

Roman Kuźniar

Wydziału Nauk Politycznych
i Studiów Międzynarodowych
Uniwersytet Warszawski¹
ORCID: 0000-0002-1959-465X

CHINA VS THE UNITED STATES: STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONY OR *THUCIDYDES'S TRAP*

As the liberal international order, marked by the ideological and strategic dominance of the West, particularly the United States, fades into decline, we are stepping into a new phase of international relations that is shaping up to be defined by *multipolar power politics*². Among the relationships between various emerging global poles, one stands out as notably more crucial than the rest: the dynamic between the two current superpowers, the United States and China. However, unlike the bipolar tension of the Cold War era in the latter half of the twentieth century, this time around, these two giants will not solely dominate the global stage. Several other political centers of gravity will emerge, refusing to be overshadowed – similar to two towering eight-thousanders rising prominently above other surrounding mountain peaks, „merely” four or five thousand meters in height. In the realm of real international relations, going back centuries or even millennia, such conditions inevitably set the stage for a contest for supremacy. Even if the present circumstances do not pose an immediate threat to their security or development, the nature of global politics means that such threats could emerge (and inevitably will emerge) as the struggle for dominance unfolds. The atavistic instincts of these powers drive them towards costly actions that not only pose risks to the global security but also hinder their own developmental capabilities. History has shown us that such dynamics often lead to conflicts with dramatic escalations and severe consequences, affecting not just the parties involved but the wider international community as well.

¹ E-mail: r.kuzniar@uw.edu.pl

² I have discussed this more broadly in Polish in my book R. Kuźniar, *Zmierzch liberalnego porządku międzynarodowego* [*Decline of the Liberal International Order*], Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2022.

■ THE „TRAP” LOGIC

Such a conflict is typically referred to as a *hegemonic war*, because what is at stake is maintaining, or acquiring, the status of „hegemon” (whatever that entails) in the international sphere. The preceding rivalry (confrontation), in turn, is termed a *hegemonic conflict*³. The transition from a relatively peaceful competition to confrontations involving armed force is a highly intense period not only for the superpowers entangled in such a relationship but also for other nations forced to choose sides, and finally for observers – scholars and commentators of international affairs. An intellectual framework for the Sino-American hegemonic rivalry was proposed relatively early on by the renowned American analyst and scholar Graham Allison, summed up in his influential 2017 book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap*⁴. As one might guess, the starting point for his argument is the Peloponnesian War between Athens and its allies on one side, and the Spartan-led Peloponnesian League on the other. The war, lasting twenty-seven years with some interruptions, brought much destruction across Hellas, initiated the decline of Athenian greatness, and accelerated the rise of the Roman Empire’s domination over Greece at the time. Many authors have found this concept to be a useful interpretive key for the US-China confrontation, and even more commentators have adopted this term, leading Thucydides’s Trap to become almost as popular a concept in the lexicon of international relations analysis as „the end of history” or „the clash of civilizations”.

As is well-known, the latter concepts have often been utilized without a deep understanding of Fukuyama’s or Huntington’s texts and intentions. This seems to be the case with Thucydides’s Trap as well, although some of the blame for its sometimes misguided use falls to the author himself. Firstly, let’s consider how Allison’s trap concept is anchored in the history of the Peloponnesian War. He views this war as an archetype for numerous subsequent hegemonic relations and conflicts, ranging from the fifteenth-century Spanish-Portuguese rivalry to the modern relationship between China and the United States. This means, firstly, that he views the war between Athens and the Spartan coalition as a hegemonic conflict, a conflict for primacy, the ability to impose one’s own rules of the game within the conflict zone (Hellas), particularly in terms of how the hegemon interacts with other states within that zone. Allison acknowledges Athens’ motives as „a steeple of civilization” at that time, aiming to secure respect and adjust the existing order to

³ Here conflict is understood in its basic meaning of a conflict of interests, stances, and expectations.

⁴ Allison began promoting the concept of Thucydides’s Trap in articles beginning in 2012, starting with G. Allison, *Thucydides’s trap has been sprung in the Pacific*, „Financial Times”, 21 August 2012. His book is *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

account for the new power dynamics. He notes, „How could Athenians not believe that their interests deserved more weight? How could Athenians not expect that they should have greater influence in resolving differences?”⁵.

However, secondly, Allison aptly observes, citing Thucydides, that the main reason for the Spartans' decision to go to war was „the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta”⁶. As Thucydides himself wrote: „The Spartans voted that war should be declared because they were afraid of the further growth of Athenian power, seeing, as they did, that already the greater part of Greece was under the control of Athens”⁷. For the Spartans and their Peloponnesian allies, the problem was obviously the brutal way in which the Athenians had been imposing their rule. The tragic fate of the inhabitants of the island of Melos (described later in the Greek historian's work) was just a further continuation of the imperial practices of the arrogant Athenians, inducing fear and justifying the decision for war.

