

Theories on U.S. – China Power Dynamics

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Introduction

This paper will review how four of the most renowned researchers view U.S.-China power relations today.

Nowadays, we often hear it said that China's rapid progress in recent years is a new phenomenon and it could overturn the existing paradigm in East Asia. The terms such as the "Thucydides Trap" and the "G-zero world" are keywords used by prominent researchers that have analyzed the structure of the U.S.-China rivalry under these international conditions. Focusing on the researchers who introduced these keywords, this paper will consider the four researchers' arguments concerning U.S.-China relations and related U.S. security policies, analyzing the logical structures of their theories to take an overview of strategic conditions in East Asia. The four researchers are John J. Mearsheimer, Peter Navarro, Graham Allison, and Ian Bremmer.

First, we will look at how each of these researchers sees U.S.-China power relations. Then, we will review the differences among these four researchers' theories on the security policies that the U.S. should adopt in East Asia.

1. John Mearsheimer

Mearsheimer, a University of Chicago professor studying security policy, is a prominent realist who has visited Japan numerous times to advise government officials and others. Mearsheimer is a leading proponent of offensive realism.

According to Mearsheimer's hypothesis concerning the structure of the international system, (i) in an anarchic global structure (ii) all nation states will enhance their military power—that is, their readiness for war—and (iii) largely be incapable of understanding the true intents of other nations. In such an international system, the ultimate goal of the nation state is to establish a position of sole hegemony, and thus the international system is a powerful inducement for nation states to aim to secure power to overcome their rivals. Mearsheimer is attempting to test this theory by verifying case studies of rivalry among great powers since 1787².

Under Mearsheimer's theory, powerful nation-states will attempt to secure hegemony regardless of their ideology (whether democratic or authoritarian), while at the same time attempting to prevent the hegemony of their rivals in other regions. Doing so would maximize the probability of their survival. His view is that if China were to become a leader of the global economy, then it would almost certainly shift such economic power to military power and attempt to dominate northeast Asia. On the other hand, in recent history, the U.S. is the sole hegemonic power³, and it has a strong interest in maintaining its current position in Asia. This is because the U.S. cannot tolerate the rise of a competing power. As a result, the likelihood of U.S.-China security competition leading to war will rise. Mearsheimer argues that the possibility is higher than that of the superpowers during the Cold War⁴. At the same time, he argues that since containing China is to the national benefit of the countries surrounding China, there is an increasing likelihood that not only Japan, but also North and South Korea, India, Russia, Vietnam, and other states would

cooperate with the U.S. to form a balancing alliance against China⁵.

In addition, Mearsheimer also points out that it would be mistaken to consider that the presence of nuclear weapons in both the U.S. and China lowers the possibility of war between the two nations⁶. In Europe during the Cold War, land forces and nuclear armed air forces were placed near what was called the Central front. This led to a situation where there was a risk of escalation to a nuclear war, which neither side wanted, in the event that fighting were to break out. At the same time, there is nothing like the Central European front in East Asia. Even though there are countless locations where conflicts could break out, there is no possibility of these escalating into a large-scale war. Mearsheimer's logic holds that under conditions in which the potential costs of war decrease while the possibility of its outbreak rises, the possibility of war breaking out in East Asia, where the risk of escalation to the nuclear level is constrained, is higher than that in Cold War Europe⁷. Mearsheimer also notes that since a future war in Asia always would involve uncertainty with regard to whether it would become a nuclear war, and this possibility could increase stability in certain crises, nuclear weapons do have a deterrent effect⁸ in Asia.

2. Peter Navarro

Navarro, an economist who has studied the impact of unfair trade policies by China on the U.S. economy, currently serves as Assistant to the President, and Director of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy (and formerly Director of the White House National Trade Council) in the Trump Administration. He maintains a staunch attitude toward China. Citing Graham Allison's "Thucydides Trap," Navarro advises that there is at least a 70% probability of a U.S.-China war, that developments through to now are leading toward conflict, and that the ultimate result could be a nuclear war⁹. He cites the works of various prominent thinkers on topics such as China's aims, its

abilities, triggers of war, and scenarios in such a case as the logical backing for his recommendations on U.S. policy choices to avoid such a war.

