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Title of the Essay: What is the 'Thucydides trap' and can the United States and China avoid it?

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Introduction

Thucydides is an ancient Greek historian who considered the real cause of Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens (431 to 404 BC) as “the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta”(quoted in Allison,2016:27). In other words, it is the structure of a rising power vis-a-vis a dominant power that makes a war inevitable. “Thucydides Trap” then refers to “the severe structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to upend a ruling one” (ibid: 29). The analogy of Thucydides Trap has been used to warn of the potential conflict between United States (US) and China in twenty-first century.

However, implicit in Thucydides Trap is the contention that the influence of other variables on the potential conflict will be overwhelmed by the dynamics of power transition. In US-China relations, I believe that fundamental ideological differences have more significant influence than the structure of a rising power challenging a ruling power. The structure which focuses more on the material factors of relative powers does not necessarily cause the tension, it is how they think about each other causes the antagonism. This is not to say that the structure and material factors are not important, but their influences depend on the ideational factors which serve as the background against which the material factors come into play.

I apply the constructivist approach to argue that the ideational factors, their senses of self as nations, shaped by their beliefs, culture and history have more significant influence on US-China relations. The Trap is in place because they see each other as rivals and the reason of their rivalry is their ideological differences; the Trap can be avoided only if China allows its sense of self as a nation to change, not being frozen in humiliation.

Conceptual session

For Thucydides, the real cause of the Peloponnesian War is the instability of the relative power transition, not their different political systems or leaders' intentions. A.F.K. Organski in his World Politics (1958) systematically linked this process of power transition to war and claimed that the

probability of war increases as the power gap narrows and as the challenger power's dissatisfaction grows. Power-transition theories "emphasize 'power parity' and 'dissatisfaction with the status quo' as crucial elements contributing to the risk of system transforming war" (Zhu,2006:13). According to power-transition theory, if China's dissatisfaction level is high, when China reaches 80% of US's capabilities, a violent power transition will be expected. In this sense, the Trap between US-China is in place but not yet triggered so long as China's capabilities have not reached the threshold and the dissatisfaction level is manageable.

Offensive realism goes further to claim that war will occur no matter what, because the structure of the international system encourages states to pursue hegemony. "The ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system..." (Mearsheimer, 2014). The rising China "will attempt to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. The United States,... will prevent China from achieving regional hegemony... The result will be an intense security competition with considerable potential for war"(ibid). For them, the structure per se has the decisive power to contain the states' behavior and they pay little attention to individuals or domestic political considerations such as ideology or culture. "It does not matter whether the states as democratic or autocratic, what matters is how much relative power the state possesses" (Measheimer, 2001:10). So they would answer that US and China cannot avoid such a trap, war is inevitable. However, not all IR theorists are so pessimistic, they believe that international institutions can change the result. As neoliberal institutionalist Robert Keohane pointed out, "international institutions could dampen, if not entirely displace, the effects of power and interest"(Keohane,1984:24). They believe that rules and norms created by the international regime will reduce the rising power's urge to overturn the ruling system. For neoliberal institutionalists, China can be socialized into the present order, in other words, US and China can avoid the Trap.

Such theorists all assume the international structure as material-based, constraining the states'

behaviors; they think states are rational actors and treat states' identities and interests as given.

These prerequisites are not accepted by social constructivists who consider the international system as ideas-based and socially constructed. States cannot separate themselves from the international structure, within which they act so states' identities and interests are not given, but are socially constructed on domestic and international levels. In the constructivist view, ideational factors including norms, identities and culture not only shape but are shaped by the international system and interstate interaction.

Constructivists see the international system as a distribution of ideas because they have an idealist ontology. The concern of constructivists is "what happens before the neoutilitarian [neorealists and neoliberals] model kicks in...civilizational constructs, cultural factors state identities,... together with how they shape states' interests and patterns of international outcomes" (Ruggie,1988:867). The ideational factors do not function causally in the same way as material power for realists, and "as a result, the efficacy of such ideational factors is easily underestimated. The role of aspirations is one instance, the impact of legitimacy is another, and the power of rights a third... Suffice it to say that these factors fall into the category of reasons for actions, which are not the same as causes of actions"(ibid:869) However, it does not mean that material factor is not important, it still matters "but how it matters depends on whether the poles are friends or enemies, which is a function of shared ideas...it does not mean that power and interest are unimportant, but rather that their meaning and effects depend on actors' ideas"(Wendt,1999:24).

Power does not explain the choice of competitors, it is the identity of a state which defines where its threats lie and such threats reveal themselves through mutual interaction. In their view, intentionality creates meaning, so-called Thucydides Trap does not exist itself; if state actors believe that such a Trap exists then a confrontation is eventually prepared. The way they think influences the way they behave, the Trap is then a self-fulfilled prophecy.

