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THE TRAPS HAVE SPRUNG? SINO- AMERICAN CHALLENGES FOR HEGEMONIC LEADERSHIP*

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SUMMARY

Although the United States established itself as the world leader—the hegemon — following the Second World War, China is now challenging that position, threatening the multilateralism and stable international economic order that the U.S. formerly ensured. President Donald Trump’s administration changed the U.S.’s position in the world significantly by abandoning much of its international leadership and altering its stance towards China. The resulting ramped-up tensions between the two countries led President Joe Biden’s administration to promise that the U.S. would show greater international leadership, but this has yet to occur. Meanwhile, China’s economy has seen impressive growth under President Xi Jinping. China has been consolidating its foreign relations, carving out a place for itself on the international scene, thus raising the question of a possible hegemonic transition from the U.S. to China. If China were to take on the role of hegemon, the democratic, liberal values of the entire global system would be at risk.

This strained relationship and rapid potential power switch could lead to what is known as Thucydides’ trap and Kindleberger’s trap. Per Thucydides’ trap, escalating tensions between the U.S. and China could lead to a direct confrontation between the superpowers. Per Kindleberger’s trap, the international world could end up rudderless, as it did in the 1930s when the U.S. did not fill the gap left by the hegemonic decline of Great Britain.

However, the future needn’t look so dark—these two hegemonic traps can be avoided. The U.S. needs to work with its closest allies and find common ground with China. Stepping back into the leadership role and rebuilding alliances would allow better management of China’s rising power and presence internationally. Collaborating with China on common issues, such as the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, would give the U.S. a chance to restore multilateralism and slow down any transition of power, lessening the possibility of falling into Thucydides’ and Kindleberger’s traps.

ABSTRACT

In an ambivalent twist of foreign policy, the Trump administration reordered Washington's stance towards Beijing. In the wake of its tense relationship with China, the United States has abandoned much of its international leadership. There were high hopes of renewed American commitment to the international order when Joe Biden was elected in November 2020. The prospect for a greater international guidance from the Biden administration has yet to lead to a cohesive policy. In contrast, under the strong hand of Xi Jinping, China has taken a more decisive role in international affairs. It remains to be seen, however, if the rest of the world is ready to follow in China's footsteps. This state of affairs leaves us in the uncomfortable situation where we must assess two daunting traps facing the future of the international system. On one hand, reminiscent of Thucydides' trap, we face the possibility of an escalation of tension that could inexorably lead to a direct confrontation between the two superpowers. On the other hand, an even less appealing scenario would take the form of a rudderless world bringing back painful memories of the 1930s. In this paper, we assess these two eventual consequences of the Sino-American confrontation, as well as possibilities of escaping those traps.

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this essay is to explain how the future of the China-United States relationship might hang on an uneasy balance between two conspicuous traps. The first trap is illustrated by the narration of the Peloponnesian War by the great historian Thucydides, who famously claimed that it was the rise of Athens and the fear it raised in Sparta that made the war inevitable. Graham Allison (2017) warns his readers against this darkened view of the world in a seminal book where he raises the possibility that the Thucydides trap may lurk in the future of the China-U.S. relationship. Despite the attractiveness of this interpretation, we believe it should be complemented by the perspective of the American economic historian Charles Kindleberger (2013). While attributing the long post-war peace to the role played by American hegemony, he cautions his readers of the risks of a return to the disastrous decade of the 1930s, when the United States, the most advanced economic and military power, failed to fill the gap left by the relative hegemonic decline of Great Britain. Joseph S. Nye (2017) called this leadership vacuum in the international system the Kindleberger trap. This represents the second trap that could await China and the United States in the near future. Yet, the future is not necessarily littered with pessimistic scenarios. The two countries have developed strong economic connections and both administrations are aware that decoupling their economies would have disastrous consequences. Furthermore, we should be careful with the use of historical analogies to explain current events, as David Lake (1991) reminds us with his comparison of the British and American hegemonies. Consequently, we strongly believe that the two superpowers still have time to avoid both traps.

