

Sino-American Competition and Its Implications for East Asia

Steve Chan*

Relations between China and the United States are strained, and current signs indicate that this relationship between the world's two largest economies may suffer further deterioration in the future. This essay considers the ongoing power transition between these countries but in a broader context where other conditions also contribute to elevating the danger of a direct conflict. Taiwan is the most likely trigger for this possible conflict, one that is fundamentally driven by the state of Sino-American relations. I also offer some additional remarks about the Korean Peninsula. We are entering a period when the tacit grand bargain that has heretofore undergirded relations between the East Asian countries and the U.S. seems to be unravelling. They are in the process of seeking a new arrangement in a bifurcated region characterized by China as the ascendant economic power and the U.S. as the preeminent military power.

Keywords: Sino-American relations, Covid pandemic, power transition, crisis precipitant, unravelling grand bargain

* Steve Chan is College Professor of Distinction at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where he teaches political science. He can be reached at steve.chan@colorado.edu.

I . Introduction

Amicable Sino-American relations hold the key to a stable East Asia. Although relations among other countries in the region obviously have their own unique dynamics and origin, they are disproportionately affected by and even sometimes predicated on the state of relationship between Beijing and Washington. This relationship has come under increasing strain. The fundamental driver for this changing relationship is the ongoing power shift between the two countries although, as I will explain below, not necessarily in the way that power-transition theory has presented it. Although the U.S. still holds preponderant military power and has alliance relationships with several key states, China has become the most important economic partner for many countries in the region. This bifurcation of military and economic power augurs major changes for East Asia.

This essay has four parts. I first turn to a brief review highlighting some recent events during the final days of the Trump administration and the early days of the Biden administration. I then turn to a discussion of the implications of these developments in terms of international relations theories about conditions that tend to threaten peace and stability, especially those conditions that can elevate the danger of war during a power-transition process. With this general context in mind, I focus my attention next on regional dynamics in East Asia. Specifically, I ask what implications do deteriorating Sino-American relations have for two historical hot spots in China's neighborhood, namely, the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula. These locales present the most likely fuses or triggers for China and the U.S. to get into a military confrontation. In the concluding section, I present the idea of a grand bargain that has until recently tied East Asia's export-based economies to the U.S. This grand bargain, however, is now facing challenges and is in danger of becoming obsolescent. Ongoing events in this region therefore suggest the search for a new order and arrangement by the pertinent countries as they seek to balance between Beijing's rising economic power and Washington's continuing military power.

II. Sino–American Relations in Serious Deterioration

For those who are old enough to remember President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, those days of Sino-American rapprochement are clearly behind us. Arguably, relations between Beijing and Washington were more cordial, even cooperative, during the Nixon administration and the Ford and Carter administrations that followed. The two countries were practically strategic allies in their joint effort to oppose the USSR. China's human rights record, its authoritarian regime, and its communist ideology did not stand in the way of this cooperation. Therefore, current U.S. allegations of Beijing's violations of human rights and criticisms of its authoritarian government reflect the symptoms of deteriorating relations rather than pointing to the basic cause of this deterioration. The major difference between then and now is that China has become much stronger today. In approximately the five decades following Nixon's historic visit to Beijing, it has managed to make significant progress in improving its international stature. Although China is still significantly behind the U.S. in many manifestations of national power,¹ it has managed to close considerably the power gap that used to separate these two countries.

Many people on both sides of the Pacific Ocean see this development

1 See, for example, Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015/2016): 7-53; Michael Beckley, "China Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2011/2012): 41-78; Steve Chan, "The World in Which China Will Have to Operate in the Foreseeable Future: The Persistence of U.S. Structural Power," paper presented at the Workshop on China's Influence, University of Hong Kong, December 2021; Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1, (Summer 2019): 42-79; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The End of MAD: The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 7-44; Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemon," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 5-46; and Sean Starrs, "American Economic Power Hasn't Declined—It Globalized! Summoning the Data and Taking Globalization Seriously," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (December 2013): 817-830.

to be the main reason behind the recent escalation of tension and competition between China and the U.S. Chinese observers often openly profess their suspicion that this deterioration in bilateral relationship stems from more determined U.S. efforts to block their country's ascent, while there is a seeming consensus among American opinion leaders that a policy to engage China has failed and that Washington needs to get tougher on China's increasing assertiveness. Recent opinion research shows that Americans have come to hold an overwhelmingly negative image of China,² and although no comparable survey data are available for China, one suspects that this image is reciprocated by the Chinese. If so, a mirror image of mutual hostility and reciprocal mistrust has taken hold. Such mass opinion represents a social fact, one that officials and politicians need to recognize and respond to if they wish their policies to be supported by their domestic constituents or if they wish to retain their political position.

We can discern the beginning of these countries' deteriorating relations from at least 2018 when Donald Trump started to escalate the U.S. trade dispute with China, complaining that Beijing's commercial policies have hurt Americans' jobs and income. He even used the metaphor of rape to describe Beijing's mercantilism. In the ensuing rounds of reciprocal tariff escalation, the U.S. raised its taxes on Chinese imports to an average of 19%. In addition to these taxes, Washington started a campaign to deny market and technology access to China's telecommunications companies, especially Huawei. It also lobbied other countries to boycott this Chinese company in building their domestic 5G infrastructure. Canada has detained the daughter of this company's founder, Meng Wanzhou, now for over two years at behest of the U.S. to extradite her for allegedly violating Washington's embargo of Iran. This incident has especially roiled China's relations with both Canada and the U.S., with Beijing complaining that it represents a blatant effort by Washington to extend the extraterritorial jurisdiction of its domestic law.