First of all, Navarro argues that a review of China's history shows that it is a fact that it has engaged in repeated armed aggression and acts of violence over the more than 60 years since the Chinese Communist Party secured power¹⁰, and that there is very little likelihood of China's adopting fair foreign policies based on transparency and negotiation in the future. He also argues that China's military strategy and military capabilities are threats to peace and stability in Asia, and that the only way to counter such a China is through a policy of peace through military strength.

According to Navarro, China is advancing plans to overturn the three pillars of the U.S. advantage through its own counter (three-pillar) strategy. The three pillars of the U.S. advantage are (i) its aircraft-carrier forces, which secure air and sea superiority through overwhelming force, (ii) its large-scale military bases, which are distributed across multiple locations along the first and second island chains, and could serve as starting points for attacks and bases for backup support, and (iii) its satellite system that enables it to confirm information in the field using state-of-the-art C4ISR systems. China's strategy to counter these consists of a plan to overturn each advantage, through (i) greatly increasing production of relatively low-cost asymmetric weaponry¹¹ capable of destroying or incapacitating costly U.S. aircraft carriers and bases, (ii) mass production of aircraft carriers to rival the U.S. fleet in volume in the future, and (iii) overturning the U.S. advantage in C4ISR, which enables it to maintain space superiority¹² Navarro points out that even though China is carrying out these counter strategies precisely and systematically, the response of the U.S. and its allies has been muffled. In particular, he argues that China might be able, through a mass missile launch, to overwhelm U.S. missile-defense systems. In addition, he notes that China is producing mass volumes of various air and sea craft as needed to mobilize its own fleet of

aircraft carriers that, although not as technologically advanced as that of the U.S., is nothing to be trifled with¹³. Furthermore, he notes that China alone among the five top nuclear powers is increasing its stockpiles of nuclear weapons, its nuclear weapons plans are unclear, and it has not responded favorably to calls for arms reduction in various forms up to now. Unlike the U.S. and Russia, China until now has not been subject to any restrictions on the development of missiles or nuclear capability. Navarro argues that China has an underground network of more than 5,000 km or missile silos serving as a maze in which it holds an unknown quantity of nuclear warheads, and that it can use this uncertainty as a coercive tool¹⁴.

Navarro argues that the best way to avoid war with China under these conditions is by demonstrating that the U.S. is serious and willing to use nuclear weapons as a last resort, by maintaining extremely powerful forces and building extremely powerful alliances¹⁵. The security policy that Navarro proposes is one of building up deterrent forces to contain China through a strong military and cooperation with allies ready for a long-term war in which there may be no clear winner or loser—that is, what could be called a new Cold War. He states that the U.S. appearing weak in East Asia would be an invitation to aggression, and that the U.S. needs to maintain an iron resolve to defend the region with its allies. If the U.S. were to adopt a neo-isolationist policy and withdraw forces from Asia, then rather than being eased, disputes and uncertainty would only worsen, making it extremely difficult to negotiate fruitfully with an aggressive and opaque China. In addition, Navarro sees U.S. troops stationed in East Asia playing an important role in the U.S. missile defense system as an early warning system, with the advantage of being able to respond immediately to any preemptive attacks, which helps to deter China.

He argues, however, that there are two facts that the U.S. military must understand about potential battlefields in East Asia. First, there is the fact that U.S. naval forces and its bases in East Asia are highly vulnerable to

attack, and unless appropriate strategies of strengthening, dispersion, and restructuring are implemented they will remain so. If this situation is left unaddressed, then the likelihood of a Chinese victory would increase, serving to invite Chinese aggression. Secondly, there is also the fact that the two conceivable U.S. strategies in response to Chinese aggression—an air-and-sea battle and offshore control—both are lacking in the power to prevent Chinese aggression reliably¹⁶. In particular, he warns that U.S. bases in Japan, exposed from the air, are vulnerable to Chinese asymmetric weaponry and its growing military might¹⁷.

