



Chinese Vice-Premier Liu He and US President Donald Trump after signing phase one of the US-China trade agreement at the White House in Washington in January. America can impede China's progress but not stop it, and a confrontation will consume resources better used in making the lives of Americans better, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

# China and America: The power of historical memory

**Indiscriminate attacks by the US on 'the Chinese' over Covid-19 and the trade war will provoke a nationalist backlash fuelled by the memory of historical oppression and racism**

**Walter Woon**

The Thucydides Trap is an intellectual trap for the unwary when uncritically applied to China.

China is not a rising power; it is a returning power. The psychology is different.

It is essential to recognise that America's "adversary" is the People's Republic of China (PRC) led by the Communist Party of China (CCP), not "the Chinese".

The millions of people of Chinese descent in the world are not automatically aligned with the PRC. To refer to the "Chinese" challenge is intellectually flabby and politically indefensible.

**PSYCHOLOGY OF A RETURNING POWER**

The psychology of a returning power is very different from that of a

rising power. Imperial Germany at the beginning of the 20th century sought to elbow its way into the circle of great powers and seize its "place in the sun". Ironically, German Chancellor Bernhard von Bulow, who coined the phrase, was speaking of Germany's acquisition of territory in China.

A newly prosperous PRC demands to be respected, not lectured by those who oppressed it. Misapprehending the nature of the problem will exacerbate it.

President Donald Trump wants a confrontation with the PRC for domestic reasons.

Mr Trump said that the current Covid-19 outbreak is a worse attack on America than Pearl Harbour and 9/11. He has said before that trade wars are easy to win.

Presumably, he thinks that a race and culture confrontation will also be easy for America to win.

But he underestimates the power of historical memory.

The first time a foreign power complained about China's trade imbalance, there was war.

In 1839 to 1842, Britain forced China to import opium to correct its trade surplus. China had to open up several ports to foreigners, who were exempt from Chinese laws – the first of the unequal treaties inflicted on China.

**AFTER 100 YEARS: ITS SIGNIFICANCE**

The year 2019 marked the centenary of the Treaty of Versailles, as well as the May Fourth Movement. China sent over 100,000 workers to France during World War I, hoping to gain a place at the victors' table and rid itself of the unequal treaties. At Versailles, China was betrayed.

The German concession in Shandong was handed over to the Japanese, instead of being given back to China.

On May 4, protests broke out all over China at this shabby treatment. Deputy National Security Adviser Matt Pottinger invoked the movement in a speech seeking to undermine the CCP.

This is ironic, since disenchantment with the Western democracies caused China to turn to autocratic countries like the Soviet Union and even defeated Germany for models.

This led ultimately to the foundation of the CCP.

The memory of racial injustice festers. The unequal treaties resulted in Western enclaves ruled by foreigners, where Chinese were treated as inferiors in their own country. A Japanese proposal for an article on racial equality in the Treaty of Versailles was rejected, by America among others.

**FROM TRADE WAR TO CULTURE WAR**

Now Mr Trump is using this anti-"China" feeling as a weapon in his re-election campaign.

What better way to rally his base than by focusing attention on a foreign enemy, with a different skin colour and culture? What started as a trade war is turning into a race and culture war.

Using race as an electoral weapon is a tactic as indiscriminate as carpet-bombing. Anyone who looks Chinese is an enemy.

Korean-American actor John Cho wrote that East Asians now face rising racism in America. The organisation Act to Change noted that "the Covid-19 pandemic has sparked rising numbers of anti-Asian hate crimes".

Racism is driven by two contradictory impulses. First, a sense of superiority. White Americans felt that other races were inferior, rejecting the racial equality clause at Versailles.

It underpins the delusion that America is a shining light for the world. The obvious failures in coping with Covid-19 undermine America's claim to moral leadership. Blaming the PRC for the outbreak is the response, shifting culpability to a foreign foe.

The second, contradictory impulse is a sense of inferiority: that Americans cannot compete against the yellow hordes. This underpinned the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

The economic rise of the PRC again feeds this hysteria. The response is to accuse the "Chinese" of unfair trading. Mr Trump's trade war is a result of this insecurity.

There is a crucial difference between relative and absolute decline.

American economic dominance after 1945 is an aberration, largely the result of Europe's self-destruction in the second Thirty Years War from 1914 to 1945.

**US-CHINA CONFRONTATION: THE PROXY BATTLEGROUND**

For most of history, China has been the largest economic power in the world. If the PRC grows economically, the relative position

of America will decline, but this does not necessarily involve an absolute decline.

The only way to prevent relative decline is to stop the PRC from progressing. This is not just unfeasible but downright immoral.

The confrontation will be played out in third countries. It is not a foregone conclusion that America will win this struggle for hearts and minds. The PRC has not tried to export revolution since the end of Maoism. It does not seek to change other countries in its own image.

America does this constantly, preaching the superiority of its values, a claim that rings hollow given the poisonous partisanship of American politics.

Moralising is all the more hypocritical when America is mired in a societal morass. Let those without sin cast the first stone; those who live in glass houses should be very careful about doing so.

Asean countries are not naturally pro-PRC. Yet Asians also take pride in the achievements of a non-Caucasian power. When the PRC put its first taikonaut in space, the Asean ambassadors in Brussels congratulated the PRC ambassador. This was not just a matter of diplomatic niceties.

**DESTROYING AN EMPIRE: WHICH EMPIRE?**

American bullying pushes positive attitudes towards negativity.

The ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute asked which of the two rivals Asean should align itself with if forced to choose between the PRC and America. The vast majority preferred not to choose, but if forced, a majority of people in seven out of 10 countries picked China.

Yet historical memory can be positive too. On Sept 14, 2001, over 200,000 Germans gathered before the Brandenburg Gate in solidarity with America after 9/11. The presentation of credentials for Ambassador Dan Coats was expedited so he could be there.

Many remembered the "Raisin Bombers" which were the lifeline of West Berlin during the Berlin Blockade.

Generosity is what made America great, not "America first and damn the rest of the world" selfishness.

The PRC behaves badly in many ways, but confronting it directly will not improve matters. There will be a nationalist backlash, fuelled by the memory of historical oppression and racial prejudice.

America can impede the PRC's progress but not stop it. A confrontation will consume resources better utilised in making the lives of Americans better. America needs all the resources it can muster after the devastation of Mr Trump's botched Covid-19 response.

An American official said that America knows how to "spend an adversary into oblivion". A story is told of Croesus, the last king of Lydia and renowned for his wealth.

Croesus wanted to attack Persia. He consulted the Oracle at Delphi, which declared that "if Croesus goes to war with Persia, he will destroy a great empire". Croesus confidently went to war and was soundly beaten. The great empire he destroyed was his own.

Perhaps America might learn from history.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Walter Woon is David Marshall Professor at the National University of Singapore and chairman of the Society of International Law Singapore, as well as former ambassador to Germany and the European Union. This article was first published in RSIS Commentary, a publication of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.