Case Study

Historical analogies such as Thucydides Trap are valuable for policy making, but they can at the same time mislead and cause mistakes if they are misapplied.

The sense of self as a nation not only shapes China's foreign policies, but also gives meaning of others' policies toward China. Chinese identity manipulated by its political elites shapes the ways in which Chinese people processed contemporary experiences. As Christopher Coker observed, "the problem with the Chinese Communist Party's rendering of the past is that it encourages the Chinese people to remain frozen in a time of humiliation which, though certainly real was largely the result of their own internal weakness..."(Coker, 2017:64).

To understand why Chinese political elites are obsessed with the narratives of "century of humiliation" which frame the way China interacts with the West, we have to seek the answer from the relational-hierarchic worldview of Chinese. This relational concept is analyzed by the developmental psychologist Bruce Hood by comparing how Westerners and Asians define 'self'. "When westerners are asked to define 'self' they will invoke a purely personal perspective such as 'I am tall', whereas Asians tend to say 'I am taller than my sister'(Hood, 2011, quoted in Coker, *ibid*:82). Humiliation does not exist alone, it must be understood in a relational context. Chinese people have always had conflictual senses of self, victorious and victimized ones; these identities are relational. Victors do not exist without the defeated, victims do not exist without the persecutors.

"The heroic or victor national narrative first served the requirements of Communist revolutionaries... and later served the national-building goals... That proud narrative, however,...replaced by one that represents China as a victim of aggression by the world's other great powers... great emphasis is placed on... "century of national humiliation", which runs from the First Opium War (1839-42) until the end of World War II in 1945..."(Gries, quoted in Mearsheimer, 2014:37).

These conflicting identities embody on one ancient Chinese figure, "King Goujian (496-465 BC)", whose story is memorized by every Chinese person. The American historian, Paul Cohen noticed the significance of "King Goujian" story while studying Chinese responses to national defeat and humiliation.¹

It must be pointed out that the King Goujian “was encouraged not to berate himself or view his predicament as the result of personal failings; rather, he should endure humiliation for the sake of the kingdom’s survival”(Cohan,2009:3). The story provides the reason of these repeating narratives of a ‘century of national humiliation’, because the story helps to shift the attention of personal failures, instead, focusing on the humiliation for future revenge. The humiliation in the past promises victory in the future; the more China emphasizes its humiliation in the past, the more assertive and aggressive China will become. As Edward Luttwak describes “China feels victimized and is becoming more assertive” (quoted in Coker, 2017:130).

Chinese president, Xi Jinping, revealed his “Chinese Dream” when he took office in 2012, which is considered as an aspiration to unite an increasingly diverse nation and being set as the hallmark of his administration. Chinese Dream means “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” which represents its victorious identity. But victorious narratives are inseparable with the historical defeated humiliation. Xi’s most recent speech at a special convention on Jan. 2nd 2019 to mark the 40th anniversary of announcing “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan” began by reminding the ‘century of humiliation’ then followed by the aggressiveness. In the speech, Xi attributed the Cross-Straits division not only to the civil war but also to the intervention of foreign forces. When Xi claimed that PRC will “make no promise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means for reunification”, the targeted audience is not only Taiwan, but also the US, which China considers the most responsible for today’s cross-strait division. Goujian’s story explains China’s “pathological need” to overtake the West.²

China’s victimized sense of self has kept its profile low, whereas victorious sense now makes Chinese more assertive. China’s diplomatic strategy has changed accordingly from ‘keeping a low profile’ which it held for more than 20 years, to ‘striving for achievement’. “All these aggressive

¹Goujian, King of Yue, was defeated by King of Wu, captured to be a prisoner-slave in Wu. During his slavery, Goujian tried to convince Wu King that he had no will to revenge, he even tasted Wu King’s urine and excrement for prognostic purposes. King Wu eventually believed Goujian and released him. After returning to Yue, Goujian resumed his noble status but chose to live in self-imposed hardship, sleeping on brushwood, tasting the gallbladder to remember his humiliation. After more than 10 years in this manner, Goujian defeated Wu King and finally took revenge for his humiliation(Cohan,2009).

² It is a remark from a Chinese dissident, Liu Xiaobo (quoted in Coker, 2017:6).

diplomatic moves undoubtedly reflect the rise of China's international status and the resultant changes in the country's strategic mentality" (Yang, 2018:207). The former leaders of claimant states in the disputed South China Sea, Philippines and Malaysia, have described China's aggressiveness:

"Benigno Aquino compared China with Hitler's Germany as "a rising power intimidating smaller states...", Najib Razak, in a subtle dig at China, said that "Imagine a world where institutions, rules and norms are ignored... in which country with large economies.. forcing the rest to accept the outcome. This would be a world as Thucydides described where the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Lam, 2016:43).