Thirdly, in the seventeen examples of hegemonic rivalry Allison chooses, he often seems to forget Thucydides and his *History*: these rivalries or wars are ones that were fought over a balance of power unrelated to the security of the main antagonists (e.g., over benefits from overseas expansion or maritime trade), were initiated for ideological reasons, or even were started out of a sheer desire for dominance – no matter if the states around the aggressor were significantly weaker (did not threaten its security), and no matter if the aggressor could count on far-reaching concessions thanks to the appeasement strategy taken by victims unaware of their later fate.

Consequently, the concept of Thucydides's trap that Allison invokes remains unclear. Allison himself describes it as „the natural, inevitable discombobulation that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power. This can happen in any sphere. But implications are most dangerous in international affairs”. He believes such a situation invariably leads to „cataclysm”⁸. Yet, crucially, the concept strays from the facts at this juncture. In Thucydides, there's no mention of surprise or frustration due to a challenger threatening the leading position. As Allison notes, there was a sole leader in Hellas at that time: Athens. It was Athens' imperial ambitions that threatened the security and independence of other Greek city-states, prompting them to see defense as their only option. Where, then, lies the trap? It seems that the real trap was Athens' imperial overreach and its failure to temper its conquest ambitions. Labeling anyone's instinctive defensive reaction against conquest or vassalization as a „trap” is, in my view, off the mark.

⁵ G. Allison, *Destined For War...*, xv.

⁶ G. Allison, *ibid.*, vii.

⁷ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. 1.88.1, as adapted by Graham Allison (2017, p. 37) from the translation of Rex Warner: Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, ed. M.I. Finley, trans. Rex Warner, New York: Penguin, 1954.

⁸ G. Allison, *Destined For War*, xvi.

Allison's selected examples – his case studies – unfortunately do not help in clarifying this. Of the seventeen cases of hegemonic rivalry, only in four instances was war avoided, and one of these examples is completely misaligned. It involves the rivalry between Germany on the one hand, France and Great Britain on the other, following Germany's reunification in 1990 up to the book's publication in 2017. Not for a moment throughout this period was there a situation of hegemonic rivalry, let alone the risk of war – the mutual membership of these three powers in the European Union effectively ruled out such a possibility. Furthermore, two prominent examples of hegemonic rivalry and war in modern times were not Thucydides's traps. The first example is the Napoleonic Wars, and the second is the war waged by Nazi Germany against Europe. Germany could not have felt threatened by anyone, yet between 1939–1941, it engaged in successive aggressions with the aim of extending its imperial control over Europe. But in both cases, the wars initiated by Napoleon and Hitler, the cause was their quest for hegemony. Therefore, one could argue that, firstly, the trap concept's inapplicability to the very scenario described by Thucydides and, secondly, the Allison's considerable nonchalance in selecting examples, both call into question the explanatory power and utility of the Thucydides's trap concept.

This, however, doesn't mean that there is no problem with hegemonic rivalry, which sometimes culminates in a major war⁹. For the case discussed in this article, certain parallels in modern times can be found in the situation prior to World War I and in the US-Soviet rivalry. The German-British relations before World War I, in a multi-polar power politics scenario that replaced the dominant concert of powers for the majority of the nineteenth century, certainly merit such a classification. Although the pretext for the war was an incident in the Balkans, which weaker powers at the time, Austria-Hungary and Russia, first responded to, what was really at stake in World War I was stopping Germany from aspiring to continental hegemony. The United Kingdom, in particular, was keen to prevent a victorious Germany from challenging its naval supremacy. Germany, the challenger, was poised to contest the UK's position as the premier European power (though the UK acted more as a balancer on the continent rather than a hegemon). Furthermore, the situation was much more complex, as the war was a clash of coalitions of powers, whose potentials ultimately determined the conflict's outcome. This bears certain similarities to the present scenario, where the United States can count on having Europe, as well as Japan and India, on its side, whereas China can rely on Russia and possibly on some mid-sized powers.

⁹ See especially B. Simms, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy. From 1453 to the Present*, Allen Lane, 2013.

