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The China Fear Factor

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America vs. China: "A Clash of Civilizations"

Hillary Clinton famously said, "I don't want my grandchildren to live in a world dominated by the Chinese."

During his tenure, President Obama launched his "Pivot to Asia," moving 60% of US naval power to bases surrounding China, developing the Trans Pacific Partnership treaty specifically to economically isolate China, making Air-Sea Battle the official US doctrine explicitly to contain China militarily, and announcing boldly that his aim was to contain China's economic rise.

Not surprisingly, China reacted with alarm. The Cold War was long over, China's economic rise was a peaceful one, it had no aggressive intentions towards the US or anyone, and prior to Obama's "Pivot to Asia," relations had been stable and tension low, China argued. Such arguments from China, however, were dismissed by US leaders.

In January of 2018, the Trump administration put out a new National Defense Strategy naming China and Russia "revisionist powers" that need to be contained, and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said, "...great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security." Googling "China" and "existential threat," now produces well over six million hits.

In 2019, the Trump administration withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), thus opening the door for the US to develop intermediate range nuclear weapons to counter the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2AD) weapons systems that China uses to defend its coastline, started a trade war with China, arrested the CFO of China's largest private company, Meng Wanzhou of Huawei, began the "Space Force, a new branch of the US military, and in essence has begun a second Cold War, complete with a new missile, missile defense, and nuclear arms races. American naval power is positioned to be able to cut off China's vital trade routes in the South China Sea, China has responded by building up its own naval power and island bases there, and confrontations have ensued. The game of chicken and negotiations with North Korea goes on again, off again. Tensions over Taiwan and sanctions prepared over Hong Kong also raise the ante. American strategists talk about "A clash of civilizations," "Full Spectrum Dominance," "Winnable Nuclear Wars," and "Whole of Society" conflict. China interprets that as meaning the complete destruction of China, and prepares to defend itself. As tensions increase, an arms race in Asia of both conventional and nuclear weapons and forces accelerates. The danger of a Cold War 2 suddenly exploding into a shooting, possibly even a nuclear war, increases day by day.

How real is the risk of a nuclear war? Daniel Ellsberg of The Pentagon Papers fame is a prominent American with deep insider experience at the highest levels of the US military system. In 2017 he released a book, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*. In it he reveals that not only was he privy to the highest levels of Viet Nam war planning, but also the highest levels of nuclear war planning. He takes us from the planning rooms to the airfields from which bombers would be launched, to explain in great detail how easily things could go wrong, how numerous close calls actually occurred during Cold War 1, and how a Cold War 2 could easily end in global disaster. Nuclear is NOT "unthinkable," because there are people at the highest levels thinking about it every day, making detailed plans and counterplans, weapons at the ready at all times, and new much more complex weapons and counter-weapon systems being developed as we speak. The greater complexity increases the risk of war by miscalculation or accident; there are many more things that can go wrong. Additionally, any nuclear attack capable of defeating either China or America would also trigger nuclear winter (even if the adversary did not counter-attack), which would end humanity regardless of other nuclear impacts. Yet there is a strong bipartisan consensus for another Cold War on China.

How did we arrive at this current state of affairs?

The Fear Factor

What is the root cause driving the current “clash of civilizations?” The answer is as simple as Hillary Clinton’s original statement: “I don’t want my grandchildren to live in a world dominated by the Chinese.”

Graham Allison, a former US assistant secretary of defense and founding dean of the Harvard Kennedy School, said it succinctly in the title of his 2017 book, *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* Thucydides was a Greek historian and former general who observed the catastrophic Peloponnesian War that devastated ancient Greece two and a half thousand years ago and said, “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.” Thucydides’s Trap is the classic confrontation between an established power and a rising power that results in war. Allison studies sixteen cases in the last five hundred years in which a rising power was seen as threatening by an established power, and notes that twelve of those rivalries ended in devastating wars. He outlines in great detail exactly how our current situation with China parallels those past situations.

But is war with China inevitable? No. Twelve of sixteen cases in Graham Allison’s book ended in devastating wars. But four cases did not. Thus, the odds are steep, but peace is possible. How do we obtain peace? First, we must look our fear squarely in the face, and fully understand both ourselves and China.

Understanding China

Let’s begin with the most basic facts of Chinese history. China is a 5,000 year old civilization, one that has survived as the ancient empires of the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, colonial era Europeans, and others all came and went. How did China survive for five thousand years, while so many other powers did not?

The answer lies in the fundamental elements of Chinese thinking, the basis of which lies in China’s three main schools of traditional thought: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. All of these schools of thought teach a holistic view of the world which includes long term thinking and a balance of aspects, the “Middle Way” between extremes. Students of Tai Chi and Chinese other martial arts know of the concept of Yin and Yang, the inherent existence of opposite aspects of everything in reality: men and women, night and day, up and down, etc., and the need to balance seemingly opposing aspects so that they worked harmoniously together and complemented each other rather than clashing against each other destructively.