2 Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historical Highs in Many Countries," Pew Research Center: Global Attitudes & Trends, October 6, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

Although Joe Biden has argued during his election campaign that Trump's tariffs on Chinese goods have in fact hurt Americans, he has not rescinded them in contrast to his decision to reverse Trump's withdrawal from the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement. Biden has also not changed his predecessor's policies to start a technological blockade against Chinese internet companies. In these respects, his policies have shown more continuity than break from the previous administration.

Tension between Beijing and Washington became further exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic, when Trump and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo both suggested publicly that this virus had originated from a Chinese laboratory in Wuhan. In his interview with ABC News on May 3, 2020, Pompeo stated that there was "enormous evidence" to support his allegation although he declined to offer any details. His allegation followed a similar claim by Trump on April 30 that he had "a high degree of confidence" that the virus had come from a Chinese laboratory,³ although he too refused to give any detail to support his assertion.

These claims contradicted the views of most scientists that the virus was likely to have originated from bats. Dr. Anthony Fauci, a leading U.S. expert of infectious diseases, said: "If you look at the evolution of the virus in bats and what's out there now, (the scientific evidence) is very, very strongly leaning toward this could not have been artificially or deliberately manipulated."⁴ The same news source noted that Pompeo and Trump's statements contradicted their own Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which had announced on April 30 that the "Intelligence Community also concurs with wide consensus among scientists that the Covid-19 virus was not man-made or genetically modified." When the World Health Organization issued its initial report on the origin of the virus in late March 2021, stating that the Wuhan laboratory was the least likely possibility, the U.S. and thirteen other countries

3 Nectar Gan, "China Pushes Back on US Claims That Coronavirus Originated from Wuhan Lab," CNN, May 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/04/asia/china-us-coronavirus-spat-intl-hnk/index.html>.

4 Ibid.

demanded additional investigation and transparency from Beijing.⁵ In May 2021, Joe Biden ordered the U.S. intelligence community to undertake a thorough investigation about the origin of the virus and to report back to him in ninety days.

In reacting to the U.S. and Western criticisms of its handling of the pandemic, Beijing suspected that this was another attempt to smear its reputation and even to arouse popular antagonism against it. Chinese pundits concur with the view that inside the Trump administration "there is an appetite to use various tools, including sanctions, canceling U.S. debt obligations and drawing up new trade policies, to make clear to China, and to everyone else, where they feel the responsibility lies."⁶ This source remarks that "While there are serious questions about China's transparency, the Trump administration has escalated its effort to blame China for the global spread of the virus as criticism of its own handling of the pandemic has increased." This view seemed to receive additional support when Trump's reelection campaign stressed his anti-China stance in the apparent belief that it would contribute to his popularity.

China's management of the virus outbreak encountered serious criticisms abroad. It had deliberately understated the severity of the contagion during its early phase and had tried to silence those who had wanted to warn the government and the public about its deadly consequences. Reacting to foreign criticisms, Beijing launched a public relations campaign. Some Chinese pundits even insinuated that the virus was introduced to China by American athletes who participated in the Wuhan Military World Games in 2019. An editorial in the *Global Times* responded harshly to Pompeo, claiming that he "had stunned the world with groundless accusations."⁷ Chinese media figures bristled at

5 Jacqueline Howard, "Coronavirus Likely Spread to People from an Animal—But Needs More Study, New WHO Report Says," CNN, March 30, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/30/health/who-coronavirus-origin-report/index.html>.

6 Geneva Sands, Kylie Atwood, Stephen Collinson, and Kevin Bohn, "US Government Report Assesses China Intentionally Concealed Severity of Coronavirus," CNN, May 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/03/politics/mike-pompeo-china-coronavirus-supplies/index.html>.

Steve Bannon's suggestion that China should be held liable for financial damages caused by the pandemic,⁸ and questioned whether Washington would be willing to apply the same logic to itself because the 2008 Great Recession had originated from its financial mismanagement, one that was, however, caused by human error rather than nature.

More recently, Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken concurred publicly with his predecessor Pompeo in describing Beijing's treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang as "genocidal" and their confinement in "concentration camps."⁹ This strong statement of disapproval was accompanied by more symbolic sanctions against Chinese officials suspected of complicity in these policies as well as in suppressing demonstrators in Hong Kong. These U.S. actions were joined by Australians, Canadians, and Europeans, followed as expected by retaliatory Chinese sanctions against these countries' individuals and entities.

Blinken also continued to accuse China of having "misled the world" about the pandemic, although he was evasive about what punitive actions would be warranted.¹⁰ Acrimonious exchanges appeared to reach a new peak when the top diplomats from the two countries met in Alaska in March 2021, when he pressed the Chinese delegation on "violations of rule-based order" and when the head of the Chinese delegation, Yang Jiechi, responded by asking in effect whose rules Blinken had in mind, stating that the U.S. "does not have the qualification to say that it wants to speak to China from a position

7 Gan, op. cit.

8 Kevin Stankiewicz, "They Owe Trillions"—Steve Bannon Says China Must Be Held Accountable for Coronavirus Spread," CNBC, April 30, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/30/steve-bannon-china-must-be-held-accountable-for-coronavirus-spread.html>.

9 Bill Bostock, "Secretary of State Antony Blinken Says He Stands by Mike Pompeo's Designation that China Committed Genocide against the Uighurs," *Yahoo!News*, January 28, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/secretary-state-antony-blinken-says-110049095.html>.

