

Is World War Between the US and China Inevitable?

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The fast rise of China as a major power over the past few decades has led many to argue that world war between the US and China is a real possibility. Already, we have seen a [trade war](#) erupt between the two countries, with tariffs imposed in both directions. Although there was a positive development last month which potentially signals a move towards a form of détente, as the two countries signed [‘phase one’ of a trade agreement](#), this agreement is by no means comprehensive, leaving many unresolved issues that could potentially serve as points of conflict in the future.

The Thucydides Trap

The major concern that world war could erupt between the two powerhouses stems from the fact that their relationship contains a historical dynamic which often leads to war: known as the Thucydides trap. This trap refers to the ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, who wrote that one of the main causes of the Peloponnesian war, which was fought between two alliances, one led by Athens and the other by Sparta, was that the “rise of Athens and fear that this installed in Sparta made war inevitable” (Allison 2018: xiv). The dangerous situation Thucydides outlined thousands of years ago has been used to refer to the explosive dynamic when a rising power threatens a ruling power (Allison 2018: xv). The Harvard Professor, Graham Allison, has used the Thucydides trap in the context of the Sino-US relationship, as a rising China is now challenging the position of the US in many respects.

The [Thucydides’ Trap Project at Harvard](#) has analysed the last 500 years of history, and found sixteen cases when a rising power has challenged a ruling power, with war ensuing in 12 instances (Allison 2018: 41). Some notable examples of the cases that resulted in war include the rise of Napoleonic France that challenged ruling British power in the late 18th, early 19th century, and the rise of Germany in the run-up to WWI, which led to war with the ruling power Britain and its allies (Allison 2018: 42).

[Video](#)

The Anglo-American Peaceful Transition of Power

In relation to the potential outcome of the relationship between the US and China, some parallels and deeper insights may be found if we look closer at one of the four instances where war did not erupt over the last five centuries: namely, when a rising America challenged and surpassed the power of the British Empire in the late 19th, early 20th century (Allison 2018: 42). Although there were periods where tensions were high between the two countries, with one instance being the [Venezuelan dispute of 1895](#), the British gradually accepted and in some respects supported the rise of US power, with this often referred to as the Great Rapprochement. This rapprochement ultimately led to Britain and

America fighting on the same, victorious side during WWI.

Furthermore, numerous connections existed and were developed between the two countries during the peaceful transition of power, both before and after WWI. Some prominent and well-connected figures in Britain were even actively supportive of the ascent of America. The English journalist and newspaper editor, William Stead, was one for instance. In his 1901 book, [The Americanization of the World](#); The Trend of the Twentieth Century, he urges Britons to “rejoice” in the power of the US and not “resent” its rise (Stead 1901: 1-2). In the immediate aftermath of WWI, more formal, institutional connections were formed between the two nations, with the influential networks Stead belonged to playing a prominent role.

After discussions between the American and British delegations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, two parallel organizations were formed, one in London, at the heart of the British empire, and the other in New York, a major center of the new great power. The first organization was the British Institute of International Affairs, which later became the Royal Institute of International Affairs after the Institute was given a [Royal Charter](#) by King George V in 1926, with the Institute holding its inaugural meeting in 1920 (Quigley 1981: 182-183). A year later, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) was formed as the American branch of the Institute. The CFR grew out of the think tank called ‘[The Inquiry](#)’ that prepared President Woodrow Wilson for the Paris Peace Conference, with the CFR having close ties to the banking powerhouse, J.P. Morgan and Company (Quigley 1981: 190-191).

The fact that the Royal Institute of International Affairs, also referred to as Chatham House, managed to set up a parallel organization in the country that was already well on its way to dwarfing British power, is highly pertinent, given the power Chatham House represented. Many of the most powerful networks at the heart of the British Empire were responsible for the Institutes creation, either directly, or through precursor organizations that then merged to form Chatham House. Some of the influential figures that belonged to these networks included Cecil Rhodes, the diamond magnate and ardent imperialist; Reginald Balliol Brett, the trusted adviser to Queen Victoria and King George V; Alfred Milner, an influential statesman and banker, in addition to Stead himself (Quigley 1981: 3). In the years after its founding, Chatham House went on to attract many more prominent people, including the British Prime Ministers, Arthur Balfour and Ramsey MacDonald, with members of Chatham House also being key [architects](#) and supporters of the League of Nations and the United Nations (UN). Additionally, Chatham House received financial support from notable American businessmen and corporations, including the oil magnate, John D. Rockefeller, and the Ford Motor Company (Quigley 1981: 190).

