



ORIGINAL PAPER

Is the US-CHINA Competition a Case of Thucydides Trap?

Mădălin-Ciprian Enescu¹⁾

Abstract:

Background: The US-China competition is a new form of competition between the first two powers of the international system, based on cooperation and competition. This complex model of competition was described by Graham Allison like a case of the Thucydides Trap. **Objectives:** The objective of the current article is to determine if the US-China Competition can be considered a case of the Thucydides Trap. **Methods:** This article will use the case study in order to test the theory of Graham Allison. In order to test the theory, it will be used 4 steps: developing a theory, determine the necessary cases to test the theory, identify an alternative explanation, collect evidences to present why the alternative explanation didn't happen. **Results and findings:** The economic evolution of China in the last years can show us that the economic growth rate is not as big as it was in 2015 and the capacity to become the first economic power it is still limited. In the same way, the South China Sea can't play the same role as the Caribbean Sea had played for the rise of the US.

Furthermore, the US-China economic competition can't become a war since the two powers continue to cooperate like in the case of the Trade War. The findings show us that China will continue to be a challenger for the US, but its capacity to start a war it is very limited. Also, it is a big probability that the US will use the buck passing strategy in order to avoid a direct confrontation with China. **Conclusions:** The US-China Competition can't become a case of the Thucydides Trap in the nearest future, but the two powers will continue to compete based on the future issues between them.

Keywords: *Thucydides Trap, US-China competition, economic competition, South China Sea, Belt and Road Initiative.*

¹⁾ PhD Student, National School of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA), Bucharest, Romania, Email: enescumadalin89@yahoo.com.

Introduction

The competition between the first two major powers from the international system is a benchmark for the history of the humankind. The way these two powers confront themselves and how the power transition is made from one power to another created an entire theory inside the international relations studies. The first European power competition was between the city states of the Ancient Greece, Sparta and Athens, which after the rejection of the Persian invasion in the Peloponnesian Peninsula managed to develop a form of a power regional system. In this regional system, there were two powers, Sparta and Athens, where the hegemon of the system was Sparta, which at that period was a military monarchy, a land power and with an economy based on agriculture and slavery. On the other hand, Athens was seen like a challenger to the hegemon, with a democratic system, a sea power and its development based on commerce, made around the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, both powers managed to create a system of alliances in the region, the Delian League made by Athens and Peloponnesian League dominated by Sparta, in order to use them against an attack coming from the other power. But, the rising power of Athens, created an antagonism between them, especially because the cities interest to expand its influence in the region. This competition, between the two major city-states created the spark of the Peloponnesian Wars and managed to destroy the entire system. The destruction of the power regional system let an outside power to become the next hegemon of the system, the Macedonian Kingdom. This pattern of competition will continue to be part of the European's history until the end of the World War 2 (WW2), when the two powers, which were considered to be outside the regional power system: the US and the USSR launched the Cold War. The Cold War was a different form of competition between the first two major powers of the international system, because both powers extend their power competition from Europe to the international system. The end of the Cold War transformed again the system and the US, the sole remaining superpower, has the ability to transform and shape the system according to its values and interests. But, the economic crisis from 2008 made possible the existence of a new power inside the international system, China, who in 2010 became the second economic power. Since then, China became the most important challenger for the US, more different than the USSR or the other European powers. Because of the complex competition between the US and China, with domains where both powers cooperate, like the economic trade, and others where they are rivals, like the future of technology, the US-China competition is seen by Graham Allison like a form of the Thucydides Trap.

But, the description of the US-China Competition like a Thucydides Trap is very criticized by some international relations scientists, mostly because it creates self-fulfilling prophecies regarding the possibility of a war between the two powers (Chan,2019). Furthermore, the concept is very criticized because the case selection is very poor and some cases are excluding from the historical analysis (Hanania,2021: 20-21). On the other hand, Graham Allison's analyses regarding the two powers competition is seen very inclusive because compared with the other power transition theories it includes also the human emotions in its variables (Zhang,2019). Because of this complex debate regarding the Thucydides Trap, the purpose of this article is to analyze if the US-China Competition is a case of the Graham Allison's concept.