10 Eileen AJ Connelly, "Blinken Dodges Question on Punishing China for COVID-19 Pandemic," *New York Post*, March 28, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/03/28/blinken-dodges-on-punishing-china-for-covid-19-pandemic/>.

of strength."¹¹ Specifically, Yang argued that China would only follow "the United Nations-centered international system and the international order underpinned by international law, not what is advocated by a small number of countries of the so-called 'rules-based' international order."¹²

In a speech given at the U.S. State Department in the early days of his administration, Biden said that the U.S. would "confront China's economic abuses; counter its aggressive, coercive action; push back on China's attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance."¹³ These words as well as the other instances mentioned above suggest that Washington's China policy is unlikely to change significantly in the foreseeable future. It will continue Trump's confrontational approach although Biden is more likely to adopt a multilateral approach to gain support from allies in a joint effort to deal with Beijing. Chinese leaders might have at one time hoped for a reset of their relations with the U.S. after a new Biden administration succeeded Trump's, but they have now come to accept a more protracted period for these relations to be characterized by contention and competition.

III. Power Transition and the Broader Context

Various episodes recounted in the last section point to the same conclusion that Sino-American relations have entered a more tense period. This development has been anticipated by many scholars of international relations. Some of these scholars have been warning of a looming conflict between these two countries, focusing especially on the phenomenon of power transition when a rising latecomer catches up to an established, ruling state. Graham Allison has asked whether the U.S. and China can avoid "Thucydides's Trap."¹⁴

11 Rising Power Initiative, "RPI Policy Alert: Rising Powers React to Contentious U.S.-China Relations: A Roundup," George Washington University, March 2021, <https://www.risingpowersinitiative.org/publication/rising-powers-react-to-contentious-u-s-china-relations-a-roundup/>.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*

According to Thucydides, the rise of Athens and the consequent fear felt by Sparta had made the Peloponnesian War all but inevitable. Predating Allison, other scholars have published similar views.¹⁵ A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler's formulation has become widely known as the power-transition theory.¹⁶ It claims that the danger of a systemic war is the greatest when a revisionist upstart reaches power parity with or even overtakes an existing hegemon.

The process of power transition, however, clearly cannot by itself completely explain the phenomenon of international conflict, even though it can constitute an important part of this explanation. Surely countries can get into a fight in the absence of a power transition such as when China and the U.S. fought in Korea. Japan had also attacked Pearl Harbor even though it was in 1941 still eight or nine times weaker than the U.S. Moreover, there have been many previous occasions of power transition that ended peacefully. In the recent past, Japan has overtaken Germany and Russia/the USSR and China has overtaken Japan without war breaking out between these countries. Anglo-American relations were acrimonious during many years when the U.S. was a rising power, but war was narrowly avoided on several occasions.¹⁷

The power transition between London and Washington eventually turned out to be peaceful. These countries of course shared similar cultural heritage, liberal ethos, racial identity, and government institutions—important factors that do not apply to today's Sino-American dyad. As constant factors, however, they cannot explain why these two countries' relations evolved from being

(New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

15 A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958); and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

16 A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

17 Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815-1908* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); and Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant: the Myth of the Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 2, (Fall 1994): 5-49.

tumultuous, even conflictual, to being amicable. Moreover, many countries with similar political institutions or cultural heritages have gone to war, such as the conflict between Prussia and Austria and various civil wars such as in Korea and Vietnam. Thus, these variables do not seem to be sufficient to stop violent clashes from happening.

As I have written elsewhere,¹⁸ power transition is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the onset of war. This process becomes dangerous only when a rising power's demands for increased recognition meet resistance from the established powers. It is important to remember that the study of international relations is always about interactions among states, and therefore we cannot understand this subject if we focus on only one party in these interactions. Whether the established powers are willing to accommodate newcomers is as important as the ambitions of these newcomers in determining the outcome of a power transition.¹⁹ When newcomers feel that their path to greater recognition is blocked by the established powers, their sense of status immobility can turn them into revisionist powers that are disposed to resorting to violent policies.²⁰

Power transitions become more likely to result in conflict when they are accompanied by other ingredients tending to induce war. This process elevates the danger of war when it is combined with other factors such as the presence of an intense armament race, the bifurcation of international relations into opposing alliances, enduring rivalries between pairs of countries that bring about recurrent militarized disputes, and contentious ideological

18 Steve Chan, *Thucydides's Trap? Historical Interpretation, Logic of Inquiry, and the Future of Sino-American Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

19 T.V. Paul, ed., *Accommodating Rising Powers: Past, Present, and Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

20 Steve Chan, Huiyun Feng, Kai He, and Weixing Hu, *Contesting Revisionism: China, the United States, and the Transformation of International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Jason W. Davidson, *The Origins of Revisionist and Status-Quo States* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Deborah W. Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); and Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

or territorial contests among countries that are located within close physical proximity of each other. These factors in combination create a dangerous mixture that can cause a small incident to become enlarged and contagious, turning it into a large-scale war involving many other countries.