Instead of explaining China's aggressiveness with its material capabilities as realists will do, Alastair Johnston ascribed Chinese realpolitik behaviors to its realpolitik cultural and claimed that it is the realpolitik culture led to China's warlike behaviors during Maoist China (Johnston,1996:217). But explaining China's tendency of resorting to force, with its war-prone strategic culture can not shed light on the nuance of its behaviors.

China frequently expresses enthusiasm for introducing 'harmony' into international political order. However, as John K. Fairbank explained "in the Confucian social system within China, order or harmony derived from hierarchy. The fundamental duty of states, as well as individuals was Confucius's commandment: 'Know thy place'"(quoted in Allison, 2017:111). Harmony does not necessarily bring peace, peace can exist only if everyone stays in his 'ought-be' place, if this order is challenged, then there will be justified necessities to resume the order. Chinese political elites continuously and purposely re-construct Chinese identities through the narratives of the 'century of humiliation' and the 'Chinese Dream' in the hope of establishing the unshakable status of the party through Chinese hierarchical ideation. This relational-hierarchic worldview partly explains the reason of Chinese resentment toward Japan, which is far higher than toward the West. The humiliation is the same, but Japan also disrespected its 'ought-be' place which causes Chinese resentment even more. Japan had been one of the tributaries to China in the past, Japan's invasion not only meant humiliation to China but also mean its disrespect for Chinese hierarchic order.

The sense as a nation should be able to change through time, add or erase different values according to its unique experiences. However, the Chinese Communist Party controls the cultural narratives and thus restrains the abundance of collective memory, making its national identity rigid and frozen in the past. With their identities fixed on victor and victim mentality, Chinese will never trust the West. As Kevin Rudd observed, Chinese leaders are convinced that “US has not, and never will, accept the fundamental political legitimacy of the Chinese administration because it is not a liberal democracy”(Allison, 2016:151).

Contrary to Chinese hierarchical worldview which considers nations and states are more important than individuals, American values the inborn rights of individuals and political democratic spirits. Its founding ‘Declaration of Independence’ proclaims that “all men are created equal” and that they are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights which include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and that these rights are not matters of opinion but rather self-evident truths(Allison, 2016:141). As a nation of immigrants, America can only unite its people by its values and beliefs. That essence of Americanness is the shared beliefs and values by its people. These values represented in the political life, is the democracy which Alexis de Tocqueville considered “as a political faith for US “not only in the value of democracy itself but also in the greater American project (quoted in Coker, 2017:53). For the same reason, Huntington called the United States “a missionary nation,” driven by the belief that human rights and democracy are universal aspirations, democratic rights will benefit anyone, anywhere in this world (Allison, 2016:144).

America itself was born of ideas so America can ‘reinvent itself’, the term Bill Clinton, the formal president of US, evoked in his first inaugural address. The ideas can be changed or be given of meaning or importance. When George W. Bush spoke “the non-negotiable demands of human dignity” in his 2002 address, he was shaping the significance of human dignity in American beliefs because history does not provide any empirical or scientific evidence of the fact that human dignity is important. “Dignity is also at the heart of Western humanism insofar as it is human

beings who insist on giving others dignity and the freedom which is a condition of being able to achieve it. By implication, Westerns consider that the source of value is to be located in their humanity”(Coker, 2017:55). American value represented in US policy is the notion of a ‘higher liberalism’, which would balance a commitment to liberal principles, with what John Ikenberry calls an ‘appropriate regard’ for the ‘historically rooted interests and aspirations of other great powers””(quoted in Coker,ibid:47). Thus the core narratives of American identity are based on the values of liberty, independence and democracy. The collective sense of self in United States is

“civic rather than ethnic, and combines with a multicultural identity...America’s ideology and commitment to individual freedom does have considerable worldwide appeal. And alongside this inclusive ideology is the fact that America’s multiculturalism allows many parts of the world to see themselves in some sense as represented in America. The American melting pot both homogenizes its citizens into Americanness, while allowing them to keep hyphenated identities as Mexican-, Chinese-... and many other national types of American” (Buzan and Cox,2013:124)

While American political elites instill these humanity based values into its national narratives, Chinese leaders are emphasizing nation rejuvenation caused by humiliation, substituting party loyalty for cultural values. In the area of identity and ideology, therefore, the US and China could not be more different. These ideational differences also reflect in their ways of handling their disparities. As G.E.R. Loyd argues that “whereas the Greek tradition tended to focus on fundamental questions and was prepared to countenance extreme and radical solutions, Chinese thought tended to prioritize practicalities and the ways in which practical measures could best be put to use...Confrontation, in other words, is the American default mode, its unique cultural style”(Coker, 2017:112-3). Contrary to American’s straight-forward confrontation, Chinese focus more on the resumption of hierarchy of the its order, thus “preservation of differences, rather than t he cultivation of homogeneity along some particular ideological line” will be the preferable way(Buzan and Cox,2013:121).