Navarro also touches on the issue of nuclear deterrence, arguing that rival U.S. and Chinese nuclear forces are no guarantee of deterrence of a conventional war in Asia¹⁸. China might use its vast nuclear forces as a shield to carry out increasingly aggressive actions. Navarro argues that for deterrence to be effective, China must believe that the U.S. and its allies have the ability and the determination to use not only conventional but also nuclear weapons to defy China if necessary. In the absence of this belief on China's part, a paradox of stability and instability could arise in East Asia¹⁹. This refers to, while having an assured nuclear retaliatory capability on both sides may create strategic stability at the highest nuclear level, this then opens up space for either proxy wars or lower-level conventional wars under the umbrella of mutually assured deterrence²⁰.

3. Graham Allison

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Athenian historian Thucydides, who analyzed the causes of that war in the 5th C. B.C., concluded that the rise of Athens and the resulting unease on the part of Sparta made war inevitable²¹. The dreams and pride of an rising power on the rise (rising power syndrome) incites fear and uncertainty on the part of the hegemon it is pursuing (hegemon syndrome), leading to conflict as both pursuer and pursued come to see the

rivalry as a zero-sum game. Thucydides identified three primary drivers fueling this dynamic that lead to war: interests, fear, and honor²².

Graham Allison, the first dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton Administration, called this severe dilemma arising from a power shift between a rising power and a hegemon, as described in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the “Thucydides Trap.” When a rising power attempts to overtake a hegemon, considerable structural stress arises, leading, even if neither side desires war, to misunderstandings that could lead to the view that war is inevitable. This is the “Thucydides Trap.” This Thucydides dynamism is considered to be present through the period in which a rising power is gaining strength, reaches equality with the hegemon, and then overtakes it. Allison’s analysis of this structure from the history of the past 500 years showed that there is a 75% likelihood of it leading to war, while war was avoided in 25% of the cases²³. Thus, Allison’s theory is not that war is unavoidable under the Thucydides Trap but that it can be avoided if both the rising power and the hegemon respond with painful, large-scale adjustments to both their attitudes and their actions.

Based mainly on economic conditions, Allison sees today’s U.S.-China relations as those of a hegemon and a rising power. He argues, based on an overview of China’s dream of regaining its past glory, that China is affected by the rising power syndrome, and warns that if leaders in Beijing and Washington keep doing what they have done for the past decade, the U.S. and China will almost certainly wind up at war²⁴. Furthermore, he lists five scenarios under which this could occur: (i) an accidental collision at sea, (ii) Taiwan moves toward independence, (iii) war provoked by a third party²⁵, (iv) North Korean collapse and (v) from economic conflict to

military war. Based on four past examples of avoiding war and maintaining peace, Allison lists 12 clues²⁶ for resolving the situation and proposes four strategic options for avoiding war: (i) accommodate, (ii) undermine, (iii) negotiate a long peace and (iv) redefine the relationship.

Based on this understanding of the situation, Allison argues that since both the U.S. and China are nuclear powers, avoidance of war would be most advantageous to them²⁷. Then he argues that since maintaining its advantage in the western Pacific is not a vital national interest to the U.S., it would be more effective for the U.S. and China to pursue their own national interests than to brandish lofty international political principles. Allison's theory holds that just as Great Britain, the hegemon at the start of the 20th century, compromised with the rising United States of that time, so should the U.S. reconsider its own important interests and, with an understanding of China's aims, rework its basic policies in accordance with a power balance involving Chinese economic predominance and concentrate on domestic issues.

In identifying scenarios that could lead to war between the U.S. and China, he also discusses the risks of alliances. Describing the outbreak of the First World War, he warns that while alliances may be formed to avoid war, they also could become destructive diplomatic structures in which a minor incident caused by an ally could lead to a major war²⁸. This shows Allison's concern that Japan, as a U.S. ally, could cause a conflict with China over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, which could cause a chain reaction drawing the U.S. into an all-out war with China. Allison warns that the Japan-U.S. alliance should not be fatal to the U.S. and argues for careful review of the scope of U.S. commitments in its alliance with Japan.