Other countries are usually drawn into these originally local contests because of their alliance commitments. Thus, the Korean and Vietnam wars became larger conflicts when outsiders joined the fray to support their respective partners or allies. This process has been described as chain-ganging²¹ whereby due to their concern to protect their reputation for resolve or to avoid the local balance of power being altered to their disadvantage, major powers become engulfed, or even trapped, when they take sides in what started as a local crisis. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo was such a crisis in that it eventually drew all the major powers into World War I, setting off an already highly combustible situation. Incidents, or accidents, such as Sarajevo are like "streetcars" because they are a recurrent phenomenon that can present a fuse to ignite a large(r) conflict, but the underlying constellation of factors that abets and sustains tension is the more basic cause (or to continue the metaphor, this constellation provides an abundance of fuel) for a large conflagration.²²

It follows from this discussion that we should ask whether leaders today are pouring fuel onto an already tense and acrimonious relationship. Power transitions tend to be determined primarily by conditions within a country. That is, these transitions are influenced largely by countries' different rates of economic growth which reflect primarily their domestic conditions and policies.²³ The differential rates of growth are therefore not so easily affected by leaders' foreign policies directed at other countries (leaders are in a better

21 Thomas J. Christensen, and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 137-168.

22 William R. Thompson, "A Streetcar Named Sarajevo: Catalysts, Multiple Causation Chains, and Rivalry Structures," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (September 2003): 453-474.

23 Gilpin, op. cit.

position to influence their own country's growth rate than that of another country). In contrast, the other elements in the dangerous combination inducing war or conflict are more within the control of leaders. As mentioned above, these other factors refer to their decisions on undertaking armament expansion and alliance commitments, as well as their pursuit of realpolitik practices such as hardball diplomacy, military display, assertive rhetoric, and crisis brinksmanship.²⁴ These practices escalate an already tense and acrimonious situation and threaten to turn it into actual combat.

How does this discussion relate to current Sino-American relations? It should be obvious from the previous section that there has been an escalation of public rhetoric and in-your-face verbal confrontation, often but not exclusively intended to score domestic political points. Once words are spoken, however, it is difficult to take them back. Officials can then find themselves boxed in by their own rhetoric. Moreover, the political climate in both China and the U.S. are such that any leader who wants to seek reconciliation runs the risk of being accused by their political opponents and attentive public for being too soft on the other country and thus for being guilty of appeasement.

We have also seen increasing signs pointing to the other components of the constellation of factors conducive to war and conflict. China has undertaken a sustained program of military modernization. It has especially expanded its navy in recent years and is poised to launch its third aircraft carrier. The U.S. has of course been the world's truly peerless military power, but Washington has not been content to sit on its existing military advantages.²⁵ In 2019, it outspent China's defense expenditures by approximately three times. Indeed, in that year alone, the U.S. had outspent the defense expenditures of the next eleven highest countries combined!²⁶ Even though China is still

24 John A. Vasquez, "When Are Power Transitions Dangerous? An Appraisal and Reformulation of Power Transition Theory," in *Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of the War Ledger*, eds. Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 35-56.

25 Lieber and Press, op. cit.; and Posen, op. cit.

26 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "2020 Fact Sheet (for 2019)" SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_

considerably weaker than the U.S. in its military capability, there are signs of an incipient arms race.

There are also signs pointing to the pertinent states' alignment patterns becoming increasingly bifurcated. I have already mentioned in my earlier discussion that the European Union, the U.S., and other like-minded states like Japan, Canada, and Australia have either criticized China's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic or its political suppression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Many of these countries have taken economic sanctions against Beijing's officials. They have also undertaken similar actions against Russia and Iran. In March 2021, we saw a virtual summit meeting of the leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. (member countries of the Quad, or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), suggesting the formation of an emergent coalition with China clearly as its target. We are also seeing pushback in response to Western sanctions and other pressures. Iran, Russia, and China are moving closer in political, economic, and military collaboration. One example is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Thus, we are facing a more bifurcated world compared to the days immediately after the Cold War's end.

This development has been accompanied by increasing incidents of military display in East Asia, especially across the Taiwan Strait, around the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea and in contested waters of the South China Sea. Naval transits and air intrusions near the territories controlled by perceived adversaries have become more frequent. These displays are provocative, and they can also cause accidents to escalate to crises such as when a U.S. intelligence aircraft collided with a Chinese fighter near Hainan Island in 2001.

Two other recent trends are worrisome in creating the dangerous brew inclining states to get into belligerence. One important feature in today's Sino-American relationship that distinguishes it from the Soviet-American relationship during the Cold War is that whereas there is a dense and deep network of commercial ties in the former case, there was hardly any in the

latter case. The value of Soviet-American trade in its best *year* during the Cold War was about equivalent to the amount of *daily* Sino-American trade recently. Economic interdependence has thus provided a strong stabilizing force and has served as a brake against backsliding in Sino-American relations. But Washington has increasingly shown an intention to "decouple economically" from China. This intention was publicly disclosed during the Trump administration and as mentioned in the last section, the Biden administration has not taken steps to reverse its predecessor's economic policies toward China. Naturally, it is still unclear the extent to which an economic decoupling can be implemented due to embedded cross-border production chains and China's large holdings of U.S. debt instruments. Nevertheless, Washington has clearly attempted to blockade China's high-tech companies like Huawei and sought to re-establish domestic production of semiconductors and pharmaceuticals.