International actors are “taking identities in relations to others, casting them into corresponding counter-identities, and playing out the result” (Wendt, 1999:21). The US identity and values not

only shape its policies but also serve as lens of viewing China and vice versa. US has not always considered China as an enemy, it has viewed China in several different ways since the late 1980s, from ‘responsible stakeholder’, ‘strategic partner’ to ‘strategic competitor’. The Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, challenged American values and changed its view of China. “The image of an opening China of the 1980s was replaced overnight by an image of a defiant China ruled by dictators...All the major differences between the two countries suddenly resurfaced.”(Zhu, 2006:90). However, Clinton’s speech in 2000 about supporting China joining WTO showed that US still had hope about China’s change, and this hope was based on US’s beliefs, “...everything I have learned about China...and everything I have learned about human nature...convinces me that we have a far greater chance of having a positive influence on China’s actions if we welcome China into the world community instead of shutting it out”. But when the Bush administration first came to power in 2001 it had identified China as one of the main threats to the US (Coker, 2017:100). Afterwards, China became a partner of US in the war on terror after 9/11. Now the current Trump administration lists China as a “revisionist power” and a “strategic competitor”. Nevertheless, China have always remained its antagonism toward US. The US, bearing the distrust rooted in fundamental contrasts, would not feel comfortable to consider China as a friend. The fundamental ideational contrasts make US and China view each other as rivals.

Although “differences do not necessarily mean conflict, and conflict does not necessarily mean violence...Over the centuries, however, differences among civilizations have generated the most prolonged and the most violent conflicts”(Huntington, quoted in Allison, 2016:137). Policies of one country will always be given meaning by counter-states, through the lens of their norm, identity and culture. Benevolent policies or the intention of one country might be viewed as unjust and malignant by its counterpart. “What we ultimately believe on the basis of empirical observation-what we believe we observe-depends on our beliefs and assumptions about the world...we are often misled by what we expect to see” (Coker, 2017:137).

Differences on the core values of countries may generate conflicts and similarity of the same

ideology may bring peace. What made Britain peacefully recognize the United States' great power status in 1895 was the fact "that they were both heirs to a liberal tradition that emphasized reason and an empirically verifiable view of life...In short, Britain's appeasement of the United States was normative. It had little to do with the balance of power and everything to do with intrinsic beliefs" (ibid:95-96). The war between Britain and Germany in 1914 was also rooted in their ideology contrary, the Germans believed that a nation derived its values from the membership of a group, thus emphasizing primary-group loyalty to the exclusion of everything else while British and French believed unalienable rights of the individual.

" At the root of this conflict was an ideological divergence between Germany and the other European powers,...the decision itself to enter the First World War was ultimately made due to the British fear of what a German-imposed peace would involve,... that no longer adhered to the 'liberal' rules of the European..." (ibid:41)

Conclusion

International relations are not static; the dynamic relations among different actors at different levels may change the process and the outcome. The constructivist approach explains the influence of ideas but struggles to anticipate directions of change, as it is not possible to predict the nature or transmission of ideas, whereas a rationalist could predict. I argue that the fundamental differences of senses of self make US and China have difficulties to consider each other benevolent, but I can not illustrate how their relative capabilities come into play under this ideological-confrontation framework, that would be the argument for realists and liberals. I can only claim that with the nuclear deterrence in mind, US and China will avoid the full-scale war but limited and various types of confrontations will remain which are happening already.

However, the ideology of a country is not impermeable or not susceptible to change, "...the identity of the same state can change and pull its interests alone... Germany and Japan today differ significantly from their pre-World War II predecessors. Antimilitarism, has become

integral to their sense of self as nations and is embedded in domestic norms and institutions”

(Ruggie, 1988:863)

Sino-American competition is inevitable since both identified each other as the major rival. But conflict itself is not unavoidable, if they both make efforts on reconstruction their ideational factors inward and outward. The existence of an underlying cause of war between US and China does not mean war will always be the result, not to mention this cause is originated by their

ideations. However, if Chinese political elites keep shaping its identity with hollow nationalism of which only value is loyalty to CCP, the Chinese nationalism may very well spiral out of its political control.

As long as US and China continuously view each other as rivals, the Thucydides Trap was set by themselves, it is not because of the rising-ruling power structure or power transition process, it is because the antagonism rooted in their ideas shaping their behaviors to each other. They can avoid the Trap or the conflict only when they understand how their senses as self as a nation shape their antagonism which lead to the on-going confrontations.

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