



DEBATE: Can China and the US Peacefully Coexist?

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

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Q: In his account of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides wrote, “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.” Harvard scholar Graham Allison subsequently applied the term “Thucydides Trap” to describe Sino-American relations. Following a meeting with former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping said: “There is no such thing as the so-called Thucydides Trap in the world. But should major countries time and again make the mistakes of strategic miscalculation, they might create such traps for themselves.” BESA poses the question: Can China and the US peacefully coexist?

Respondents: Nicola Casarini, Alon Levkowitz, Yuan Sha, Jamie Metzl, Jens Bastian, Xavier Richet, Ole Doering



[Nicola Casarini](#), Senior Research Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IA), Rome

China and the US do not have any other option nowadays but to peacefully coexist. Arguments in favor of decoupling the US economy from that of China are flawed, given the breadth and depth of their interdependence. Likewise, proposals put forward in favor of containing China will not be successful unless all US allies and partners in the region enforce them. This is quite unlikely at this stage as even a country such as Japan, where anti-Chinese sentiment is high, would find it politically difficult to advance a containment strategy towards its powerful neighbor – in particular in the context of Trump’s tendency to go it alone.

Trump prefers to deal with China on a bilateral basis – an approach different from that of former US President Barack Obama, whose “pivot to Asia” relied on US allies and partners. Trump’s unwillingness to bring allies together against China guarantees a somewhat peaceful coexistence between Beijing and Washington. A war against China can be waged only by a more traditional US president – someone who would fully leverage the US system of alliances for that purpose.



Alon Levkowitz, Research Associate, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies

Yes they can, but with constant tensions. The current trade war between the US and China is just one layer of the complex relations between the two superpowers. The trade war might reach a compromise soon. It will decrease the trade deficit between the US and China. But Washington understands that the Chinese role in the global economy is increasing each year. One example is the growing role of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Chinese investment all over the world. Washington will have to recalibrate its global investment policy before China becomes a global dominant economic player.

The second layer is the military presence in Asia. Asia, especially Washington’s allies in the region, are trying to figure out Trump’s intentions. Will his administration continue to tilt towards Asia and balance China, or will it opt to avoid interfering in internal Asia conflicts like the South China Sea issue? If Trump decides to confront China not just on economic issues but on strategic and territorial issues as well, one would expect tensions between the two states to rise, but it would not lead to a conflict.



**Yuan Sha, Assistant Research Fellow, Department for American Studies, China
Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Beijing**

I am optimistic on the question, since the conflict between the two countries is more a matter of perception. First, China and the US are not natural enemies. They have no territorial dispute, no historical animosity, and no immediate clash of interests. It would be nonsensical for China, which lags far behind the US in terms of military prowess, economic strength, and soft power, to challenge US dominance in the world.

Second, the two countries share many common interests. Cooperation is indispensable in countering global threats like nuclear proliferation, climate change, terrorism, epidemics, and drug trafficking. They both thrive on international trade and share an interest in maintaining a stable international order.

Last but not least, both sides can resort to peaceful means to resolve differences. International institutions, despite their flaws, provide a platform from which to adjudicate disputes, foster norms, and build expectations. The two countries can also negotiate bilateral agreements in fields ranging from trade to arms control. Most importantly, as they are both nuclear powers, they would try every means to avert war.

But I must strike a cautious note. Great power relations need careful management to stop perceptions of conflict from becoming real conflict. Differences in political systems, economic models, and ideology have engendered mutual mistrust, and the subjective perception of threat aggravates the security dilemma. The US is bent on global leadership and has an expanded notion of its national interest. Washington likes to dictate terms on such thorny issues as Taiwan and the South China Sea, which infringes upon China's perceived interests and security.

The question has policy implications. The US must decide whether to engage China or contain it, while the Chinese must choose whether to integrate into a US-led world order or preempt US containment. Given the grave consequences of miscalculation, I'd suggest each side give the other the benefit of the doubt, refrain from hyping up the threats they pose to one another, and avoid self-fulfilling prophecies.



Jamie Metz, Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council, Washington DC

The US and China can coexist peacefully so long as both sides agree to a common enough set of global values, norms, structures, and institutions binding them together in a common purpose. Because the US and the Soviet Union were roughly paired in power and influence over the Cold War years but did not share sufficient common values, the world was dangerously divided for decades. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US-led global system became the only show in town for a couple of decades. The postwar liberal international order has endured because it did so much to help the US and other countries around the world develop their economies and societies. It is not by accident that the post-war period has seen the greatest advances in peace, prosperity, and security in human history.

After decades of self-defeating (and murderous) domestic leadership under Mao, China's reform process, started by Deng Xiaoping, made China rich and then strong. Although China's wealth has been based on its access to the US-led global economic system, Beijing has done little to support – let alone strengthen – the system from which it has so massively benefitted. If Beijing articulates, advocates for, and lives up to a set of values credibly designed to benefit the rest of the world while also helping China, there will be unlimited space for both economic growth and peaceful coexistence. If not, the US and its allies and partners around the world will be forced to resist China with increasing vehemence to protect the best part of the existing order.



Jens Bastian, independent economic consultant working on Chinese equity investment and bank lending for infrastructure projects in Southeast Europe. In

2017 he was commissioned by the EBRD to write a [report on the Balkan Silk Road emerging in Southeast Europe](#)

The accumulation of bilateral conflicts and finger-pointing between China and the Trump administration in 2018 – tit-for-tat trade tariffs, cyberwar allegations, the arrest of a leading Chinese corporate representative in Canada on the request of US law enforcement – has given rise to a revisiting of the so-called “Thucydides Trap” argument.

