

# US and China can escape the Thucydides Trap

The risk of conflict as a rising China challenges the US is over-stated. The two countries are interdependent and the world is becoming more integrated. It is in neither country's interest to have a major confrontation with the other.

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For *The Straits Times*

The rapid rise of China has not only made it the second-largest economic power, but also reshaped the economic, geopolitical and diplomatic landscapes in the world. As a result, the relationship between China and the United States, the incumbent hegemon of the world, has become the most important bilateral relationship in global affairs.

The ultimate question is whether the two superpowers can escape what American academic Graham Allison has called the "Thucydides Trap", which suggests that conflict between a rising power and incumbent is inevitable, drawing from a famous quote from the ancient Greek historian Thucydides: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable."

In a speech at the 16th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, US Defence Secretary James Mattis said that "the conflict (between the two countries) is not inevitable".

But this is hardly convincing, given the inevitable conflicting interests between the rising and the established superpowers that are substantially different from each other in terms of values, political system, level of development and cultural traditions.

A close scrutiny of how China has been rising reveals that the US-China relationship is unique as compared with the previous ones between the rising and established powers in our history. History shows that all the previous rising powers (Great Britain, Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union and the US) had possessed a global-reach military capability – they could fight massive wars far beyond their borders – when they were rising.

But until this day, China does not have such a capability despite the impressive development of its military forces in the past decade.

Moreover, China does not challenge the existing international system as the previous rising powers did. Instead, China has integrated into this system, which was established and led by the US-led Western democracies.

This is the essential reason why US governments, Democrat and Republican alike, have never really contained China but sustained the policy of "engagement" ever since

the normalisation of the bilateral relationship in 1979. Indeed, one can hardly imagine how China could have risen so rapidly and "peacefully" without the embrace of the US and the Western world.

A few traits of the US-China relationship make it highly unlikely that they will fall into the Thucydides Trap.

### INTERDEPENDENCE

One of the most fundamental consequences of China's "peaceful rise" is that the US and China have become irrevocably interdependent. This has made the relationship far transcend the scope of bilateral relations. While all the issues between the two countries have global implications, many of humanity's most intractable global challenges (think climate change) can hardly be managed, let alone solved, without communication, consultation and cooperation between the US and China.

### INTERNAL POLITICS

Hence, the US-China relationship nowadays is actually defined by internal politics. In both the US and China, policymaking involves widely diversified interest groups with different stakes, affecting one country's policy towards the other. For example, a policy hailed by Wall Street might upset human rights groups. Environmental groups would oppose a policy that is good for the energy industry. And labour unions would be unhappy with a policy encouraging more trade between the US and China that disrupts jobs in the US.

Similar situations exist in China, although policymaking in Beijing is far less transparent than that in Washington. As a result, the stability of the relationship is essentially determined by the top leaders' strength in internal politics and their capability in establishing a consensus at home, rather than whether Washington and Beijing can see eye to eye on a given policy issue.

### INTEGRATION

Moreover, interdependence on the one hand and global economic integration on the other hand have eroded the foundation for a zero-sum game, which is essential for the assumption of the Thucydides Trap. A zero-sum game between the two countries would require four conditions.

First, policymaking in both countries would have to be ideologically oriented so that, second, the world can be politically divided in a black-and-white fashion in which state players could (or would have to) choose sides. Third, there would exist two independent economies, upon which, fourth, both sides could form their security alliances, preparing for the final confrontation.

### INTERESTS-DRIVEN

Instead, like most countries today, policymaking in the US and China are essentially interests-driven, not ideologically determined.



It took no time for US President Donald Trump to develop an "outstanding friendship" with Chinese President Xi Jinping at their Mar-a-Largo summit. Mr Trump emphasised that "our one China policy" remains unchanged and announced that China is no longer a currency manipulator. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Today, it is virtually impossible that the world could retreat to Cold War dynamics, where countries are divided into two camps politically hostile towards each other and economically independent of each other.

Although a US-led security system has survived the end of the Cold War, few US allies would want to join the fight should confrontation take place between the two superpowers. Australia, for example, has repeatedly made it clear it would be reluctant to get involved, unless its own interests are at stake. As for China, President Xi Jinping pointed out in his speech at the Belt and Road Initiative summit last month that China does not intend to pursue any alliance but strives to foster partnerships with other countries.

Thus, it is hard to imagine that either the US or China would go to war against each other. This is not necessarily because they would give up the competition, but because it will be extremely difficult for both Washington and Beijing to shape a policy consensus at home and security alliance abroad, which are necessary for a confrontation.

President Donald Trump's post-election behaviour is revealing. As a candidate, he was unmistakably hostile to China, attacking it for stealing America's jobs, engaging in unfair trade and manipulating its currency at the expense of the US. He even challenged the "one China" policy, which involves China's "core

interest", after his phone conversation with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen.

It turned out that it took no time for President Trump to develop an "outstanding friendship" with Mr Xi at their Mar-a-Largo summit. Mr Trump emphasised that "our one China policy" remains unchanged and announced that China is no longer a currency manipulator. Instead of launching a trade war, the two countries have reached a series of new agreements on trade and economic exchanges. Even on the thorny North Korean nuclear issue, Mr Trump and Mr Xi are working with each other to put pressure on Pyongyang.

As Mr Mattis said at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, the two countries have common goals, common interests and will take common actions on the North Korea nuclear issue. It is worth noting that in his remarks on North Korea, Mr Mattis did not mention military action at all.

### UNCERTAINTY AND STRATEGIC MISTRUST

However, the US-China relationship remains uncertain. The lack of strategic trust between Washington and Beijing – it is wishful thinking that any strategic trust could be achieved between two nations that are fundamentally different – prevents the two from establishing a sustainable cooperative relationship. Even if such a relationship could be achieved temporarily, it could become a

liability rather an asset given the complexity of internal politics in both countries.

One US president's friendship with China could become a liability in the next president's policymaking process. Similarly, one Chinese leader's good terms with the US could provide his opponents with justification to sabotage him in internal politics.

But the two countries do need to work together as neither of them can overcome the existing global challenges on its own no matter how strong it is. This is essentially why strategic masterminds like Dr Henry Kissinger and the late Zbigniew Brzezinski advocated G-2, and President Xi has strived to establish a "new type of relationship between major countries".

Although their agendas, priorities and formats differ, their goal is to institutionalise the bilateral relationship so that the two countries can optimise the common interests and manage the inevitable conflicting interests. In this regard, "strategic reassurance" advocated by former US deputy state secretary James Steinberg is worth serious consideration for both Washington and Beijing.

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