It is critical to highlight that Britain and America were highly connected when the power center of the world shifted to the US, with Britain even setting up a parallel organization in the heart of the new center of power. The connections between the two countries and Britain’s acceptance of the rise of America, with some Britons even being supportive of the Americanization of the world, are arguably key reasons why war never broke out between the two powers. Therefore, in relation to whether a hot war between the US and China is inevitable, a key question emerges: how connected was America to the rise of China?

America and the Ascent of China

The answer, quite simply, is that America was deeply connected to the China’s rise. In fact, the US in many ways facilitated China’s rise on the world stage, as the US government

under Richard Nixon made the decision to bring China in from isolation, and help integrate it into an international order dominated by US power, with this power sitting within an overarching global system. Nixon made his stance on China clear even before he became US President in 1969. In a 1967 [article for Foreign Affairs](#), the publication of the CFR, Nixon argued that it should be the long-term strategy of the US to bring China out of isolation and incorporate it into the evolving international system (Nixon 1967: 121).

Four years later, in 1971, Henry Kissinger, who was serving as Nixon's National Security Adviser, [secretly visited China](#) in order to stimulate relations with the Chinese. Kissinger's meeting laid the foundations for Nixon to visit China the following year, in a historic meeting for the US President. Then, in 1973, the American billionaire and banker, David Rockefeller, visited China and had a [private meeting](#) with Zhou Enlai, the then Premier, or Prime Minister, of China. In fact, the Rockefeller family had many [connections](#) to China stretching back over a century, from selling kerosene in the country in 1863 to establishing medical institutions through the Rockefeller Foundation. David Rockefeller also brought a small team from his Chase bank on a 10-day trip of China in 1973, penning an article for the New York Times where he [praised](#) the country and the social experiment under Mao Zedong. After the trip, Chase bank, where David Rockefeller was Chairman and CEO, became the [first US bank](#) to establish a relationship with the Bank of China since the Chinese revolution in the 1940s.

Without Nixon, Kissinger and Rockefeller bringing China in from the cold, it is highly improbable that China would be anywhere near as powerful as it is today, as these moves paved the way for China's growth to explode in the subsequent decades. Furthermore, the US also aided the rise of China through the transfer of technology. In 1999 for instance, the Clinton administration [transferred missile technology to China](#) so that a communications satellite could be launched using a Chinese rocket. The technology transfer pertained to satellite fuel and explosive bolts, with these [technologies](#) potentially going to help the development of China's ballistic missile program.

Today, there are numerous connections between the US and China. In addition to the Rockefeller Foundation, many US-based foundations have major footprints in China, with the Ford Foundation working [in China](#) since opening an office there in 1988, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace operating a [global center in Beijing](#). The connections between the US and China extend to having shared membership in a plethora of global organizations, including the UN, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the G20, and the global central bank of central banks, the [Bank for International Settlements](#) (BIS).

Given the vast amount of connections between America and the rise of China, it seems reasonable to conclude that world war is not inevitable between the two powerhouses. No doubt there will be skirmishes between the two countries in the future, particularly in hot spots such as the South China Sea and potentially Africa going forward, as the two countries adapt to a new way of interacting with each other. Conflict in the cyber, psychological and economic spheres of warfare is also highly likely in the near future, as the nature of warfare itself changes. Yet the probability that a world, nuclear war will erupt is less likely than the way it is often presented, not only because nuclear weapons themselves serve as MAD deterrents, but because America and the networks of power in America were heavily involved in the rise of China, and are still deeply invested in the Asian powerhouse today.

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