Drawing on the historical analogy between ruling Sparta and a rising Athens, the ancient Greek historian argued that fear, competition, and misconceptions about the adversary “made war inevitable” between the city-states. We have not (yet) reached the same level of antagonism between China and the US, but the ingredients for further escalation exist. Therefore, sleep-walking into a major confrontation is a real and global policy risk in 2019 and beyond.

Increasingly, government authorities in both Washington and Beijing are shaping the narrative of these commercial, cyberwar, and judicial conflicts in terminology that underscores profound differences in the definition of and responsibility for the state, political economy, national security, and international relations. Moreover, friends and allies near and far are being pressured to take sides in these bilateral conflicts and pledge their allegiance. The binary nature of this challenge reduces the available policy space for compromise and threatens a variety of sanctions for non-compliant countries.

Peaceful co-existence between China and the US – taken for granted for decades and subjected to profound threat over the past two years – also has major consequences for global governance institutions such as the UN, WTO, IMF, and World Bank. Simultaneously, pushing back against both Chinese assertiveness and the confrontational strategies of the Trump administration is a tall order for individual countries and multilateral institutions. But it is the order of the day. Otherwise, Thucydides Trap risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.



[Xavier Richet](#), Professor of Economics, University Sorbonne Nouvelle Jean Monnet Chair. Co-founder and co-director of the [BRIC Seminar](#), Maison des

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Normally yes, even if “a spark can set the plain on fire”, as the Chinese saying goes. The confrontation between China and the US should take place in a peaceful framework. Their differences cannot be resolved quickly. Neither party necessarily has the means to preserve and reinforce its advantages while destabilizing the other.

On the US side, President Trump’s policy has two declared objectives: to reduce the trade deficit between the two countries (trade war, tariffs) and protect intellectual property rights. In fact, the main objective is to maintain the country’s technological advantage vis-à-vis China. In both cases, the expected result will be long-term: the trade imbalance will continue, and the repatriation of industries in the US will be (or should be) at the cost of increased robotization of production at the expense of jobs if these industries do not settle elsewhere entirely (e.g., India).

On the Chinese side, the possibility of “counting on one’s own strengths,” as President Xi put it, to maintain growth and close the technological gap remains limited. Investment in technological R&D is time-consuming, and the country is facing internal difficulties: low economic growth, financial imbalances and indebtedness of firms, the middle income trap, and the difficulty of engaging China on an endogenous growth model.

The question that arises is therefore the nature, content, and viability of the compromise that seems to be emerging between the two countries.



**Ole Doering, Associate Professor, Institute of Philosophy, Karlsruhe Institute for
Technology**

Coexistence, as a global political order principle, is built on the acknowledgement of diversity of systems. During the Cold War, narratives of order left the relational characteristics of powers ambiguous: recognizing political systemic difference, under

UN auspices, while tolerating hegemonic policies in the form of post-colonialism, thus allowing mental reservations of hegemonic mindsets to be left unchallenged. With the erosion of that architecture, the apparent footprints of global injustice, and China's return to the status of global player, the terms of coexistence are in need of revision.

When we take mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity together with the non-aggressive resolution of disputes as a formal base, and mutual benefit and peace as the common global value base, our focus should be on proper rules, capabilities, procedures, and infrastructures – and the institutional means of guaranteeing this minimal requirement for the whole world.

Now, we can see that China, on the one side, is pushing for engagement in all these areas, whereas the US is pulling back in terms of moral and material commitment. The ideological undercurrent of the transatlantic age has lost its credibility and appeal to many, owing to double standards abroad and failure to deliver proper governance at home. China is securing influence through an ever more refined strategy of pragmatic investments without a defined moral mission. In particular, multilateralism and respect for diversity, within the established global code of conduct, need a new translational discourse on a sustainable relationship.

We are faced with a historic chance to learn lessons and make those lessons global from the start. It is time to urgently remember the humanities, in the holistic traditions of the Chinese and European classics, as a reservoir for methodological resources to become creative, for trans-national, trans-cultural, and trans-lingual narratives of pathways for humanity. Peace requires strength on the basis of sustainable values. The moral high ground is no one country's or culture's to determine, but for all of humanity. The UN has already made a first step towards this goal by calling for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Eurasia is increasingly becoming the critical regional challenge to organize a new balance of power on the basis of SDGs. Here, the odds for success hinge upon the ability of Western Europe to develop a sincere understanding of being humble citizens of the world. For the formerly privileged, this may be painful, but the dividend of peace does compensate for all. Here, China will meet the trajectories of the West and will have to make sense of European abilities to be prudent and convincing within a secularized social economy model.

This development will also define a new role for the US as a former superpower. The US will have to shift away from a position as the self-perceived center of the world – a shift similar to what the UK experienced as it came to terms with the requirements of a post-colonial and post-transatlantic order.

Coexistence is less than peace. In today's formative stages of a new world order, the vision should be guided by the more ambitious core of the UN's defined SDGs: to aspire for sustainable cohabitation, to learn collaboration, and to share with all. This will make a more convincing narrative than those of the 20th century. Within such a framework, life in the global village will not only depend on states. Power to define relations and transactions will be distributed across the spectrum of political citizenship. Thereby, the role of nations, big or small, will be moderated and their powers mitigated.

Oh, yes, and then: even China and the US can live together in peace.

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