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Methodology

To determine if the US-China Competition can be seen like a form of the Thucydides Trap, we will use the case study in order to test the theory. Testing the theory will mean 4 steps: developing a theory, determine the necessary cases to test the theory, identify an alternative explanation, collect evidences to present why the alternative explanation didn't happen. Because of these 4 steps testing model, the case study can be used to test the theories for events which are still in developing (Schwandt and Gates,2017:604, 612-614). In the case of this article, the 4 steps will be the following: developing the theory- the Thucydides Trap theory, determine the case studies- will be the 16 cases selected by Graham Allison to test his theory, identify an alternative explanation- the use of John Mearsheimer's concept of the regional hegemon to analyze US-China Competition, collect evidences that the alternative explanations didn't happen- the arguments regarding the regional competition between the two powers. The time period for testing the Graham Allison's theory will start from 2010 and will continue until the present moment.

The Thucydides Trap Concept

The concept of the Thucydides Trap is described like a structural stress put on the dominant power by the rising power in the international system, because the later wants to become the next dominant power. This stress, in time, will make the dominant power to start a war against the rising power in order to enforce its status and power inside the system (Allison,2017:29).

This concept was coined by Graham Allison for the first time in 2012, into an article written for the *Financial Times*. According to this article, China is going to overtake the US economically and became the first power of the system. In this case, the rising of China can be seen like a Thucydides Trap, like Athens and Germany in the history of Europe. Most of these rising ends up into a war between the two rival powers, but there are some cases where the war didn't happen, because there were adjustments made by both countries in their attitudes and actions. In order to support its ideas, Graham Allison analyzed 15 cases of the Thucydides Trap since 1500 and found out that in 11 of them the war happened. That's why, the US's and the Chinese political leaders should use dialog or other actions instead of war, in order to solve any contradictions between the two powers (Allison,2012).

The second article in which Graham Allison talked about the Thucydides Trap appeared in 2015 in *The Atlantic* and is more developed than the first one. According to the second article, China already became the first economic power of the international system, but only using the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) and not by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This transformation happened during one generation, starting from 1980 up until 2015, when China managed to rise from an economy smaller than Netherlands into the second world economic power. The internal political reforms made by the president Xi Jinping, transformed China from a collective ruling into a one man power, reinforced the political power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and transformed the Chinese economy from an export economy into a domestic consumption. Also, China is the only country of the international system, which during the 2008 economic crisis managed to have a growth rate higher than 8%. This growth offered the chance to become the first economic power in terms of PPP and made possible what Xi Jinping called, the Chinese Dream. Because of these advantages, the Chinese leader supported the idea of transforming the international system from an US

unipolar system into a multipolar system. On the other hand, the US tends to compare China's rising with its rising, as the only regional power in the Western Hemisphere. (Allison, 2015).

In order to explain these changings, Graham Allison analyzed 16 cases from history where the Thucydides Trap was possible: in 12 of them the two powers were going to war and in only 4 cases the transition was made by peace. The first case in history of the Thucydides Trap is the war between Sparta and Athens, caused by the rise of Athens in the Peloponnesian Peninsula and the second most important case is between Germany and Britain before the First World War (WW1). According to these cases, two are the motives turning the Thucydides Trap into a war: the rising importance of the rising challenger and the fear and its determination of the status quo power to defend her status (Allison, 2015). Like in the case of the first article, Graham Allison supported the idea that the two powers should continue to cooperate on major domains, in order not to start a war. In the same way, the author criticizes the US policy on balancing China in the East Asia, called the Pivot to Asia, policy promoted by the former US president, Barack Obama, and supports the future dialog between the political leaders and a changing attitude coming from both parts regarding the competition between the two countries (Allison,2015).