The other recent ominous development pertains to a more vocal, even strident, public inclination for Washington to "stand up for our values." This development points to a departure from the second feature that has until recently distinguished the more pragmatic relations between the U.S. and China in contrast to the ideological competition between the U.S. and the USSR during the Cold War. Beijing has thus far refrained from exporting its model of governance or development to recruit foreign clients or converts. Beijing has publicly professed its policy of not interfering in the domestic politics of other countries. In contrast, Washington has in recent decades engaged in a campaign of supporting regime change and color revolutions abroad. Washington's recent escalation of condemnation of China's domestic performance on human rights, however, is a relatively new phenomenon since at least the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. A greater emphasis on values suggests a shift away from pragmatic politics and portends possibly a return to the ideological competition reminiscent of the Cold War era. In Chinese eyes, this reorientation also suggests possibly a more intense U.S. intention to convert the world according to its image and thus its embarkment on a more expansionist and offensive agenda internationally. If this interpretation is valid, it will remove another ballast that has heretofore stabilized Sino-American relations which even when faced with important differences

of interest, have not been saddled with the additional burden of ideological contentions. As James Fearon has reminded us,²⁷ it is more difficult to settle differences when they pertain to intangible values that are inherently indivisible and defy compromise.

IV. Issue Grievances and Tinder Boxes

States do not fight about power transitions even though shifting balances of power can engender various cognitive or emotional responses, such as uncertainty, fear, arrogance, and pride that can impede sound judgment. It is grievances about specific issues that cause states to fight.²⁸ If so, what are the likely issues that can produce such strong feelings to get states to accept the high risks and costs of war? Nationalism, an intense feeling of loyalty to one's country and of anger resulting from the perception that it has been disrespected or even humiliated, is one source of such strong feelings. If this remark makes sense, we should look for places where these feelings are likely to be felt most intensely. Moreover, because it takes two to tangle, these are places where both sides of a contest have equally strong but incompatible feelings.

The logic presented in the last section suggests that we need to look for potential danger spots where recurrent crises are likely to provide the fuse to ignite a large conflagration. Tension across the Taiwan Strait is most likely to be the spark that sets off a larger Sino-American confrontation.²⁹

27 James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 379-414.

28 John A. Vasquez, "Whether and How Global Leadership Transitions Will Result in War: Some Long-Term Predictions from Steps-to-War Explanation," in *Systemic Transitions: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. William R. Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 131-161.

29 See, for example, Charles L. Glaser, "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 49-90; Scott L. Kastner, "Is the Taiwan Strait Still a Flash Point? Rethinking the Prospects for Armed Conflict between China and Taiwan," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015/2016): 54-92; and

It is obviously a case of contested sovereignty or at least a case involving competing claims of legitimacy by rival regimes. In either case, such contention involves strong emotions. Taiwan is becoming a tinder box or ticking timebomb also because ongoing trends are creating a local constellation of factors auguring an increased danger of war. Moreover, the U.S. is inclined to use Taiwan to score domestic political points and to leverage it in bargaining with China. But this tendency can easily produce unintended consequences.

As I have discussed elsewhere,³⁰ three processes have combined to turn the Taiwan Strait into an increasingly dangerous situation. First, public opinion is moving increasingly in the direction that most of Taiwan's people favor political independence and are opposed to reunification with China. At one time Beijing could take comfort in the thought that notwithstanding its many and strongly felt differences with the Kuomintang government ruling Taipei, they at least agreed on the basic idea that there is only one China and Taiwan is part of China. With declining support for the Kuomintang and many of the original Mainlanders' descendants taking on a separate, independent Taiwan identity, popular support for reunification with China has seriously eroded. This erosion in turn means that politicians on Taiwan will be strongly disincentivized to take a pro-reunification position if they want to win election. Indeed, politicians from both the Kuomintang and the opposing Democratic Progressive Party are converging in their opposition to making political concessions to China. Thus, the trend of public opinion on the island does not offer any hope to Beijing about prospects of a peaceful reunification.

Beijing has tried for decades now to use the "soft" approach relying on economic inducements to win over Taiwan's people and business firms. It has offered preferential treatment to compatriots from the island to engage in commerce and pursue study on the mainland. This approach of using economic carrots and nationalist appeals has so far failed to win the hearts

John J. Mearsheimer, "Taiwan's Dire Straits," *The National Interest*, no. 130 (March/April 2014): 29-39.

30 Steve Chan, "In the Eye of the Storm: Taiwan, China, and the U.S. in Challenging Times," in *Taiwan's Political Economy*, eds. Cal Clark, Karl Ho, and Alex Tan (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2021), pp. 61-78.

and minds of Taiwan's people. Despite the island's increasing economic integration with the mainland, its public opinion is strongly opposed to reunification and has become more so over time. This phenomenon in turn suggests that Beijing may now consider replacing the "soft" approach with a "harder" one. The use of sticks becomes more likely since resorting to carrots has not yielded favorable results.

Second, a "harder" approach is becoming more feasible for Beijing because over the years, China has improved its military capabilities. Although it is difficult to mount a successful amphibious operation, the People's Liberation Army has gradually gained more of the necessary means to undertake this operation. The shifting balance of power in the local theater is therefore making this undertaking more feasible. Moreover, public opinion on the mainland is also demanding the government to stand its ground and to push back on perceived assertiveness on the part of Taiwan and the U.S. China's mass public has always been more nationalist than its elite. No less than their counterparts in Taipei, Beijing's leaders face this social reality reflecting their people's sentiments. A stronger coercive capability, Taiwan's economic dependence on the mainland, and vocal nationalist sentiments can have the effect of disposing Chinese leaders to consider a military option even though it will involve high risks and costs.

Third, the unfolding process of deteriorating Sino-American relations further adds to the mix, inclining the relevant parties to become more bellicose and possibly to miscalculate. This deterioration of course emboldens Taipei which understands that Washington's support is indispensable for its continued survival as an independent political entity in fact if not in name. With the prospect of increasing U.S. support, Taipei will be even more reluctant to come to terms with Beijing's demands. Given its deteriorating relations with Beijing, Washington is also more disposed to use Taiwan to irritate, even provoke Beijing or to use its relations with Taipei to punish Beijing for its supposed transgressions. The U.S. has already broken its longstanding policy of banning its officials from formal visits to Taiwan or meeting with Taiwan's officials, thus in Beijing's eyes violating its tacit agreement with China.

