

# The Next Thucydides Trap: A Case Study of the Sino-American Relationship since 2000

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<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Research Question and Sub-Questions	6
1.2 Theoretical Framework	7
1.2.1 Offensive Neorealism	7
1.2.2 Defensive Neorealism	8
1.3 Historiography	9
1.3.1 Thucydides Trap	10
1.3.2 Sino-American Thucydides Trap	11
1.3.3 Sino-American Relations	13
<b>2. Methodology and Source Criticism</b>	<b>16</b>
2.1 Source Criticism	16
2.1.1 Governmental Websites	16
2.1.2 NGO Websites	16
2.1.3 Governmental Policies	16
2.1.4 Advisory Reports	17
2.2 Methodology	17
<b>3. Military Considerations</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1 Military Spending and Capabilities	20
3.2 Alliance Networks	24
3.3 Geological Considerations	27
3.4 MAD War	30
<b>4. Economic Considerations</b>	<b>33</b>
4.1 The BRI	33
4.2 The Fight for Resources and Trade	37
4.3 Economic Interconnectedness	39
<b>5. Ideological Considerations</b>	<b>44</b>
5.1 Information War	44
5.2 The Ineffectiveness of Global Institutions	47
5.3 The American Pivot to Asia	48
5.4 Anti-Chinese Rhetoric	49
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Sources Cited</b>	<b>54</b>
Primary Sources	54
Secondary Sources	55
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>68</b>
Appendix A: Top Ten Defense Budgets per Country (2023)	68
Appendix B: Top Ten Defense Budgets per Country (2020)	69
Appendix C: Top Ten Countries with Highest Number of Active Military Personnel	70

Appendix D: Nine Dash Line	70
Appendix E: China-US Bilateral Trade 2001-2016	71
Appendix F: China-US Bilateral Trade 2017-2023	72

## 1. Introduction

This thesis will be about the possibility of war between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the USA. This will be done by looking at the relationship between these countries since the turn of the century. The paper will be divided into three different aspects that will determine the possibility and likelihood of the closing of the Thucydides trap between these two nations. Firstly will be the military considerations that will be taken into account. The difference in military spending between the two nations and the size of the military will be analyzed to gauge whether these are sufficient as a deterrent to the other nation in making the first move leading to escalations that would eventually turn into military conflict. The analysis of military spending will also extend to less conventional modes of warfare such as cyber capabilities as these may be a trigger point for a conflict just as much as any conventional attack could be. Furthermore, when discussing military spending as a deterrent, it is not only the nations individual spending that can be considered as a deterrent to the other nations, their network of alliances and other mutual defensive pacts must be taken into consideration that will further limit the possibility of war unless the aggressor nation is willing to fight with more than one nation.

Having said this, there are three flashpoint regions that may very well lead to direct military conflict between the USA and the PRC, the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula and the question of Taiwanese sovereignty. In the case of the Korean peninsula, the USA and the PRC have already fought, albeit indirectly, a war for control of the region in the early 1950's. Taiwanese sovereignty may however be the more pressing matter as the PRC attempts to exert increasing amounts of pressure on Taiwan to become a Chinese province whilst the USA has repeatedly claimed that it would help defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. The question of Taiwan also ties into the investments China is making in the field of semiconductors and microchips which are necessary for highly advanced military equipment since currently Taiwan is the world leader in production of these with around 63% of the world market in 2021.<sup>1</sup> However, regardless of both countries military spending or size of the militaries, the largest deterrent still remains in the availability of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) that would

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<sup>1</sup>Lee, Yen Nee. "2 Charts Show How Much the World Depends on Taiwan for Semiconductors." CNBC, March 16, 2021. Accessed November 16, 2022. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/16/2-charts-show-how-much-the-world-depends-on-taiwan-for-semiconductors.html>.

lead to a Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) war. This must remain a consideration in the relations between the USA and the PRC, keeping them engaging in direct military conflict, lest they wipe each other out with nuclear weapons, of which both countries possess enough to do many times over.