Historically, China considered the long view and the balance of aspects in all matters including in affairs of state and foreign affairs. Thus when China was

strong, it secured its borders and internal affairs, but did not overextend itself by world conquering campaigns such as other empires did. For example, a thousand years ago during the Song dynasty, China developed gunpowder, four hundred years before anyone else, and knew how to use it in war. China was a large nation with an advanced civilization, good natural resources, a large population, and a monopoly on gunpowder. Yet it did not engage in any attempt at world conquest, unlike the West when it developed gunpowder hundreds of years later and went on to conquer much of the world during the colonial period. Why did China not do this? Because it viewed world conquest as a gross overextension that would eventually lead to its own downfall. A thousand years later, the remains of past empires and the failure of many former colonial powers demonstrates the wisdom of the Chinese strategy.

Understanding Ourselves

Consciously or not, the United States has fallen into the vacuum left by the declining former colonial powers, and is now overextended. Furthermore, the US has fallen into the millennia old trap of believing that the only way to maintain security and prosperity is to maintain or even extend a now unsustainable status quo. But to continue doing this is to inevitably meet the same fate as all other historic empires that attempted to do so — decline and failure.

China survived for five thousand years precisely because China understood the natural limits of power and always avoided overextending itself. Modern China will do exactly what it has always done in the ancient past; secure its own borders and internal affairs, and prosper by trading with the rest of the world via the “New Silk Road,” the “Belt and Road Initiative.

During much of ancient times, the world was divided into many states of varying sizes, with multiple centers of power and no single state dominating the entire world. This is actually the natural state of the world. For any single state to dominate the entire world requires an extraordinary effort on the part of that state, which would eventually exhaust its resources and its people. This is, in fact, exactly where the United States finds itself today.

But rather than adjust our position realistically, our Washington leadership is doubling down on an unsustainable attempt to not only maintain, but even extend our dominance of the world by endless wars to overthrow governments we do not agree with, and dictate to other governments (even our allies) what they may or may not do. As we have seen in the Middle East and elsewhere, this is failing.

Why are we doing this? Some in America say that “If we don’t do it to ‘them’ first,

‘they’ will do ‘it’ to us.” In other words, some in America believe, consciously or unconsciously, in the “Zero Sum Game”: either you are the conqueror, or you are the conquered. The history of Western civilization, from the many small kingdoms of Europe in the Middle Ages fighting with each other, to the colonial period and the “great game of nations,” to the two World Wars and the Cold War, reinforce this view of the world and the so called “hard nosed realists.” Hillary Clinton’s fear of China dominating America is a classic example of this.

Understanding the Total Reality

But this was the view of all past failed empires, who rose to great power, held it for a few hundred years, and then disappeared into history. It is not the story of China, a civilization which simply maintained itself within its natural limits, did not try to dominate the world, and never perished.

China understands the limits of power, and that it has to work cooperatively with other nations — especially other powerful nations — cooperatively in order to maintain its own peace, security, and prosperity. That’s what China has always done in the ancient past, and what it will do today. That is why Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders talk about “a multi-polar world” and humanity as “a community of common destiny.” They understand that no single nation — not America or China — can dominate the world, and that either we all live together or we all die together.

America can take a page from China, rebalance ourselves and our country, pull back from endless wars, work cooperatively with the rest of the world, accept limitations on not just our but all nations’ powers, work through the United Nations and with other nations for mutual concerns and mutual benefits, and with a long term view and a balance of aspects and policies, survive far into the future not as the dominator of the world but as one of the permanent leading nations. The actual “hard nosed reality” is this: China needs us, and we need China. China knows this. The question is, do we?

Peace, long term survival, prosperity, and a continued role in world leadership are within our reach. Let us reach for it.

Suggested Reading

Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap? by Graham Allison, 2017, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston — New York

The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner. by Daniel Ellsberg,

2017, published by Bloomsbury, New York — London — Oxford — New Delhi — Sydney

China Condensed: 5000 Years of history and culture, by Dr. Ong Siew Chey, 2008, Marshall

Cavendish International, Singapore. This is a brief introduction to China's history and culture for first time readers of the subject.

A Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy: <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

Professor Kishore Mahbubani describes China's ancient history of rejecting global imperial ambitions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixa6ZIk-b6U&feature=youtu.be>

Kishore Mahbubani is a Singaporean academic and former diplomat who served as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations and held the position of President of the United Nations Security Council between January 2001 and May 2002. He later served as Dean of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

An American hedge fund manager with 34 years of experience in China details the link between China's ancient culture and its modern economic rise: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/looking-back-last-40-years-reforms-china-ray-dalio/>

"The Pivot to Asia Was Obama's Biggest Mistake," by Captain John Ford, US Army: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/01/23/commentary/world-commentary/pivot-asia-obamas-biggest-mistake/#.XopmJXJlCUk>

A large number of former high ranking US diplomats, officials, and scholars sign a statement calling for more US diplomatic engagement with China rather than confrontation, and explain why: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.fdf342a07a86