation in America” (The US-China...2021). In 2019, exports to China supported 1.2 million Americans, and in 2018 a reported 197,000 Americans were directly

employed by Chinese companies. On the other hand, when Trump started the “trade war” with China, US economic growth declined and an estimated 245,000 jobs were lost. If the US continues escalating trade tensions with China, the “trade war escalation and decoupling scenario sees the US economy produce \$1.6 trillion less in real GDP terms over the next five years and results in 732,000 fewer jobs in 2022 and 320,000 fewer jobs in 2025. In addition to a significant near-term shock to economic output, long-term effects would permanently lower GDP, reflecting lower economic productivity. By the end of 2025, US households will have lost an estimated \$6,400 in real income” (The US-China...2021). With China predicted to drive one-third of global growth and wealth over the next decade, and with its increasingly complex interdependence with the US economy, maintaining trade with China is increasingly essential for the success of US businesses, Chinese and American consumers and workers, and the wellbeing of both nations — anything less could be seriously damaging.

Liberals argue that transnational linkage such as economic interdependence and maintaining stability builds incentives for cooperation, and as Genest put it, “promotes negotiation rather than military confrontation as a means to resolve disputes between states” (Genest, 2006). Given that the wealthy oligarchs in America are the ones benefiting most from economic interdependence (and they are the ones that influence US foreign policy), they have the most to lose if the two nations go to war. Ironically, even leaders like Donald Trump that accuse China of “raping” the US still support China. "I like China — I've made a lot of money with China," Trump said. "The Bank of America building in San Francisco, a building in New York, 1290 Avenue of the Americas, one of the biggest floor plates in the whole city of New York. I do great with China, I sell them condos, I have the largest bank in the world from China, the largest in the world by far. They're a tenant of mine in a building I own in Manhattan" (Gass,

2016). At the end of the day, the influential wealthy elite and the consumer citizens in both countries benefit from friendly relations with one another. Liberal theory thus explains why these people — and their countries — would want to prevent war between the US and China.

### **Counterargument: Realism and Unavoidable War**

Realist theory has a near opposite take on the possibility and reason for war with China. As Genest put it, “realist theory focuses on power. It looks at how the distribution of power, quest for power, and ability to preserve power within the system supercede other goals and dictate the behavior of states and organizations” (Genest, 2006). Realists believe that the goal of states is to enhance its power and security — and that is why they argue that while the US should aim to avoid war with China, it might just be inevitable.

Imagine the US and China continue on the same economic trajectory as they have over the past twenty years. This means China would overtake the US economically, and their economic interdependence would be more entrenched, with Chinese oligarchs having wealth tied up in the US (such as Chinese companies on the New York Stock Exchange) and vice versa. With these facts, liberalism predicts no war between the US and China because countries with extensive trade ties are strongly incentivised to maintain peaceful relations. Based on the same set of facts, realism comes to a different conclusion. Realist theory believes that in order to maintain global peace, there needs to be a balance of power in East Asia. Balance of power is a policy aimed at maintaining the status quo worldwide, and, as Genest explained, it “contends that if two or more states maintain an even distribution of power, neither side can be confident of victory should conflict arise... In this way, balance and stability in the system are preserved” (Genest, 2006). Realism would also cite the Thucydides Trap for predicting war between the US and China, on the basis that countries go to war when an emerging power threatens to displace an

existing great power as an international hegemon. Not only will China threaten to do it, but in our hypothetical example, economically it would already have come to pass. As these facts come about, according to realism the risks of miscalculation and conflict will grow — war will be inevitable — unless the US works with its trusted partners in the South China Sea to preserve a favorable balance of power, and China submits to it (Friedberg, 2011).

### **Which Theory Better Explains the Possibility of War Between the US and China?**

Liberal theory and realist theory are at odds — the question now is which theory better explains whether or not there will be a war between the US and China.

Based on history to date, it is clear that neither the United States nor China seeks direct conflict with the other. The principal objective pursued by both the US and Chinese governments in recent times has been the pursuit of mutually beneficial interactions that promote economic prosperity in each country. Their collective domination of global commerce has gotten to the point that any small move has unpredictable repercussions, which is the bane of capitalists and markets who want overall stability and predictability. Neither group would benefit from war as much as they benefit from peace. They are aware that any conflict arising between them would produce “catastrophic regional damage and potentially bring the global economy to its knees” (Klare, 2021).