Following the Second World War, the United States established itself as the world leader, otherwise known as the hegemon. This influential role has enabled it to promote liberal systems, institutions and international rules to its own benefit. By promoting

co-operation through multilateralism, the United States ensured the stability of the international economic order and postwar regimes.

However, things are about to change as the Chinese economy has undergone impressive growth. Its improved efficiency and its openness to the global economy, foreign trade and investment flows now allow it to exceed, or be on track to overtake, the U.S. in most economic indicators (Hamnett 2018; Hang 2017). Since the *fenfa youwei* (strive for success) policy put in place by Xi Jinping in 2012, Chinese ambition has been characterized by several goals that reveal the nation's desire to overtake the U.S.; for example, we can think of the objectives of achieving 70 per cent self-sufficiency in specific industries by 2025 and of being the world's leading power, all sectors combined, by 2049 (Zhao 2008; Li 2017; Modebadze 2020; Neppalli and Hunter 2018; Can and Chan 2020). Without a doubt, China is now asserting itself as the dominant regional power in Asia economically, militarily and in soft power, and seeks to do so on a global scale as well (Hang 2017; Argounès 2014; Shaffer and Gao 2018).

Its involvement in several projects allows China to consolidate its foreign relations and to carve out a place for itself on the international scene — the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November 2020; its willingness to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP); its numerous foreign direct investments in Africa and Latin America; and its aid to developing countries in the fight against COVID-19 (Duchesne and Zhang 2020; Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada 2021; Sevilla 2017; Foot 2020; Consulat Général de la République Populaire de Chine à Montréal 2021; Zhou 2019; Keohane 2015; Lefebvre 2020; Li 2017; Sevilla 2017; Wintgens 2015; Viennot 2019; Etwareea 2016; Bruun and Bennett 2002; Joshi 2019; Grimes and Sun 2014; FSA Ulaval 2021). China appears to be standing up to the Americans by questioning the U.S.'s hegemonic primacy through territorial, institutional and commercial means (Neppalli and Hunter 2018; Glaser 2012; Hang 2017; Cheng 2013; Wu 2018). Americans therefore predictably face a relative decline in global power and influence and this new reality threatens to change the international system as we know it.

Yet, the U.S. is not ready to cede its hegemonic status to China and is resisting the power transition to the East (Hang 2017; Argounès 2014). While the ambitions of the two countries seem incompatible, it is relevant to question the future of the relationship between China and the U.S. Some theories and past examples warn us against the pitfalls that await the two powers; these pitfalls are respectively labelled Thucydides and Kindleberger traps. Those traps have already begun to take root in Sino-American policies in recent years and they cast their shadow over the future of the relationship between the two giants.

This paper aims to explain the two traps and their application in the Sino-American situation. While the traces of these traps are mostly found in Donald Trump's presidency, it is Biden's presidency and those that follow that we are primarily interested in, as they will determine the future of the relationship between the two countries. Finally, we conclude on a possible solution that would allow the U.S. to avoid the Thucydides and the Kindleberger traps in the medium term.

1. THUCYDIDES' TRAP: GREAT TENSIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES.

China's gradual emergence as a great economic power at the turn of the century has prompted some analysts to raise the question of a possible hegemonic transition from the United States to China (Swaine 2011; Badie 2019). According to the hegemonic transition theory, the unipolar world gradually becomes multipolar as a country rises and the hegemon slows down (Stuart 2016; Modebadze 2020; David and Turreille 2018; Can and Chan 2020). This moment of cohabitation includes an important trap predicting that a conflict is inevitable as the hegemony shifts from a declining power to a rising one (Zhao 2008; David and Turreille 2018; Stuart 2016; Lefebvre 2020; Modebadze 2020; Gries and Jing 2019; Can and Chan 2020). Thucydides' trap is rooted in the struggle for power and influence between the two hegemonies, which can also be described as systemic rivalry. While the two countries' ambitions and geopolitical interests are often incompatible, the rising power will attempt to transform its regional hegemony into a global hegemony and extend its influence in several areas (Duchesne and Zhang 2020; Zhou 2019; Lim 2008; Allison 2015). The declining hegemon, on the other hand, has an interest in preserving the current system and its rules, institutions and values that favour it (Zhao 2008; Lim 2008).