The most compelling comparison, however, is to the purely hegemonic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The two superpowers far surpassed all other countries in potential, especially military, and made no secret of the fact that what was at stake in their confrontation was maintaining the number-one position (the US) or usurping it (the USSR). This confrontation was also two-layered, strategic and ideological, touching on nearly all aspects of their mutual relations and affecting all regions of the world. It concerned not only hegemony but also the ideological shape of the global international order – a historical first in this respect. Although the antagonists skirted close to war, they did manage to avoid it, perhaps in large part due to their nuclear weapons and the resulting situation of mutually assured destruction (MAD). It's also worth recalling the general strategies each side employed with respect to the other over the decades of this confrontation. While the narrative on the Soviet side championed, almost until the very end, the optimistic notion that victory for the „forces of peace and progress” was a historical inevitability, on the American side, two approaches clashed: the idea of engaging with the Soviet Union for the sake of overall stability and security (including mutual respect for each other's spheres of influence) and a strategy aimed at containment, defensive posturing, and ultimately seeking to precipitate the collapse not only of the Soviet Union but of (international) communism as such¹⁰. As is well-known – and this is an important lesson – the outcome of this rivalry hinged not on military might but on competitive advantages in developmental capacity and the overall appeal of the system that combined market capitalism with liberal democracy.

In concluding this section of the paper, we need to acknowledge another significant flaw of the Thucydides's trap concept within the context of hegemonic rivalry: its theoretical confinement to the realist school of thought. It is not always the case that the spark triggering a conflict is – as in the Peloponnesian War – a security issue, as posited by advocates of realist theory in international relations (who somewhat erroneously claim Thucydides as their precursor). For instance, one might speculate, somewhat whimsically, whether the Cold War would have occurred if the United States and Western Europe had embraced communism. After all, the formation of the first anti-French coalition following the French Revolution was driven by regime change (restoring monarchical power), not hegemonic ambitions. Hence, ideological or cultural dynamics can significantly influence rivalries and conflicts that realists might too readily categorize as hegemonic, even though the quest for dominance does often intertwine with ideology in politics, including on the international stage.

¹⁰ Representative examples of both approaches can be found in H. Kissinger's *The White House Years*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1979, and Z. Brzezinski's *Game Plan: How to Conduct the U.S.-Soviet Contest*, Atlantic Monthly Press, Boston 1986. The Reagan Administration pursued a distinct strategy aimed at weakening the USSR in order to ensure its defeat as a US rival.

■ THE U.S.-CHINA CONFLICT AS A CONTEST FOR HEGEMONY

Due to what realists term the structure of the international order (essentially, the shifting balance of power in a world without a „global government”), China and the United States are indeed destined to be drawn into a hegemonic rivalry. To grasp how much the potential of these two superpowers „stands out” above other significant nations among the world’s top ten in terms of the overall potential that qualifies a country as a power (global, mid-level, or regional), let’s examine some basic data. The United States remains at the forefront at the start of this decade, with a GDP of around 23.5 trillion USD, a *per capita* income of approximately 70,000 USD, a population exceeding 330 million, and defense expenditures over 800 billion USD (or about 3.5% of GDP). China’s corresponding figures are approximately 18 trillion USD in GDP, with a *per capita* income of around 12,500 USD, a population of about 1.4 billion, and defense spending about 300 billion USD (or about 1.8% of GDP – considered to be an unreliable indicator, likely understated).

It’s not very clear who should be seen as ranking next in this lineup. In terms of GDP, Japan still claims third spot with around 5 trillion USD, yet with a relatively small population of about 125 million people and defense spending around 55 billion USD. In terms of population, India surpasses everyone, with slightly over 1.4 billion people, but it has a GDP of merely about 3.2 trillion USD (about 2,300 USD *per capita*). India does have significant military expenditures – about 77 billion USD – but this is still 4 times less than China’s and more than 10 times less than US spending. Russia is another power, mainly thanks to its vast area, though its GDP is just 1.8 trillion USD, its population about 143 million and military spending around 65 billion; however, Russia also boasts the second-largest nuclear arsenal after the United States. Also ranking high are three Western European powers – especially Germany, with a GDP of over 4.2 trillion USD, a population of about 84 million, and cautious yet growing defense expenditures of about 60 billion USD. However, like Japan, Germany does not possess nuclear capabilities. By contrast, this status is held by the other two Western European powers: the United Kingdom (with a GDP of about 3.2 trillion USD, a population of about 67 million, and defense spending around 70 billion USD), and France (with a GDP of about 3 trillion USD, a population of about 67 million, and military expenditures of about 57 billion USD).