The third source for understanding the Thucydides Trap is the book written by Graham Allison in 2017, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides Trap?* In this book Graham Allison developed more his theory and even he is explaining the first case of the Thucydides Trap or lunched the idea that the South China Sea can be seen like the Caribbean Sea, in the case of the US's rising. On the other hand, the author is interested to find peaceful solution in order to stop a military conflict between the world power- the US and the challenger- China.

The regional competition between Sparta and Athens started at the end of the wars between the Persians and the Greeks, when Sparta became the dominant power in the Peloponnesian Peninsula. Sparta was a conservative power, not interested in developing its economy and preserving its slave system of production and its political system, the monarchy. At the same time, Athens was a rising city using trade and technological advantages to extend its influence in the region (Gilpin,1988:598). Also, the geographical position made Athens less vulnerable than Sparta in the case of a land invasion. Athens was in a region not so fertile comparing to other city states, which had offered the city the capacity to offer shelter to different people from other regions. At the same time, trade made Athens a very rich city and transformed its political system from the aristocratical system into a democracy (Gilpin,1988:598).

The war between the two powers in the Peloponnesian Peninsula, started when the two city states, Corcyra and Corinth, engaged into a war between them. The two powers got involved in this minor war because both of them realized that if one of their allies are going to lose, the other power is going to obtain a strategic advantage which can't be balanced in the nearest future (Allison,2017:35-37). Even though both powers realized that the war can make them weak in front of other powers from the system, this didn't stop the power elite from both cities to continue the decision to start a war. In the end, Sparta won the war but both powers were so weak, that none of them could stop the ascension of the third part- the Kingdom of Macedonia, which had conquered the peninsula and incorporated the city states in its empire (Allison,2017:38-39; Gilpin,1988:602).

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Analyzing the way the events from the Peloponnesian Wars had started, Graham Allison determined that not the ascension of Athens was the cause of war, but the: national interest, fear and honor. The national interest is linked to the well-known concept of the independence of the state from the realist school, whereas fear is determined by miscalculation and misperception coming from one side or another. At the same time honor is more linked to the idea of the prestige and recognition that a power should have in order to model the system by its own interest (Allison,2017:39-40). Another factor that made the war possible, was the bipolarization between the Sparta and Athens and their allies. This bipolarization turned into a war by a single spark coming from an inside event and by the incapacity of the ruling elite in controlling the chain of events (Allison,2017:28; Gilpin,1988:612).

Starting from the war between Sparta and Athens, Graham Allison defines his concept of Thucydides Trap and in order to test his theory he analyzed 16 cases from history when this concept can be found. According to his study, in 4 cases the war was avoided, whereas in the other 12 cases the two powers got into a conflict (Allison,2017:41,244). From these 4 cases, there was only 1 case in which the transition from one power to another was made peacefully, when the US became the world power after the end of the Second World War (WW2), whereas in the other 3 cases the trap was avoided: the Portuguese and Spanish world competition, the end of the Cold War and the Germany's economic rise after 1990 (Allison,2017:271-273,281-286). From the other 12 cases when the war was not avoided, only two of them can be explained by the Thucydides Trap theory: the start of the First World War (WW1) when the German Empire attacked Russia, because the German's command was afraid by the rising power of the Russian army and at the start of the WW2, when Japan attacked the US because the Americans started an embargo against the Japanese economy (Allison 2017:275-276,279-281). In the recent history, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, can be seen like a case of the Thucydides Trap, because Russia saw Ukraine's internal reformers for integration into NATO and the European Union (EU) as a threat to its regional status quo. In this case, Russia started a war, like Sparta did in the past, only to enforce its military and political power in the region and to stop any attempts from the other countries from its sphere of influence, especially Belarus, to make the same political changes in the future.