The theories of the hegemonic transition and Thucydides' trap apply to the current Sino-American situation. China, through the development of its economic, military and influence capabilities, further challenges the established world order as it favours the U.S (Duchesne and Zhang 2020; Hang 2017; Zhao 2008). On the other hand, the threat of a hegemonic transition to China worries Americans who wish to maintain their global economic primacy. In addition, the U.S. concern is also justified because China's "peaceful" rise can be questioned as it asserts itself in more territorial disputes, such as the issue of the Sino-American dispute over Taiwan and the South China Sea conflict, and in the development of modern armaments (Zhao 2008; Cheng 2013; Neppalli and Hunter 2018; Glaser 2012; Li 2017; Lim 2008). There is also a great difference between their politico-economic model, their values and their behaviour, at the point where we can talk about the shock between Washington's and Beijing's consensus. These elements make the U.S. suspicious of China's intentions and fearful of what a future with Chinese hegemony would mean for Americans.

Thus, the Thucydides trap threatens to recur soon as the rise of the Chinese hegemon heightens competition and rivalry between the two countries; there are already several security dilemmas and a trade war between the two countries (Lefebvre 2020; Modebadze 2020; Badie and Vidal 2019; Stuart 2016; Larson 2021; Kai 2014; Li 2017; Allison 2015).

a) This Trap Was Illustrated Especially Under Trump

This trap was most illustrated under Trump's presidency, since that is when the president strongly decried the irritation China caused and the trade war truly took shape. According to Trump, but also his predecessors, the Chinese model of a socialist market economy, also known as state capitalism, is incompatible with the American model and the institutions in place (Mavroidis and Sapir 2019; Zhou,

Gao and Bai 2019). The irritation caused by this incompatibility has motivated the development of strategies and policies around the “China problem.”

“China’s threat to the U.S. in the region and elsewhere might emerge [...] because by playing by the rules that Westerners themselves have formulated, the Chinese are beating them [unfairly] at their own game” (Argounès 2014). It should be specified that it is China’s commercial behaviour, especially at the level of public enterprises and the forced transfer of technology, and its non-conformist attitude at the WTO that have probably laid the foundations of a trade war with the U.S. since it is mainly on these issues that their business models collided (Duchesne and Zhang 2020; Paquin 2018; Mavroidis and Sapir 2019; 2021; Carbaugh and Wassell 2019; Qin 2019; Godement 2019).

The U.S. has tried to pressure China into changing its behaviour by resorting to anti-dumping measures at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and unilaterally imposing tariffs on Chinese products until tensions evolved into tariff protectionism and endless retaliation (Mavroidis and Sapir 2019; Zhou et al. 2019; Shaffer and Gao 2018; Duesterberg 2019; Hur 2018). Former U.S. trade representative Robert Lighthizer and former U.S. ambassador to the WTO Dennis Shea have also strongly criticized the Chinese economic model under Trump’s presidency, to the point of qualifying Chinese state capitalism as an “unprecedented threat to the world trading system” (Zhou et al. 2019).

b) What Will Happen to Thucydides’ Trap Under Biden?

On many points, numerous people have seen Trump’s presidency as a temporary detour from normalcy due to surprising decisions, like the U.S. withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) and some trade negotiations like those of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the deepening of the WTO blockade and a distancing from allies (Duchesne and Zhang 2020; Paquin 2018; Hur 2018; Neppalli and Hunter 2018). Yet, Trump’s concern for China appeared to be one of the few elements of continuity of his tenure. The Obama administration had also criticized China and developed policies (albeit more cautious) to counter its rise; the “pivot to Asia” strategy, later renamed “rebalancing to Asia,” was also intended to focus U.S. economic, diplomatic and military attention in the Asia-Pacific region (Tow and Stuart 2015; Badie and Vidal 2019; Shambaugh 2013; Swaine, Esplin Odell and Lee 2021).