4. Ian Bremmer

Bremmer is a young and energetic researcher who, at the age of 28, established the Eurasia Group research and consulting firm in New York City, who has been known for announcing the Top 10 risks every year and advises leaders around the world. Bremmer's G-zero world has attracted a lot of attention. Groups of nations (e.g., the G7 and G20) have played leading roles in building the international order and leading the international community in this order. Bremmer's G-zero world refers to "the world without authoritative leadership"²⁹. In the 2008 financial crisis in 2008, none of the G20 member states was able to play a leadership role on the global stage, since each was bound by its own domestic issues. G-zero world expresses this gap between form and reality. Bremmer sees such a situation in which a country is unable to deal with international issues due to the large number of domestic issues as "a trade-off between domestic and international issues"³⁰.

Even as he describes a G-zero world of domestic and international trade-offs, Bremmer argues that international cooperation is essential to permanent security and prosperity, and that leadership is important for it to function. However, the U.S. government's America-first approach to TPP negotiations and withdrawal from the Paris Agreement ultimately helps to strengthen the rise of China. He envisions China moving in to fill the leadership gap in the international community resulting from the withdrawal of the U.S. Bremmer points out that what China is attempting to advance is not traditional globalization through international cooperation, but China's own unique model of globalization. This is a unique model based on state capitalism, led by the government based on foreign investment intended for infrastructure development and other purposes. That is, promotion of globalization in this

sense is synonymous with China's own hegemonic victory³¹.

Bremmer argues that the policy that the U.S. to choose in response to China's rise is one of "an independent U.S." (domestic recovery), one that prioritizes the national interest, safety and freedom, and that the time has come for Americans to redefine their own value in the world³². His view is that American influence on China will be much smaller than the U.S. hopes to be, and that it should devote its energies to recovering its own economic power instead.

Reforming alliances would be essential to a U.S. domestic recovery. Bremmer argues that U.S. allies need to take more responsibility for their own security, pointing out that Germany and Japan in particular are wealthy states able to take responsibility for their security³³. He also argues that U.S. leaders need to demonstrate to their allies their intention not to intervene in conflicts that do not involve U.S. national security or economic power.

Conclusion

Review of the four arguments above concerning U.S.-China power relations shows that all share the view that China will continue to advance and rise in the future and that, accordingly, U.S.-China power relations will be an important international political factor. Each researcher's main points are summarized below.

First of all, Mearsheimer sees the current U.S.-China rivalry as even more serious than that between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This is because the U.S.-China rivalry is taking place in an environment in which the likelihood of it developing into a war is higher. This is due to the fact that, as the possibility of war increases due to falling

potential costs of such a war, East Asia faces the risk that a war could escalate to the nuclear level.

Navarro points out that U.S. military bases in Japan are highly vulnerable to Chinese attack and that the strategy of air-sea battles and offshore control do not have the power to restrain China reliably. He also stresses the need for credibility on the use of nuclear weapons and expresses concern about the stability-instability paradox. While pointing out the need to build strong alliances in response to these issues, Navarro does not make any clear proposals concerning what specific steps the U.S. and its allies should take.

Allison argues that there is a likelihood of at least 50% that war will break out between the U.S. and China in the coming decades, and that one reason for this is the possibility of its alliances proving fatal to the United States. He also argues that the U.S. should review its policies vis-a-vis China in order to avoid getting drawn into war by its alliances.

Bremmer argues that the policy that the U.S. should choose in a “G-zero” international community in which effectively there is no authority for demonstrating leadership, is one of domestic recovery (devoting its energies to recovering U.S. economic power). He also argues, like Allison, that there is a need for the U.S. to reform its alliances, and he notes that Japan should bear more responsibility for its own security.

These four researchers’ arguments can be divided broadly into those that argue for countering China through power and those that argue that, amid limitations on U.S. power, the nation should prioritize its own safety and prosperity over involvement in East Asia. This is connected to differences in their assessment of the Japan-U.S. alliance, and it shows that the strategic environment in East Asia is a difficult one to address, and one that

differs from the strategic structure during the Cold War.

¹ This paper was presented by Shinohara to summarize the findings of a study conducted in FY2018 at the Center for Air and Space Power Strategic Studies

² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.

³ All other great powers (including Napoleonic France, the Japanese empire, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union) failed in their attempts. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 396, p. 398. Regarding NATO deterrent strategy during the Cold War, see the paper by Yamashita later in this issue (pp. 53-84).

⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 398. On this point, see the paper by Yamamoto later in this issue (pp. 85-107). Thomas Schelling's concept of a "threat that leaves something to chance" leads to the idea of avoiding risks through the possibility that destructive, savage weapons could be used.

⁹ Peter Navarro, *Crouching Tiger: What China's Militarism Means for the World*, Prometheus Books, 2015, p. 18.

¹⁰ Navarro's examples are China's incursions into Tibet and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, the Vietnam War, the China-Soviet conflict, the Spratly Islands, the Taiwan Strait Crisis, and the Senkaku Islands issue. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-42.

¹¹ Asymmetric weaponry refers to weapons that are much less expensive than the subjects they are intended to damage. For example, while antiship missiles launched from mainland China and conventional cruise missiles launched from high-speed double-hulled vessels cost only several million dollars per launch, they are capable of destroying a U.S. aircraft carrier that costs \$10 billion.

¹² Navarro, *Crouching Tiger*, p. 262.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 264-265.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Citing Dan Blumenthal of the American Enterprise Institute, Navarro stresses the importance of military power. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-182.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 232. A number of works make similar arguments: Sugio Takahashi, "Deterrence architecture of the Japan-U.S. alliance: Linkage between strategic nuclear deterrence and dynamic deterrence," *Journal of World Affairs*, May 2013, 74-88; Taku Ishikawa, "'Strategic stability' in Northeast Asia and the Japan-U.S. deterrent," *Journal of World Affairs*, May 2013; Masahiro Kurita, "Alliance and deterrence: As an assumption of collective self defense," *Reference*, March 2015, p. 21.

²⁰ Navarro, *Crouching Tiger*, p. 232.

²¹ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Scribe,

2017, p. 29. Thucydides is known as the father of international politics. In the realist school of international politics in particular, realistic thinking is considered to be thinking like Thucydides. Jitsuo Tsuchiyama, *International security politics: Impatience and arrogance*, Yuhikaku, 2004, p. 2.

²² Allison, *Destined for War*, p. 39.

²³ Of 16 cases in which a rising power threatened the status of a hegemon, 12 led to war while war was avoided in four cases. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, P. xvii.

²⁵ The third parties referred to here by Allison are South Korea and Japan.

²⁶ (i) Higher authority can help resolve rivalry without war; (ii) States can be embedded in a larger economic, political and security institutions that constrain historically “normal behaviors”; (iii) Wily statesmen make a virtue of necessity and distinguish needs and wants; (iv) Timing is crucial; (v) Cultural commonalities can help prevent conflict; (vi) There is nothing new under the sun-except nuclear weapons; (vii) MAD really does make all-out war madness; (viii) Hot war between nuclear superpowers is thus no longer a justifiable option; (ix) Leaders of nuclear superpowers must nonetheless be prepared to risk a war they cannot win; (x) Thick economic interdependence raises the cost – and thus lowers the likelihood – of war; (xi) Alliances can be a fatal attraction; (xii) Domestic performance is decisive. Allison, *Destined for War*; pp. 187-213.

²⁷ Allison argues that the U.S. and China are in a relationship of mutually assured destruction. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

²⁹ Sarah Green (interview with Ian Bremmer), “Welcome to the G-Zero World”, Idea Cast by *Harvard Business Review*, accessed at January 18, 2019, available at: <http://hbr.org/2012/05/welcome-to-the-G-Zero-World>; this interview was conducted in response to the following work: Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World*, Penguin, 2012.

³⁰ One example cited is that of German Prime Minister Merkel changing policy in a manner that led to decreased support in proportion to the increase in the number of refugees admitted to the country. Ian Bremmer, *After the G-Zero: Overcoming fragmentation*, Eurasia Group, 2016, p. 15.

³¹ Nyshka Chandran, “Trump’s presidency in a big win for China, Ian Bremmer says”, CNBC Politics, Nov 8, 2017, accessed at 15 Jan 2019.

³² Ian Bremmer, *Superpower: Three Choices for America’s Role in the World*, Portfolio/Penguin, 2015, p. 200.

³³ Bremmer argues that Europe and Japan should take responsibility for their own security, funding it themselves and putting their own troops’ lives on the line, and that Germany and Japan both are wealthy enough to take responsibility for their own security. Bremmer, *Superpower* p. 61, p. 204.