Ever since its establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Beijing, Washington has adopted a policy of "strategic ambiguity."³¹ This policy is supposed to have the purpose of dual deterrence. That is, it is supposed to prevent a Chinese military attack on Taiwan by hinting that the U.S. will come to the island's defense if this attack is launched without any provocation from Taipei. This policy is also supposed to prevent Taipei from declaring de jure independence, the most likely provocation motivating Beijing to attack. Washington's policy is ostensibly "ambiguous" because it declines to commit itself one way or the other before a crisis develops. However, as just alluded to, recent events suggest that Washington is departing from this posture of dual deterrence and deliberate ambiguity. The U.S. seems to be moving in the direction of giving Taipei stronger political support which can embolden the island's leaders to push harder for de jure independence. Whether this is the actual intention behind Washington's changing posture, it is likely to be perceived by Beijing and Taipei to enhance this possibility. When Washington sends its cabinet official (Secretary of Health and Human Resources Alex Azar) to visit Taiwan or holds a meeting in the State Department with Taiwan's top envoy (Hsiao Bi-Khim), it is signaling to Beijing and Taipei. Rightly or wrongly, these signals may be interpreted by these two capitals to suggest stronger U.S. support for Taiwan, thus inclining Chinese and Taiwanese officials to in turn alter their policies which can potentially launch them on a course that makes a collision more likely.

As already mentioned, this potential collision is often brought about by an outside great power's commitment to support a local ally in a crisis that did not initially engage it directly. For various reasons already sketched, a Sino-American confrontation is more likely to stem from a dispute about Taiwan's status. Significantly, the words spoken by officials from all three sides have consequences. The more they declare their policy as a national commitment, the more difficult it is for them to reverse themselves. To renege on their announced policies would be to suffer a loss of reputation and

31 Richard C. Bush, *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005); and *Uncharted Strait: The Future of China-Taiwan Relations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

to incur criticisms, even outrage, from the leaders' respective domestic constituents. Whether intended or not, declarations by U.S. officials to support Taiwan or statements by Chinese officials to reunify the island with the mainland can tie their hands and lock them in on a pathway leading to conflict.³²

Readers of this journal may be interested in asking how deteriorating Sino-American relations may affect the situation on the Korean Peninsula, which shares some of the features characterizing relations across the Taiwan Strait such as recurrent crises, strong nationalist feelings, the historical legacy of a civil war, and of course the intervention of foreign powers that has thus far impeded national reconciliation. I am not an expert on Korea, but I would venture to offer three speculations.

First, it seems that a likely way for Beijing to retaliate against Washington's support for Taiwan is to cease its efforts to help bring about a successful agreement on curtailing North Korea's nuclear program. Thus, there is the possibility of linkage politics between the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, with worsening Sino-American relations hampering progress on nuclear negotiations with Pyongyang and even causing Beijing to provide firmer support to it. Thus, arms control talks involving Pyongyang can be a casualty of the current state of Sino-American relations.

Second and on the brighter side, Beijing is also likely to see Seoul as an important pivot in the evolving power balances in East Asia. With Washington pursuing allies and partners to form a stronger opposition to contain China, Beijing will be looking for ways to weaken this coalition. It seems likely that Beijing will view some countries' commitment to a U.S.-led anti-China coalition to be difficult to shake. For example, Australia and Japan are likely to be perceived as firmly entrenched in the U.S. camp. Among the members of

32 James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (February 1997): 68-90. For an analysis that questions the extent of audience cost when a leader reneges on her public commitments, see Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011): 437-456.

the so-called Quad, India is possibly more easily detached from this coalition. Because of a variety of cultural, economic, geographic, and historical reasons, Beijing is likely to believe that a wedge policy stands a better chance of working with South Korea than, say, Japan. This Chinese calculation will in turn create more policy space for Seoul, enabling it to pursue a more independent and pivotal role in balancing among Japan, the U.S. and China. Thus, deteriorating Sino-American relations may have this other more positive side effect from Seoul's perspective. Seoul will have a larger menu from which to choose its policies.

Third, there is a potential hazard facing Seoul, one that I would describe as chain-ganging in reverse. By this, I mean that there is the possibility that South Korea can be drawn involuntarily into a conflict involving the U.S. (the opposite of a situation whereby the senior partner of an alliance gets into a conflict because of its commitment to a junior partner caught in a local crisis). The most obvious situation for this chain-ganging in reverse is of course a confrontation involving Taiwan's status as just discussed. Washington is likely to ask its military bases and personnel located on Korean soil to be used against China in this contingency. The prospect of this involuntary involvement, one that can entail South Korea becoming the target of Chinese retaliation, in turn suggests another reason for Seoul to carve out a more equidistant position between Beijing and Washington.

V. Unravelling Bargain and Uncertain Future

The post-1945 order in the Asia Pacific region has been buttressed by a tacit grand bargain.³³ As the most powerful economic and military country after World War II, the U.S. has been the linchpin of this grand bargain. The origin of this bargain can be traced to post-war Japan. This country was occupied by U.S. forces and in economic ruins. It faced the specter of

³³ For a more extended discussion of this idea, see Steve Chan, *Looking for Balance: China, the United States, and Power Balancing in East Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

communism's domination of the East Asian mainland after Mao Zedong's victory in the Chinese civil war and the outbreak of the Korean War. The consequent loss of Japan's prewar export markets and supplies of raw resources on the East Asian mainland posed a serious challenge to its economy. At the same time, American occupation forces were eager to contain the influence of Japan's political left and to check the possibility of this country's remilitarization as an independent entity.