Right now, Biden seems to be close to Trump’s stances on China and has even pointed out that he could be tougher than Trump (Paris 2021; Biden 2020). Secretary of State Antony Blinken, at the bilateral diplomatic meeting in Anchorage in March 2021, said the Biden administration will examine China’s breach of international law (Lee and Thiessen 2021; United States Trade Representative 2021). As China-U.S. relations continue to be strained, the president does not appear to want to stray from Thucydides’ trap. Biden wishes to use aggressive measures against China’s unfair practices and does not seem ready to ease existing Sino-American tensions (Wells 2020). This trap should, however, be taken more seriously: considering the current technologies and the globalized world, it can be

realized in a direct and indirect way (Allison 2021). Although the trade war is not a war per se, it illustrates the tensions existing between the two countries and has a real impact on their economies. It could give rise to an even greater conflict since economic and trade conflicts can easily spill over into security conflicts (Duchesne and Zhang 2020).

2. THE REAL ANOMALY: THE ABANDONMENT OF INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The real anomaly of the Trump presidency was the diversion of U.S. international policy from multilateralism to aggressive unilateralism. Among think tanks, the media, public opinion and political parties (Democrats as well as Republicans), there is a consensus on the world leader role of the U.S., which probably stems from American exceptionalism (Lee 2017; Badie and Vidal 2019). The international community is also favourable to it because it benefits from public goods that are promoting global political and economic stability, often possible thanks to American leadership (Lee 2017). By rejecting avenues of co-operation like the TPP deal, the WTO system and the country's alliances, Trump undermined the reigning U.S. leadership (Jervis et al. 2018; Badie and Vidal 2019). By breaking away from multilateralism and focusing on America First, Trump's presidency has possibly created irreversible damage, like throwing the world into the Kindleberger trap.

a) Kindleberger Trap: Concern of a Lack of International Leadership

Nye (2017) explains that the second trap of the duality of Sino-American hegemony, the Kindleberger trap, lurks for the entire international community. Nye's contribution to the debate is focused on China's ability or willingness to provide international public goods as a growing international power. Duchesne and Zhang (2020) follow in Nye's footsteps by adding Trump's fallback from supporting international institutions to the equation, thus creating a potential void of world leadership. For Duchesne and Zhang, the Kindleberger trap can be summed up as a decline or a too rapid abandonment of American leadership, as China is unwilling or unable to take over. While Xi's international actions are increasingly active, Chinese officials are making it clear that they cannot and will not act as a hegemonic power in a medium-term future. American abandonment of leadership would lead to an international leadership vacuum and undermine the efforts of the international system to co-ordinate in recent decades. This would harm the U.S., which would lose its hegemonic status; China, which would struggle to adjust to its new status and responsibilities; and the rest of the international community, which would be disorganized (Duchesne and Zhang 2020).

b) Under Biden, Can the U.S. Reassume its International Leadership?

As this trap looms, can Biden's presidency lead its country to a renewed international leadership? Certainly, Biden would like it. When he took office, he quickly abandoned Trump's America First slogan, replacing it with "America is Back," announcing at the same time a return to multilateralism and, consequently,

to predictability, co-operation and transparency (Agence France-Presse 2021b; Berry 2021; Shaffer and Sloss 2021; Paris 2021; Cardwell and Kerr 2021). Concretely, the Biden administration has already reiterated its support for (or outright reinstated) certain institutions and agreements Trump left, in particular the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Paris Agreement, the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), the WHO and the international vaccine distribution program (COVAX) (Edelman 2021; Eichensehr 2021; Maizland 2021).

In contrast to his strong commitment to international liberal ideals, Biden had to recognize that the country's many national concerns, such as police violence, racism, rising nationalism, systemic injustices, voting suppression, socioeconomic inequalities and the pandemic's many effects, were his priority.