The second idea launched by Graham Allison in his book is the comparison between the South China Sea and the Caribbean Sea. The Caribbean Sea was for the US the most important area to expand its influence in order to impose the Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere. Because the Caribbean Sea is very close to the US borders, this area has a strategic influence on the US's defence system, like it happened during the Cold War when the USSR managed to install nuclear missiles on the Cuba's territory. Also, in order to become the regional hegemon, the US had to secure the Caribbean Sea and blocked the other powers to intervene in the regional affairs. Because of this, the US started a war against Spain in 1898 and obtained the control of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. The second phase was to build the Panama Canal and expelled the United Kingdom and Germany from involving in the Central and the South America's affairs. In the same period the US navy started to raise from no battleship in 1890 up to 25 ships in 1905. (Allison,2017:110-111, 152-153). On the other hand, China is interested to transform the South China Sea into a South China Lake, according to Graham Allison. In order to do this, China is using the nine-dash line, a geopolitical concept launched at the end of the WW2 by the Republic of China, to make the South

China Sea part of its territory. But this situation is a bit complicated because the region is disputed by so many regional powers, including Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and even Taiwan. But China continues to its purpose and sized the control of the Paracel Islands from Vietnam in 1974, the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012 and started to create military and civil outpost in the region. The Beijing's idea is to extend the Chinese exclusive economic zone in the region and to militarize it in order to exclude the US military presence (Allison,2017:129-130).

Furthermore, the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, has the ambition to transform China into a superpower using a concept called- the Chinese Dream (Allison,2017:113). According to this concept China can become until 2021, one of the most develop countries and in 2049 will pursuit to become one of the superpowers of the international system (Jinping,2014:56-58). Besides, China is thinking itself like the centre of the regional power system and is not interested to conquer other territories, but rather to dominate the region, by a hierarchical power system and economic relations (Allison, 2017:115-116). Besides, Graham Allison is a bit optimistic about the project launched by China in 2013, One Belt One Road called today Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) regarding the capacity of China to extend its influence in the Central and the South Asia region in order to rise its international power (Allison, 2017:128). BRI is very contested because in some countries from Africa and Europe the projects built by China had generated debt traps, ecological issues and the local labore couldn't benefit from the investment because the Chinse companies brought their own labour force from China (Fodbei,2019:155-163; Schmitz,2021). On the other hand, BRI it is a bit debatable at the moment, because in 2021 China launched another international program called- Global Development Initiative (GDI) with the roll to become more involved in projects which are helping the countries under development. Compared to the BRI, this new international program includes not only infrastructure projects but also programs in order to help the population of that country (Jinping,2023:3-4). But even though the Chinese leadership announced that they are not going to renounce to BRI, this situation showed that China had to change its international strategy due to its internal economic issues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs,2022; Wu,2023).

The third idea launched by Graham Allison is about the Chinese economy, which has the ability to surpass the US economy in the future. In order to sustain this argument, Graham Allison compared the power purchasing power parity (PPP) for both countries and finds out that China already surpassed the US in 2015 and the country's economy will be four times bigger than the US economy in the next one or two decades, if the Chinese productivity will be equal to the US's productivity (Allisson,2017:7). But, in Thomas Christensen's opinion this index is not very accurate, because it doesn't show how much money the people are willing to spend in order to support the military and the foreign policy of China. Because of this, Christensen propose another index, GDP/capita, which shows how much money are attribute to each person from the country's GDP. Also, in this case it is a bit difficult to compare both countries because the Chinese population is bigger than the US and any economic sanctions can affect more China than the US (Christensen,2015: 60). Furthermore, the predictions regarding the Chinese economic growth became not so optimists like they were in 2015, because the Covid-19 pandemics managed to slow down the economic growth and the internal deficits, the aging working forces made difficult to obtain a big economic rate in the nearest future (The Economist,2023; Xie,2022). On the other hand, Graham Allison considers that an economic war between the US and China can be a trigger for a