What about the powers of the Global South? Consider the other two founding members of the BRICS group (besides the aforementioned China, India, and Russia). Brazil can boast of a population of about 215 million and a decent GDP of about 1.6 trillion USD, but its defense spending is just about 20 billion USD. South Africa fares worse, with a GDP of about 420 billion USD (much less than Poland’s), a population of about 60 million, and negligible defense spending of about 3.3 billion USD. And how about other countries? Indonesia, for example,

stands out due to its population of about 280 million, yet its GDP is only about 1.2 trillion USD, with military expenditures barely reaching 8 billion USD. How does Iran, known for its militant stance, rank? Poorly, as its population is nearly 90 million, but its GDP is alarmingly low, at about 360 billion USD, and its defense spending is also not impressive, at about 28 billion USD (for comparison, Saudi Arabia, with a population of 36 million, spends over 56 billion USD on its military, or twice as much as Iran). Nuclear-armed Pakistan, in turn, despite having a population of over 230 million, has a GDP of at just about 350 billion USD (only half that of Poland, with a population of just under 38 million), and so its military expenditures are likewise modest – at slightly over 11 billion USD.

Aggregated data for the EU, if treated as a collective power, also place it below the United States and China: the EU's total GDP is about 17 trillion USD, with defense spending around 260 billion USD¹¹. Even if these figures merit attention, it's important to remember that the EU is not a strategic actor, and in security matters, especially in the face of threats from Russia, its members prefer to rely on the NATO and the United States. This implies that the European Union cannot be regarded as an entity capable of hegemonic rivalry, even in relations with Russia, which is significantly weaker in terms of GDP and much smaller in terms of population and military spending.

The comparison above clearly demonstrates the extraordinary dominance of the United States and China over other global powers across categories. Even though this analysis relies on conservative data that excludes variables like natural resource endowments or technological progress, it vividly shows how comprehensive the capabilities of the United States and China are when compared to other nations. They have considerable strengths in land area, population size, GDP, defense spending, and technological advancement. Naturally, material factors alone, whether considered in relative or absolute terms, do not automatically „destine” nations to come into hegemonic rivalry or conflict, especially not armed conflict. Yet, history has undeniably shown us that as powers gain significance and civilizational momentum, they become more assertive, demanding recognition and compliance from those around them, and strive to enhance their influence by shaping the international order within their grasp (which typically means expanding their spheres of influence). Graham Allison sees this dynamic as something perfectly natural in the case of Athens in the runup to the Peloponnesian War. This same pattern was also the case for the United States and is now being replicated by China.

Indeed, having a substantial overall potential, particularly in military terms, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of a hegemonic conflict (be it a rivalry, confrontation, or eventual war). What is also necessary is a certain

¹¹ All figures cited after K. Jędrzejowska, *Aneks: Państwa świata – wybrane dane i wskaźniki* [Annex: Countries of the World – Selected Data and Indicators], in: *Rocznik Strategiczny 2022/23*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2023.

sort of politics: encompassing ambitions regarding one's role, perceptions of the external world, and the determination to face challengers, that is, to defend or acquire a hegemonic position. Also crucial are motives such as concern for one's security or status and the desire to expand influence in order to obtain certain benefits, which are often connected to a quest for prestige. Frequently, this involves the need to protect one's established position, including economic relations and networks with other countries (spheres of influence, interests, or forms of hegemony over certain regions). The decisive factor is the volitional element evident in a particular ruler, leadership group, or the entire ruling class.

In the case of the United States, the ambition to play a leading, sometimes specifically hegemonic role in relation to much of the world has been notably present since at least World War II. This ambition, of varying intensity, remains a constant within the US political establishment, irrespective of whether Republicans or Democrats happen to be in power. During the Cold War, American leadership was „limited” to the free world; with respect to Latin America, it could be characterized as the classic US hegemony. After the Cold War ended, however, this leadership potential expanded globally. This was the result of a unique geopolitical, specifically geostrategic vacuum caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union as a superpower and the temporary absence of powers in other regions of the world. Only the United States had global „power projection” capability at that time, the ability to exert force anywhere in the world. This sparked an ideological aspiration and material pressure in America to make this leadership a reality. Numerous statements by prominent American analysts, researchers, diplomats, and politicians highlighted the need and inevitability for the United States to assume the role of a global leader, policeman, or hegemon. American foreign-policy discourse introduced such concepts as „unipolar moment”, „indispensable nation”, „American world system”, and „bound to lead” (attributed to Charles Krauthammer, Madeleine Albright, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Joseph Nye, Jr., respectively)¹². Emphasizing America's international leadership became a staple for subsequent US Presidents. This pursuit of leadership manifested itself in its most assertive, hegemonic form, based on sheer force, during President George W. Bush's Administration. The 2003 invasion of Iraq can be seen as a hegemonic war by proxy, aiming to signal to the rest of the world Washington's leadership resolve and the cost of its defiance by any nation. This ambition was bolstered by immense pressure from the background in the form of large interest groups, especially transnational corporations (TNCs), financial institutions, PR agencies, think-tanks, arms manufacturers, etc. This was

¹² Some of the most persuasive arguments supporting global U.S. leadership were articulated in the following works: Ch. Krauthammer, *The unipolar moment*, „Foreign Affairs” 1990, no. 1; Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York 1997; R. Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, Knopf Publishers, London 2003.

strongly linked to the second wave of globalization, propelled by the US economy and its support for building a liberal international order.