Although the Biden administration has emphasized its national priorities through its Build Back Better Framework, some internal policies may also be part of the country's international strategy (United States Trade Representative 2021; Office of the United States Trade Representative 2021; Freeman 2021; Agence France-Presse 2021a; 2021c; Wells 2020). For example, the management of immunization and climate change, two of the president's priorities, can be multilateral.

This collaboration could strengthen American alliances and leadership and create new commercial opportunities (United States Trade Representative 2021; Biden 2020; Freeman 2021). This would ultimately stabilize the country's internal situation, while promoting the return of American leadership (Mearsheimer 2019). In sum, Biden seems to have a good chance of avoiding the Kindleberger trap by keeping this approach.

In a strange twist of fate, Russia's invasion of Ukraine could give the impetus to a resurrection of strong Cold War alliances. This places Beijing in an uncomfortable position of maintaining an equilibrium among three tenets of its foreign policy: maintain the pressure on the United States for world leadership, non-involvement in domestic affairs of other countries and a commitment to liberal economic institutions to foster internal growth. Vladimir Putin has now thrown a rock into China's long-term strategies. Will the Chinese opt for a continuation of their triptych, ambiguous international stance towards the postwar international order or will they counterbalance a stronger NATO alliance by inching closer to Russia? So far, Beijing has maintained its policy of strategic ambiguity regarding the war in Ukraine and it is therefore too early to provide a definitive answer to that question.

3. CONCLUSION

One way for the U.S. to avoid both traps is to work with its closest allies to find areas of common ground with China. The return of American leadership and alliances would allow better management of the stakes raised by China's increasing power and presence on the world stage. Biden plans to use aggressive measures against China's perceived unfair and unjust practices, on the basis of closer American cooperation with its coalition partners (Wells 2020; United States Trade Representative 2021).

A combination of strong pressures from an American-led alliance and tough trade measures could force China to stop its apparent irritating behaviour, which could lessen the possibility of Thucydides' trap.

A coalition of allies would also prevent a too rapid decline of American leadership (Duchesne and Zhang 2020). The Kindleberger trap would therefore also be avoided, until a hegemonic transition to China (or to another power) becomes acceptable. Biden seems to be using the Quad Plus to create a democratic alliance to the service of a set of values with political, economic and maritime capabilities (Péron-Doise 2021; Biden 2020).¹ This alliance allows countries to collaborate on several common issues, such as tackling the pandemic's economic effects or fighting the nefarious effects of climate change, and gives Biden an opportunity to return to multilateralism (Péron-Doise 2021; Choudhury 2021; Badie and Vidal 2019; Swaine et al. 2021; Wells 2020), all issues for which China can be co-opted to drive a more peaceful international environment.

For now, it seems clear that most allied nations will prefer to collaborate with the U.S. rather than allow China to wield more power on the international scene. Although China exerts more influence than before, notably through projection of its economic power in emerging markets, it still represents an unacceptable model for Western democracies. For example, in addition to its state capitalism, some of its behaviours and values, such as the abuse of human rights; the persecution of certain minorities; the elimination of its citizens' rights and freedoms; the increased inequalities in society; the dispossession, relocation and exploitation of certain populations to make way for state projects; and corruption and control in Taiwan and Hong Kong, are strongly criticized by the international community (Dirlik 2017; Hang 2017). The release of the two Canadian hostages (Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig) following the outcome of the Huawei affair confirms that China, if it became the hegemon, would threaten the social well-being and the democratic, liberal and inclusive values of the whole international system (Marquis 2021; Wu 2018; Pollack 2016).

“A slow transition is the best way to avoid the traps of Thucydides and Kindleberger. A hope which rests, in short, on two elements: a moderate pace of historical developments and the accession to power of political leaders actively involved in international institutions” (our translation) (Duchesne and Zhang 2020). In light of our paper, it seems that Biden, or the return to multilateralism in general, will place the U.S. in a good position (or at least a better one than Trump did) to avoid the traps of hegemony.

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The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is a 2007 American initiative bringing together Japan, the United States, Australia and India which may soon include South Korea, Singapore and the United Kingdom (Péron-Doise 2021). The recent creation of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) is providing some additional hints towards a Biden policy in the region.

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