Yet, many observers of American politics believe that — however unintended — the US is on the precipice of stumbling into war with China (Macgregor, 2021). Unlike the Soviet Union which was primarily a military powerhouse without global financial clout, China first rose to power through the strength of its economy, and its military and geopolitical strength has followed suit. US public opinion had become convinced that China’s growing clout makes it “an inherent enemy,” one that must be confronted. It is an attitude that made Trump’s trade war

supported by the very Americans who bore its cost. China's challenge to the East Asian balance of power is one the US has resisted, and a game of "military chicken" is already being played off China's coast (Klare, 2021). Predictably, this is generating "a maximum of resistance" on the Chinese side. Strained relations with China are "the biggest problem for America, the biggest problem for the world" according to former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who in May 2021 told the McCain Institute's Sedona Forum on Global Issues, "because if we can't solve that, then the risk is that all over the world, a kind of cold war will develop between China and the United States" (Porter, 2021).

This is where realist theory comes into play, because Thucydides Trap predicts strained relations if not outright conflict between the US and China. There is increasing consensus that the US needs to contain the threat, which is exactly what is happening when the US encircles China with the US military and pokes at it with tariffs and sanctions. However, these very actions may provoke the outbreak of conflict — like a self-fulfilling prophecy — in a war in which the US may not emerge victorious. Imagine if the realist theory proved correct and the two nations became entangled in direct military contact with the US striking China's mainland. With consideration of the size and technology of China's military, even if the strikes inflict remarkable loss, short of nuclear annihilation China could not only absorb the damage, it could hold its ground and bring the war to the US homeland, at the same time resulting in economic collapse for both countries. Moreover, both countries are nuclear powers, so if either side resorts to nuclear weapons — which is plausible since neither side would submit to defeat — there would be "grim consequences for humanity and the climate" (Macgregor, 2021). Thus, the realist view that war is inevitable goes against US interests as the US may consequently lose its security, economic power, and dominance. In a kind of realist double-speak, Henry Kissinger called for

US policies short of all-out conflict to prevent Chinese hegemony while maintaining peaceful coexistence between the two nations (Zheng, 2021).

Liberals understand that military strength is no longer the sole measure of power. The realist assumption that states are the primary actors in international relations is no longer the case within the interdependent economic system driven by corporate capitalism — liberals believe that non-state actors such as multinational corporations also play a vital role in influencing foreign policy and maintaining global interdependence. This economic interdependence encourages cooperation and enhances trust between nations, promoting negotiation rather than military confrontation as a means to resolve disputes (Genest, 2006). This does not deny that US leaders may have concerns such as advancing their nation's prestige and maintaining national security, but these purposes tend to be subservient to the dominant capitalist interests. Although political leaders provide many services for their country's wellbeing, Ralph Miliband noted it “should not obscure the fact that *in the service of these purposes*, they become the dedicated servants of their business and investing classes” (Parenti, 2003).

For two decades or more, people in the US have predicted China's rise, and yet the US has not acted in a belligerent or warlike manner against China. Even Trump's “trade war” didn't amount to anything meaningful or lasting. This complacency and inertia suggest that no significant counteraction, let alone war, will be stirred by Americans even if China overtakes the US economically. This complacency toward China's rise will continue so long as Americans continue to benefit and not see any direct detriment from China's rise: Consumers will enjoy cheap prices for electronics and clothing while wealthy oligarchs will see their investments and riches grow. If Americans cared more for their country's well-being or supremacy around the globe than for those material objects, they would have come together after the recent terrorist

attacks on the US Capitol, but they did not. The last time they did was after 9/11 and before that was the attack on Pearl Harbor. In both cases it took a foreign, surprise attack that killed many unsuspecting Americans. If that is what it takes to mobilize for war, then as liberals would say, war is unlikely to happen between the two superpowers.

### **Conclusion**

While the United States and China are destined to compete, they are not destined for war. They have in recent years experienced increasing tension arising from each side's reaction to China's extraordinary yet predictable economic rise — predictable because US corporate capitalists supported it — with increased geopolitical competition. Lack of cooperation and mutual suspicion has been costly, having made the global pandemic worse and forsaking potential economic gains. But there are common interests that present opportunities for partnership such as constraining North Korean and Iranian nuclear capabilities, increasing trade profits and most importantly, as the US and China are the two largest global gas emitters, they have a common interest in managing global climate change. As liberals believe, handling these global problems requires diplomatic leadership, not a competitive effort of dominance. The consequences of exercising military power often outweigh the benefits and are less effective than employing economic power. In order to maintain international stability and economic prosperity, cooperation and trust — which international rules and organizations help foster — are in the interest of every state. For these reasons, the international relations theory of liberalism offers the best explanation for the possibility of war between the US and China: they will cooperate despite their competition.

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