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conventional war between them (Alisson 2017, 180-183). But this scenario it is not likely to happen mostly because: the Chinese and the US economies are very well connected, China being the first owner of the US bounds and an economic attack to the US dollar can have a spin effect on the Chinese deposits in the US dollars (Christensen, 2015: 62-63). But, the capacity of China to decouple from the US dollar can rise in the future if the new currency which is going to be built by Brazil Russia India China and South Africa (BRICS) can be seen like a very good alternative to the US dollar. The new currency will be launched in the Autumn of 2023, but it will take a period until it will be considered an equal to the US dollar or even to Euro (Sullivan,2023).

The US-China Competition and the Thucydides Trap

Analyzed from the Thucydides Trap, the competition between the US and China is far different than the war between Sparta and Athens. First of all, both the US and China are not in a bipolarized position, because they compete in some domains, but they continue to make trade between them. Second, China didn't form regional alliances like the two city states or the European powers did before the World War 1 (WW1), in order to bipolarize the regional system. On the other hand, the US managed to create regional alliances during the Cold War with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore and Australia and two international alliances during the modern times: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and Australia-United Kingdom- United States (AUKUS), in order to balance China in the East Asia. These alliances are part of very known US's foreign policy of containment during the Cold War, but also to the Pivot to Asia, the last US's foreign policy for Asia, launched by the former Obama Administration, in order to change the US's foreign policy from the Middle East to the East Asia (Clinton, 2011: 58-60). Also, China has a military alliance with North Korea, a security partnership with Pakistan and regional allies without any military treaty signed with: Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia (Christensen, 2020:24; Mearsheimer, 2014:537). Furthermore, the regional system in the East Asia looks more like an unbalanced multipolar system, where China is the potential hegemon and the other powers are trying to form a counterbalance coalition to stop its ambitions (Mearsheimer,2014:337-338,356-359). For China this distribution of power is a real disadvantaged because many countries from the region saw the Chinese military rise like a threat to their national security and because of this, they are more open to be part of an alliance or military treaty with the US rather than with China. Besides, all the treaties signed by the US in the region are defensive treaties not offensive and so the capacity of the US to start a war in the region, like Sparta did, it is very limited (Mastro,2018:35-36).

The second concept analyzed is about the conflict from the South China Sea, which reflects very well the distribution of power in the East Asia, where six countries are trying to extend or to preserve their exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The decision taken by China to build the artificial islands in the South China Sea managed to rise the tension in the region and made the US to get involved in this conflict. So, in 2020, the US didn't recognize the right of China regarding to extend its territory in the South China Sea and tried to impose an international treaty in order to support the free navigation in the region (Teixeira,2021: 4-5). The situation from the South China Sea can be seen like a trigger for a conventional war more than an economic conflict between the US and China. But, in this situation it is a high probability that the US will buck pass the responsibility of the war to the other regional actors: Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia or the Philippines, rather to get involved into a war. This strategy can give the

US enough resources to get involved in this conflict later and can use the economic sanctions, in order to make China to start peace discussions and avoid the escalation of the conflict.