The second major part of this paper will entail the economic considerations to the possibility of the two nations going to war. Foreign investments that these nations make to increase their global influence will be discussed. The Belt and Road Initiative is a prime example of this with the Chinese government taking control of an important port in Sri Lanka for no economic gain but solely due to its strategic location.<sup>2</sup> The chance that China becomes too politically and strategically involved in locations deemed of national strategic interest by the US could cascade the situation into a war (as was the case with Iraq during the first gulf war).<sup>3</sup> The chance that China becomes too politically and strategically involved in locations deemed of national strategic interest by the US could cascade the situation into a war (as was the case with Iraq during the first gulf war).<sup>4</sup> It could also lead to a situation where the USA is also unable to source the resources it needs for its own military and strategic goals leading to a war. This could extend to sensitive infrastructure the USA would need to be able to defend itself or even field an effective invasion force, such as can be seen with the increasing investments China makes in microchip and semiconductor industries.<sup>5</sup> However, the interconnectedness of these two major economies also plays a role in this situation as a manner to keep both nations in check against each other or risk major economic downturns as the USA's and the PRC's economies are heavily dependent on each other. Nevertheless, this may not continue to be a deterrent to the two nations as they both work to diversify their economic imports and exports to ensure less dependency.

The final chapter of this paper will discuss ideological considerations to make when regarding the Sino-American Thucydides Trap. Concerning the ideological differences between

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Abi-habib, "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough up a Port." The New York Times. The New York Times, June 25, 2018. Accessed November 16, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Gulf War." Miller Center, August 14, 2020. Accessed November 16, 2022. <https://millercenter.org/statecraftmovie/gulf-war>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Gulf War." Miller Center, August 14, 2020. Accessed November 16, 2022. <https://millercenter.org/statecraftmovie/gulf-war>.

<sup>5</sup> Lara Williams, "China to Take Lead in Global Semiconductor Growth." Investment Monitor, July 27, 2022. Accessed November 17, 2022. <https://www.investmentmonitor.ai/analysis/china-lead-global-semiconductor-growth-2030>.

these two nations, it is important to understand the information war that is taking place between them. This extends to both an internal and an external level. Internally this encompasses the increasing negative rhetoric from the political sphere as well as the change in the way the public news presents the other nation, which in turn can galvanize the populace of the country to the point of war. Furthermore, this also includes the amount of fake news that permeates in the nations concerning the other country. Externally, this entails the attempts of each nation to further ostracize the other on the global scale. The external point will also allow for an insight into the ineffectiveness of international institutions from staving off war between the USA and the PRC if they are leading up to it. As well as this, America's Pivot to Asia under the Obama administration will show that there is an increase in the amount of concern from US politicians and leadership about the rise of Chinese power and influence, and is used as a way to limit or hamper Chinese growth in influence. These two points will also show that the populaces of these two nations are becoming ever-more hostile towards the other nation. This hostility lowers the threshold for the American government to justify an armed conflict with China in the eyes of its population. Furthermore, the rhetoric of the past three US administrations will be analyzed to determine the extent to which the relations between these two countries have worsened, and would allude to any military intervention from the USA into China.

Through these three chapters it will become evident that the likelihood of the Thucydides trap closing between the USA and the PRC is relatively low as it does not meet the same standards as other historical examples do. However, it will also become apparent that although the likelihood is not high, the chances are also not nil. Whilst both nations have many factors that will deter outright conflict between the two nations, the worsening of the relations and the rise of China as a global competitor to the USA could lead to war in a few cases where the China makes a miscalculation to the USA's commitment to a certain ally or region, such as with Taiwan, or if the USA feels sufficiently threatened by China's gain in influence in a region that is deemed of national security interest by the USA, as would be the case of rare materials needed for military hardware.

## **1.1 Research Question and Sub-Questions**

The research question the thesis will focus on will be: Applying a neo-realist perspective, using case research methods, how likely is it that the USA and China will fall into a Thucydides trap as

a result of US status anxiety? As a sub-question, I will be looking at whether the economic interconnectedness will be a point to which the USA and China will refrain from entering into military conflict with each other as an act of self-preservation. Furthermore, I will regard whether the theory of a Thucydides trap is limiting, as newer forms of warfare, such as cyber warfare, were not applicable during the time of the creation of the theory. Furthermore, does Xi Jinping's China believe in an offensive realist perspective in terms of becoming the new world hegemon. Finally, I will also be looking at whether institutions, such as the UN, are effective in their mandate in stopping wars, especially between countries that have permanent spots, and veto rights, on its security council, and as such 'run the show' when it comes to these institutions. This is in line with Mearsheimer's claim that institutions play a minimal, if any, role in achieving and maintaining peace internationally as they have little influence on a state's behavior.<sup>6</sup>