The solution to these problems was enshrined in what became known as the Yoshida Doctrine after the former Japanese prime minister. American and Japanese authorities struck a deal with these terms: Japan would gain access to the U.S. market, capital, and technology and in return it would accept political subordination to the U.S. and military protection from the U.S. It was a bargain that prevailed for many years although there were of course adjustments to its terms. Thus, Japan's need for U.S. capital and technology lessened over time, and there was increasing emphasis being placed on its use of its export revenues to purchase U.S. debt and its submission to the dollar's depreciation (or alternatively, the yen's appreciation). But the main outlines of this bargain continued so that, for example, Japan accommodated U.S. military bases and personnel on its soil long after its armed forces acquired the capability to defend the country. Tokyo also agrees to accept its status as a junior partner in the military alliance (one that is one-sided in the sense that there is little prospect that Japan will be called upon to defend the U.S. homeland), and throughout the Cold War aligned itself with the U.S. in a united front against the USSR and China. Even after the Cold War and after it became the world's second largest economy, Japan has continued to subordinate itself to the U.S. both politically and militarily such as when it offered verbal and financial support to the U.S. in its preventive war against Iraq and its campaign against international terrorism. In essence, the grand bargain between Japan and the U.S. called for Japan's political deference and military subordination to the U.S. in exchange for access by Japan's export-dependent economy to the U.S. market.

Japan was the first Asian country to pursue an export-led growth strategy. Its wartime devastation and the loss of its traditional markets on the East

Asian mainland disposed it to rely on the U.S. Following Japan's footsteps, other Asian economies began to pursue the same growth strategy. Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong (which is of course not a country) became the next tier of export economies, often taking advantage of those industrial niches vacated by the Japanese in the so-called flying-geese formation. Although they started their export drives by relying on their advantages in labor cost and discipline, these economies gradually moved on to products demanding increasing technology and capital input. Just like Japan, they reached the same tacit agreement with the U.S., exchanging their political deference and military subordination for access to the U.S. market.

Starting from the late 1970s, China arrived on the scene and began to play the same export game. Of course, Beijing did not buy into that part of the bargain that would entail it to give up its political or military independence. For a considerable amount of time, however, it aligned itself with the U.S. and played a subordinate role in these countries' joint effort to oppose the USSR. Beijing also agreed to set aside the Taiwan issue and refrained from challenging U.S. dominance in Europe, the Middle East, and the Western Hemisphere. While it initially lacked the capability to mount such challenge, it continued this policy of restraint after it became the world's second largest economy and gained increasing political stature and acquired more economic resources.

The terms of the bargain shifted for China and the other Asian export-dependent economies, including Japan and Korea. The *quid pro quo* began to include the expectation that these countries would recycle their export surpluses. That is, they would use their trade profits to purchase increasing amounts of U.S. debt instruments, and thus to support Washington's fiscal and monetary extravagances. In exchange for its military protection (for some such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) or political acceptance (such as China), these trade partners would tacitly agree to accept the dollar's depreciation. The U.S. gains from this bargain because American households benefited from cheap consumer goods and the recycled dollars enabled it to postpone austerity measures and fiscal and monetary discipline. Washington was able to in effect export the inflationary impact of its economic policies

and force its trade partners to share the cost of this burden. China and Japan became the largest creditors for the U.S. Saudi Arabia was also a leading purchaser of U.S. debt and for similar reasons of recycling petrodollars and in exchange for Washington's political support and military protection. Naturally, holding large amounts of U.S. debt meant that these countries came to have a vested interest in maintaining the dollar as the world's dominant currency. Any challenge by Beijing to the dollar's dominance would entail it to internationalize the renminbi, but relaxing government control of its currency is fraught as shown by the experience of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

For China to participate in the grand bargain, it had to also open its economy to accept foreign investment and the operation of foreign companies on its soil. Foreign companies and investors have a larger presence in China than the U.S. or Japan. In contrast, their presence was practically non-existent in Japan and Korea when these countries started their export drives. Naturally, all these exporters have long since graduated from their former role as providers of goods made with a high labor content but low technology or capital content. They are now leading manufacturers in the most competitive and sophisticated industries. And, of course, the ranks of countries pursuing the export-led strategy of economic growth have now also expanded. Following China, the Southeast Asian countries have adopted this strategy and there are still other countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka seeking to take over export niches vacated by their predecessors.

Why do I discuss this implicit bargain at such length? It is because this bargain is unravelling. Its terms are facing obsolescence. The pocketbooks of American consumers are stretched, and the U.S. market is not nearly as profitable and accessible as it once was. There is also rising doubt about the dollar as a store of value, and declining willingness to accept depreciated U.S. currency in exchange for access to the U.S. market and its technology and investment. Indeed, U.S. technology and capital are not nearly as important now as they were in the past for countries such as Japan, Korea, and China.