Another regional conflict which can be turn into a conventional conflict between the US and China is the conflict between Taiwan and the mainland China. This conflict is the first regional conflict in which the communist state was involved, since the Proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). At the end of the Chinese Civil War, the nationalist forces retreat from the mainland to the island of Taiwan. Starting from 1950 until today, the Taiwan island is acting like a country but with a few diplomatic relations, since the PRC became part of the United Nation Security Council in 1971. Since then, there were 3 Taiwan Strait crisis and two military exercises, the last one had taken place in 2023, all of these being part of the cross-strait conflict between the mainland and Taiwan. Even though both the mainland and Taiwan were at the beginning authoritarian regimes, over time Taiwan became a democracy and one of the main important regional economies. Because Taiwan became a democracy the US is willing to support the country in the case of any military attack coming from the mainland, using the Taiwan Relation Act. According to this document the US has the ability to provide arms with defensive character to Taiwan and is considering any act like boycotts or embargoes a threat to the security of the Western Pacific area (Taiwan Relation Act, 1979-1980:1). But in case of a military attack coming from the mainland, the US will not get involved in the conflict and will probably buck pass the responsibility to Taiwan and like in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine from 2022, will probably use the economic and political sanctions against Beijing in order to stop the conflict. The sanctions put by the US and the European Union against Russia in 2022, gave China a chance to view how the country's economy can be affected if a regional conflict will turn into a war. But, comparing to the Russian economy, the Chinese economy is too big to affected and the sanctions will probably put a big pressure also on the US economy and the other regional powers. On the other hand, losing the Taiwan, will mean for the US a geopolitical lose because the island is being part of the First Island Chain which is considered to be a natural barrier against the Chinese expansion to the Pacific region (Kaplan,2015:290; Marshall, 2020: 91). Because of this, the US will be interested not to let Taiwan lose a military confrontation with the mainland China and will probably use all the regional resources, the regional alliances and the economic sanctions, to stop any Chinese invasion of the island.

On the other hand, the US-China economic competition can't be seen like a trigger for a conventional war, because the last Trade War between the two countries finished with an economic treaty design by the will of the US. The Trade War is a new form of conflict between countries, where both parts are imposing custom tariffs for different kinds of goods. This war started in 2018, when the former president Donald Trump launched the idea to protect the US economy by rising the custom tariffs for goods coming from different parts of the world. At the beginning this war was not targeting only China, but in the end became a way to impose to China different conditions like: intellectual property rights, the technological transfer and transparency regarding the renminbi (United States Trade Representative,2023). Even though the first phase of a treaty of the economic cooperation between the US and China was signed in 2020, the Trade War continues until today but on a low scale comparing to the period between 2018-2020. As we can see the US and China are trying to cooperate rather to let their internal ambitions to make the war possible. Besides, this situation can't be taken

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for granted and the relation between peace and war continues to be related to both to the internal factors, like the personal ambitions of the political leaders or economic issues and external factors, like the military capacity of China to launch a military attack in the region or the bipolarization of the East Asia, in the future.

Conclusions

The Trap of Thucydides is a good concept to define the strategic relation between the US and China in the East Asia Region. But even though there is going to be a strategic stress regarding the ascension of China, it is very unlikely that America is going to start a war against China because of this. The US-China competition it is very difficult to define like a Thucydides Trap case, mostly because even though the US is a power which is seeking to preserve the status quo and the American leaders are open to negotiate rather to start a war, like it happened during the Cold War. Compared with the Cold War, when the war between the first and the second international power was sometimes inevitable, the US and China relations are a bit different, because in some domains the two countries are cooperating, whereas on the others are in competition. Furthermore, between the two countries there is an economic relation and China is very well integrated in the international institutions. This situation makes cooperation more probable rather than an escalation into a conflict. On the other hand, it is very improbable that an economic war will degenerate into a conventional war, as it happened during the two Opium Wars in the history of China. The only problem for the two powers will be the regional conflicts, but because the US doesn't have a national border issue inside the East Asia region and all the regional treaties are defensive treaties, it is possible that Washington is going to use the buck passing strategy in order to preserved the countries resources. In this scenario, all the regional allies of the US will probably get involved in the conflict, like in the case of the Russian's invasion of the Ukraine from 2022, when the European allies started to help Ukraine alongside with the US. Besides, the probability of an US attack against China is very limited, but not excluded. As John Mearsheimer said, the US is not a hegemonic power which is interested to obtain more territories, but it is a power interested to preserve peace and the freedom of commerce (Mearsheimer,2014:170). Because of this perspective, the Thucydides Trap will not happen in the case of the US-China Competition, but a conflict between them, like the Trade War, probably can happen again in the nearest future, based on economic and political issues.

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