This case has been well-documented and does not require further elaboration in an article as concise as this. However, it's important to revisit the current US perspective on its leadership role in the light of China's recently disclosed ambitions and capabilities. It's also important to remember that quite recently there was a US President, namely Donald Trump, who showed little interest in maintaining America's global leadership, focusing instead primarily(?) on the nation's economic interests and being the first US President to openly label China as a trade-level rival or adversary. The stance of the current US Administration, under President Joe Biden, has been succinctly outlined in the National Security Strategy signed on 12 October 2022. For our purposes here, three aspects of that stance need to be highlighted. First, the document assumes that global „need for American leadership is as great as it has ever been”, indicating no US intention to cede its number-one position in the evolving international landscape¹³. Second, it views China as a formidable rival, not just challenging America's power but also aiming to reshape the international order to benefit autocratic regimes. Thus, the hegemonic conflict extends beyond mere rivalry between the two powers and encompasses fundamental issues and the shape of the global order. Third, the United States is committed to managing this rivalry responsibly, aiming to prevent it from escalating into armed confrontation.

Facing off against America in this hegemonic conflict is China. As the only other superpower currently on par with the United States, China presents a formidable candidacy for global leadership. As potentially the most powerful empire of antiquity, for centuries its profound cultural influence has radiated to its surroundings. However, the world has not been then yet sufficiently interconnected for China to extend its leadership beyond its immediate neighborhood. That was a time when empires were so far apart from one another that hegemonic rivalry or wars were not really possible. For instance, two thousand years ago, a hegemonic conflict between the Roman and Chinese empires was unthinkable. In modern times, during the dawn of the global world, China experienced regression and, due to its weakness, fell under the humiliating influence of Western European powers. The communist experiment made it a formidable force to be reckoned with, but did not spur its development. It was only the second wave of globalization and the liberal international order that presented China with an opportunity that it took full advantage of, partly thanks to its culture, undergoing rapid, profound, and comprehensive modernization through a (controlled) opening up to the West. The United States and the Western Europe helped the most (by providing access to their markets and technology). America, in particular, championed the power of liberal ideas and the free market, which were

¹³ J. Biden, *Global Security Strategy*, The White House, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

also expected to transform Chinese society and politics and make China a responsible partner in addressing global issues.

The reality unfolded quite differently. Letting itself be deceived by its own ideological naivety and the profit motive of its corporations, America inadvertently nurtured a rival that is now, feeling no gratitude, intent on usurping its global leadership¹⁴. Back in 1989, China was not even in the top ten in terms of GDP or military expenditure, but just over two decades later, it had secured itself a solid second place. In 2012, Xi Jinping came to power, departing from the great reformer Deng Xiaoping's strategy of concealing China's strength as long as possible and exercising restraint in foreign relations to avoid alarming potential rivals prematurely. By the latter half of the 2010s, with China's share of global GDP surpassing 15% (compared to about 22–23% for the United States), it became evident that China was on the chase, with some projections suggesting it might overtake the United States before 2030. Beijing recognized it was time to unveil its ambitions. Thus, at the CPC congress in 2017, Chairman Xi proclaimed „an era that sees China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind”¹⁵. A place at the center of the political scene is reserved for one actor, a bit like in the old Chinese adage that has again become fashionable in political Beijing: „There can be only one sun in the sky”.

This readiness to lead the world – part of what Xi Jinping termed the „Chinese Dream” – was well-founded. China was evolving into a comprehensive superpower, no longer just the „world's factory” but also a leader in new technologies, space exploration and modern weaponry, with expanding its influence in Africa and Latin America. Through the „Belt and Road” mega-project, it aimed to weave its economic influence throughout Asia and Europe¹⁶. As two French economists warned in 2011, Chinese imperialism, striving for world hegemony with a blend of political, military, economic, cultural, and ideological dimensions, can be characterized as „economic” due to its primary mode of operation¹⁷. Although Xi openly asserted to Trump in 2017 that China considered itself an equal power to the United States, a gesture that seemed like a challenge being made to America, in recent years the challenger has encountered some problems that could delay the final showdown for center stage (Beijing's handling of the Covid pandemic, which originated in China,

¹⁴ R. Spalding, *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept*, Portfolio, 2019.

¹⁵ J. Xi, Report delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm; for broader discussing in Polish see B. Góralczyk, *Powrót Chin do centrum światowej sceny* [China's return to the world center], in: *Rocznik Strategiczny 2018/19*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2019.