Moreover, China has become the most important trade partner for many countries, and its market has therefore become more important for many

of them compared to the U.S. market. China itself has recently tried to place more emphasis on domestic consumption as a driver for its economic growth, thus seeking to reduce its economy's dependence on exports (the so-called dual circulation model of growth). Moreover, Beijing has sought to trim its exposure to owning huge amounts of U.S. debt, and has turned to using its trade surpluses for overseas investment projects in its Belt and Road Initiative. Finally, Washington has introduced various policies that limit access to its market and technology. China is facing this situation with increasing U.S. tariffs and a technological blockade on its internet companies such as Huawei. Of course, Washington had also taken non-tariff measures such as when it tried to limit imported Japanese automobiles in the 1980s.

The other side of the ledger is also relevant. With the demise of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the value of U.S. military protection has become more questionable. Whatever one may say about Saddam Hussein or Al Qaeda, they do not convey the same level of threat to most countries as the specter of a monolithic communist bloc in control of Eurasia during the 1950s. Kim Jong-un, for example, may pose a threat to South Korea and Japan, but he is less menacing to many other countries that are located farther away from the Korean Peninsula. As Beijing has abandoned its Maoist rhetoric to support violent insurrections abroad and as it has established deep and wide relations of economic interdependence with many countries, the military threat it poses to others—with the important exception of Taiwan—would also seem to have abated significantly. In other words, the value of U.S. military protection has also become more questionable. Naturally, the discourse on the threat emanating from a rising China and a resurgent Russia is useful to remind Washington's allies that this protection continues to be indispensable. China's assertive sovereignty claims over the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and Taiwan are part of this narrative. Pyongyang's nuclear program is also part of it.

Washington's alliances in Europe and Asia, however, cannot be simply described as a deterrence effort aimed at addressing the foreign threats faced by its friends. These alliances also serve other purposes. In a moment of candor, the first secretary general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,

Hastings Ismay, famously remarked that the purpose of this alliance is "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down."³⁴ It does not require too much imagination to substitute Chinese for the Russians and Japanese for the Germans in the East Asian context. "Keeping the Americans in" of course means the forward deployment of U.S. forces along the rim around China (thus the opposite posture of an offshore balancer). It enables Washington to avoid any of its allies becoming too independent or even ganging up on it. Its security treaties with Japan and Korea enable the U.S. to "leash" these countries' respective militaries (such as avoiding the prospect of their developing an independent nuclear capability), and the hub-and-spokes nature of these arrangements serves the further purpose of enhancing Washington's pivotal influence in dealing with its allies separately.³⁵ One interesting historical fact is that China withdrew all its troops from Korea shortly after the armistice, whereas U.S. troops are still there even though by nearly all conventional indicators, its ally Seoul is much stronger and more prosperous than Pyongyang (except of course for the latter's possession of nuclear weapons).

Washington is pressing its allies to increase their contribution to collective defense. Trump had demanded U.S. partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to raise their military expenditures and threatened to reduce U.S. support if they fail to do so. He had planned on withdrawing U.S. troops from Germany. Trump had also demanded Japan and Korea pay more for the costs of maintaining U.S. troops on their soil. At the same time, the U.S. has been demanding more favorable commercial terms for its own exporters and taking increasing measures to protect its own domestic industries. Trump

34 Goodreads, "Hastings Lionel Ismay Quotes," https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1375210.Hastings_Lionel_Ismay.

35 Victor D. Cha, *Alignment despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Triangle* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Why Is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism," *International Organization* 56, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 575-607. For a contrarian view that disputes the perspective presented by the above studies, see Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "Network Connections and the Emergence of the Hub-and-Spokes Alliance System in East Asia," *International Security* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 7-50.

had criticized the North American Free Trade Agreement as the "worst trade deal in history,"³⁶ and threatened to withdraw from it unless Canada and Mexico would agree to extend more advantageous terms to U.S. producers. In this light of pressuring its trade partners and military allies for more defense contributions as well as more commercial concessions, Washington faces the challenge of "selling the same horse twice."

The reality facing countries in East Asia is that China's economic importance to them has approached, even eclipsed in some cases, that of the U.S., although the U.S. remains as the preeminent military power. Yet, the U.S. is farther away whereas the East Asian countries will have to live with China as a close neighbor. Some time ago, Kenneth Boulding presented the idea of "loss-of-power gradient," suggesting that a country loses power as it seeks to project it farther away from its homeland.³⁷ Thus, although China is still considerably weaker than the U.S. in its overall power, we are facing an increasingly bipolar situation in its "near abroad." The implicit grand bargain characterizing relations between the U.S. and the East Asian countries is becoming obsolescent.

U.S. officials have professed an intention to "decouple economically" from China, but this may be much more difficult for the East Asian countries to do. It is also more costly for them to alienate Beijing because of their economic ties with China and their physical proximity to it. How they will navigate between an economically ascendant China and a militarily dominant U.S. will shape the future of the region. My hunch is that unlike the Cold War era, they will resist pressure to choose between Beijing and Washington. They would hedge their bets. Each will have its own remembered lessons from history, including the lesson to be learned from the Vietnam War that raises questions about Washington's staying power (just as it is being raised again in the debate about Washington's negotiation with the Taliban to expedite its military withdrawal from Afghanistan).³⁸ In the struggle between two great

36 "Trump: NAFTA Worst Trade Deal in History," CNBC, June 28, 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/video/2016/06/28/trump-nafta-worst-trade-deal-in-history.html>.

37 Kenneth E. Boulding, *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory* (New York: Harper, 1962).

powers that are China and the U.S., East Asian countries would want to steer a cautious course between their fear of being abandoned and their fear of being dominated.

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38 Biden announced that the U.S. would withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. Apparently, this decision bypassed negotiation with Washington's ally, the incumbent government in Kabul.

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