¹⁶ The „Belt and Road Initiative” is a vast transcontinental project encompassing both land and sea routes, designed to facilitate the export of Chinese goods to numerous countries across the globe. It also aims at importing capital, technology, and resources to fuel China's ascent as a global power.

¹⁷ French edition A. Brunet, J.P. Guichard, *La visée hégémonique de la Chine – L'impérialisme économique*, Editions L'Harmattan, 2011; English edition *China's strategy to rule the world*, Editions L'Harmattan, 2013.

led to increased mistrust towards it; China is experiencing an economic slowdown; increased centralization may impede its development). Nonetheless, the growth in potential, international expansion, and China's „body language” unequivocally suggest it has positioned itself for a hegemonic clash with America. Simultaneously, there is a prevailing belief within the Chinese leadership that time is on their side, suggesting they may achieve supremacy through a „long march” rather than an immediate showdown, given the current relative equilibrium between the two powers.

The strategic cultures of the two rivals might play a pivotal role in determining the outcome of this contest. Americans are often perceived as being quick to adopt a combative stance, having a capacity for brinkmanship, and tending to employ the argument of force, particularly military force. Such an inclination is borne out by their foreign policy actions since World War II. Undoubtedly, driven by both its economic interests and the distinct ideology of American exceptionalism – the idea of being a „city upon a hill” – the United States is determined to maintain its premier position in the hierarchy of powers that shape the international order. The strategic culture of modern China, however, is not as straightforward. While it is ancient, it is marked by discontinuities. Modern China has not had the opportunity to test itself in direct confrontation with other powers. Its foreign policy over the past three decades has been influenced by the philosophy of Sun Tzu, favoring a so-called indirect strategy (contrary to America's approach), which involves advancing tactically, seizing every chance to expand its influence through peaceful means, economic measures, and soft power. This strategy echoes that of the communist Russia as described by George Kennan in his renowned „Long Telegram” of February 1946. I refer to this as a strategy of osmosis, where Chinese influence subtly permeates other states, subsequently making them compliant with Beijing's expectations. Xi Jinping's response to the American pledge of a trade war with China ran somewhat contrary to the indirect strategy: „In the West you have the notion that if somebody hits you on the left cheek, you turn the other cheek. In our culture we punch back”¹⁸. It seems Xi didn't realize that the same is true in American culture as well... However, whether the extreme divergence in the great cultures of the East and the West, represented by these two powers, will propel them towards or deter from Thucydides's trap (assuming we adopt Allison's framework) and a hegemonic war remain an open question. Historical precedents are inconclusive. Athens and the Spartan coalition shared the same, albeit very homogeneous culture (and went to war), whereas the United States and the Soviet Union were markedly different (yet did not).

However, were China, in its hegemonic conflict with America, to stick to its indirect strategy, its promise to unify Taiwan with the People's Republic of China could indeed become a true trap. Beijing has not shied away from suggesting it might

¹⁸ L. Wei and Y. Kubota, *China's Xi Tells CEOs He'll Strike Back at U.S.*, „Wall Street Journal”, 25 June 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-tells-ceos-hell-strike-back-at-u-s-1529941334>.

resort to force, while the Biden Administration has stated it would defend Taiwan's independence if China attempted to act against the will of the Taiwanese people. The pushback against Russia's aggression in Ukraine undoubtedly serves as a cautionary tale for Beijing. It can be assumed that China may continue to exercise restraint in the near term, but the Taiwan issue could potentially ignite a direct hegemonic confrontation between China and America in the foreseeable future. As long as Beijing cannot assert its dominance in the South China Sea region, it cannot consider itself a hegemonic power on a global scale, whatever the term „hegemonic” is taken to mean today (in addition to the number-one position in the power hierarchy).

■ FACTORS DETERRING A HEGEMONIC WAR

While a hegemonic conflict (confrontation) between America and China is widely regarded as inevitable, it does not necessarily have to find its resolution in the form of a hegemonic war (as is the case in most of the scenarios analyzed by Allison). There are several factors or barriers that will hamper this rivalry from escalating into such a conflict. This is, of course, assuming, first, that the parties act rationally, which is never guaranteed. And second, that there won't be an uncontrollable escalation of the use of mutual force emerging out of a situation initially considered strategically secondary. So, what are these preventative factors?

The concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD) is the most straightforward such a factor to identify. This principle is credited with having prevented a great war between the United States and the USSR. Among known instances of hegemonic confrontation, the standoff between these powers and their respective alliances posed the greatest threat of war, primarily due to the strength of the ideological antagonism. Despite the current significant disparity in nuclear capabilities favoring the US (with some 500 warheads for China versus almost 4,000 for the US)¹⁹, China's nuclear potential is deemed sufficiently deterrent. Moreover, China has significantly stepped up its nuclear warhead production in recent years, aiming to match the United States in the number of deployable warheads by 2035. If China does not pose a threat to the physical security of the United States (its territory), which we should assume it won't, the United States would have no rationale to risk a nuclear attack on China, unleashing the MAD scenario. Particularly in this aspect, the assumed rationality of both actors is the key issue. The Americans would also have to weigh the risk that, in the event of a nuclear exchange with China, they could be additionally vulnerable to strikes from Russia, which possesses a larger missile arsenal than they do.

Positive economic interdependence acts as another significant deterrent. China's rapid advancement post-1989 largely resulted from its extremely favorable trade relationship with the United States. Even now, its GDP growth benefits from trade

¹⁹ As of January 2023, *SIPRI Yearbook 2023*, Oxford University Press, p. 250 and 286.

with America, despite recent US efforts to balance the massive trade deficit with China and restrict its access to the cutting-edge technology, particularly in the military sector. Nonetheless, the United States remains a sort of „goose laying golden eggs” – a vital source of revenue for China. Despite a decline in US imports from China in 2023 by about 20%, the import volume still reached approximately 430 billion USD, while China’s imports from the USA, despite a 4% drop, amounted to just under 150 billion USD. To bypass American sanctions, Chinese firms have shifted their production to Southeast Asian countries, from which they can more easily access the US market. The ties between America and China go well beyond trade and are significantly broader than the Cold War relationships between the USSR and the US. These connections will likely prevent Beijing from pursuing further actions that could harm Chinese interests or manifest hostility towards America. However, should China continue to distance itself from the West – a trend that has been noticeable for several years – the impact of this factor could weaken over time.

Thirdly, the global international environment will play a significant role in preventing the escalation of the hegemonic conflict between the United States and China. If we look back at the Peloponnesian War, it’s important to remember that Athens and Sparta were virtually alone. There was no one within or around Hellas who might have moderated the conflict. Today, surrounding China and the United States are numerous countries and powers of varying significance, many of which cooperate with them while balancing between them (known as swing powers), and none of which have an interest in any war, especially not in a hegemonic one. These powers are already serving and will continue to serve as a check on the mutually aggressive postures of the two superpowers. The comparisons made in the second part of this paper not only show how much the United States and China stand out above other powers but also highlight the existence of many other powers with significant potential and influence that are needed by either China or the US. These smaller powers, with the exception of Putin’s Russia, will dampen the severity of polarization caused in the world by the current „hegemon” vs „challenger”. China is expanding its influence in many countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but in geostrategic terms, the United States still has greater coalition capabilities (not only NATO but also AUKUS and the QUAD)²⁰. The likely rise of India in the hierarchy of powers will slightly alter the balance of power and further bind China’s hands in its geopolitical zone.

²⁰ AUKUS is a strictly military pact among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the USA, designed to coordinate their collective efforts to ensure stability in the Indo-Pacific region. The QUAD, on the other hand, is a consultative mechanism among four nations: the USA, India, Australia, and Japan, dealing with security matters in East Asia. From Beijing’s perspective, both arrangements are seen as efforts to „encircle” China by countries concerned about its growing influence in that region.

In discussing the international environment that could soften the polarization driven by the hegemonic rivalry between America and China, and its potential to evolve into a conflict-generating trap, it's important not to reduce this environment to a simplistic view of states as billiard balls. The twenty-first-century international context is dense with factors that tighten the bonds between states and create a much more cohesive whole than in the past, and this happens at a sub-state level. While leaders may prefer to view their nations as solid and impenetrable „billiard balls”, social connections rule this out. These factors include a plethora of non-governmental relationships, norms, international organizations, development ideologies, human rights concerns, the need to care for „global commons” like the climate, and international public opinion, etc. These elements may not always be quantifiable in terms of traditional power metrics, yet they are tangible. The culmination of this trend is a global network of a deep and a wide-ranging interconnectivity, which cannot be severed without detriment to oneself and the wider community. This network will keep the temperature of the US-China hegemonic rivalry below a certain level. It will also provide both superpowers with opportunities for a dialogue, recognizing fears and expectations, and seeking a compromise. While this does not mean they will become friends or converge ideologically and politically, nor agree on a division of influence zones (a soft understanding of condominium), it will lead them to act with a greater restraint towards each other.

■ CONCLUSIONS

Can all these factors prevent a hegemonic war between China and America? That remains uncertain. However, they do suggest that this relationship cannot appropriately be viewed as a „trap” (Thucydidean or otherwise) fraught with fatalistic determinism. After all, wars can and do also occur outside the logic of such traps. The combined strength of the restraining factors listed in the three sections above warrants a cautious optimism. Yet, history has shown us, not just in the China-America context but also in the relations between Russia and the West before 2022, how predictions can be upended. This brings to mind the work of Jan Bloch, a Polish entrepreneur and philanthropist, who authored a seminal study on the prospects of a major European war at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bloch deemed such a war impossible because it was... irrational. The level of interdependence between nations at that time, which he thoroughly investigated, in his opinion, made war unprofitable²¹. However, there also remains the human factor – the leaders. Their emotions, fears, often pathological ambitions, obsessions with power, errors in judgment, and misperceptions – irrespective of

²¹ J. Bloch, *Przyszła wojna pod względem technicznym, ekonomicznym i politycznym* (opracował G.P. Bąbiak), PISM, Warszawa 2005.

differences in interests – have been behind the wars of the twentieth century and earlier, just as they are behind Russia's aggression in Ukraine today.

Can the leaders of China and America avoid these pitfalls during their hegemonic confrontation? This remains an open question. Nevertheless, both parties should bear in mind that the Peloponnesian War wasn't the inevitable outcome of a trap, but rather the result of Athens' lack of moderation – as Allison himself puts it, „Athenian assertiveness swelled into hubris”²².

REFERENCES

- Allison Graham (2012), *Thucydides's trap has been sprung in the Pacific*, „Financial Times”, 21 August.
- Allison Graham (2017), *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Biden Joseph (2022), *Global Security Strategy*, Washington: The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.
- Bloch Jan (2005), *Przyszła wojna pod względem technicznym, ekonomicznym i politycznym* (adapted by Grzegorz P. Bąbiak), Warszawa: PISM.
- Brunet Antoine, Guichard Jean-Paul (2011), *La visée hégémonique de la Chine – L'impérialisme économique*, Paris: Editions L'Harmattan; English edition *China's strategy to rule the world*, Editions L'Harmattan, 2013.
- Brzezinski Zbigniew (1986), *Game Plan: How to Conduct the U.S.-Soviet Contest*, Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Brzezinski Zbigniew, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York: Basic Book/HarperCollins Publishers.
- Góralczyk Bogdan (2019), *Powrót Chin do centrum światowej sceny* [China's return to the world center], in: *Rocznik Strategiczny 2018/19*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Jędrzejowska Karina (2023), „Aneks: Państwa świata – wybrane dane i wskaźniki” [Annex: Countries of the World – Selected Data and Indicators], in: *Rocznik Strategiczny 2022/23*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Kagan Robert (2003), *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, London: Knopf Publishers.
- Kissinger Henry (1979), *The White House Years*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Krauthammer Charles (1990), *The unipolar moment*, „Foreign Affairs”, no. 1.
- Kuźniar Roman (2022), *Zmierzch liberalnego porządku międzynarodowego [Decline of the Liberal International Order]*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Lingling Wei, Kubota Yoko (2018), *China's Xi Tells CEOs He'll Strike Back at U.S.*, „Wall Street Journal”, 25 June, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-tells-ceos-hell-strike-back-at-u-s-1529941334>.
- Simms Brendan (2013), *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy. From 1453 to the Present*, London: Allen Lane.
- SIPRI Yearbook 2023*, Oxford University Press, p. 250 and 286.

²² G. Allison, *Destined For War*, p. 40.

- Spalding Robert (2019), *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept*, London: Portfolio (Penguin Group).
- Thucydides (1954), *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. by Moses I. Finley, trans. Rex Warner, New York: Penguin.
- Xi Jinping (2017), *Report delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, October 18, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

Roman Kuźniar

CHINA VS THE UNITED STATES: STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONY OR *THUCIDYDES'S TRAP*

This article discusses the prospect of the transition of the Chinese-American rivalry into an open, all out war. The problem arises from the experience of history – two leading powers eventually refer to war in order to assume their, one of them, strategic and political primacy within the relevant international order of their time. The present situation – after a demise of the international liberal order – of confrontation between the US and China is being compared to the so-called Thucydides's trap, which is the reference to the Peloponnesian war. The author is challenging both the comparison and the inevitability of the war between the Big Two, without however totally excluding the possibility of some military demonstrations of their resolve to push for or to defend their global status. Reasons for such an assessment are based upon negative (nuclear capabilities) and positive (economy, development) interdependence factors between the only two superpowers and the nature of the contemporary international environment, complex and tight, which will be preventing the Big Two from sliding into the world war, disastrous for all.

Keywords: Peloponnesian war; Thucydides's trap; hegemonic conflict; international liberal order (decline of); new bipolarism; power politics; negative/positive interdependence