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

As this paper is a case study of the Sino-American Thucydides trap where either nation's decisions can be the cause of war, it will be important to use both offensive and defensive neorealism as a theoretical framework. Neorealism, according to Mearsheimer, has five key assumptions: 1. Great powers are the main actors in world politics in an anarchic world system. 2. All nations have military capabilities. 3. States can never be certain about other states' intentions. 4. The ultimate goal of each state is its own survival. 5. States are rational actors that will try to find the best strategy for their own survival.<sup>7</sup> These five assumptions will also underpin the arguments made in the paper and will be used as the theoretical framework for the arguments as to the specific case of the Sino-American Thucydides trap.

### **1.2.1 Offensive Neorealism**

Mearsheimer explains Offensive Neorealism simply as it is in a country's interest to "gain as much power as possible, and if the circumstances are right, to pursue hegemony."<sup>8</sup> In the Sino-American Thucydides trap case it will be the starting point that both nations will pursue

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<sup>6</sup> John J. Mearsheimer. "The False Promise of International Institutions." *International Security*. Vol. 19 No. 3 (1995) pg. 7

<sup>7</sup> Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith, and John J. Mearsheimer. "Structural Realism." In *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 5th ed., 53. UK: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith, and John J. Mearsheimer. "Structural Realism." In *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 5th ed., 52. UK: Oxford University Press, 2013.

strategies to increase their power with at times being to the expense of the other to attempt to tip the balance to their favor. Snyder further explains this theory by stating that states will however only attempt to gain more power when an opportunity presents itself to mitigate risks to its security whilst doing so.<sup>9</sup>

However, Feng and Ruizhuang pose a problem with this outlook in defensive realism with the change in relationship between the USA and China during the 1970's. They state that defensive realism does not fully explain the change in policy of the triangular relationship between the USA, the USSR, and China to a more bilateral relationship between the USA and China in less than a decade.<sup>10</sup> As well as this, Rendall agrees with Feng and Ruizhuangs position by explaining that Mearsheimer in his theory of offensive realism only uses great powers as examples and does not explain the actions of lesser nations, such as post-Napoleonic France and Austria.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.2.2 Defensive Neorealism

However, on the other hand it is also important to incorporate the key tenant of defensive neorealism into the framework, especially in the case of the PRC, where the assumption is that if a nation tries to gain too much power it will be punished by the system. In the case of the Sino-American Thucydides trap it is crucial to understand the motivations of the PRC, especially as they still are not in a position to resoundingly defeat the USA in open conflict. As such the PRC may use a more strategic approach of balancing so as not to get punished by the system (the USA and its allies) for attempting to upset the balance of power which will also be used as an addition to the theoretical framework of this case study. Taliaferro furthers this argument by pointing out that many nondemocratic states can work together outside of the framework of international institutions for mutual benefit to gain power yet only so as a balance to a third power that threatens both.<sup>12</sup> This same sentiment is brought forth by Kenneth Waltz in explaining that many

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<sup>9</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, "Mearsheimer's World-Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay." *International Security* 27, no. 1 (2002): 153.

<sup>10</sup> Liu Feng, and Zhang Ruizhuang. "The Typologies of Realism." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1, no. 1 (2006): 120.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Rendall, "Defensive Realism and the Concert of Europe." *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 3 (2006): 525.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited." *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2000): 130.



states have created alliances in an attempt to balance the unchecked power of the USA after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup>

Snyder and Lieber however see defensive neorealism in a different manner, pointing to the state of Germany in the lead up to World War 1. They state that the German military staff saw no alternative than to engage in a preventive war for the safety of the country and that this would be the only way for Germany to balance the power between it and its rivals.<sup>14</sup> Posen furthers this argument with the example of Japan acting in a similar fashion during World War 2 as a manner of balancing.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.3 Historiography

Since the end of the Cold War the world has entered an era of unipolarity, yet this has slowly been changing over the last two decades. The rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) threatens the long standing hegemony of the United States. This development has set these two superpowers into a collision course that has the possibility to lead out into war, also known as a Thucydides trap. In the last 500 years, twelve of the last sixteen Thucydides traps have led to a war between the reigning power and their contender.<sup>16</sup> Following this historical reasoning, shows that the USA and the PRC are more likely than not to engage in war with each other. This paper aims to determine if this however truly is the case by looking at economic, military, and ideological considerations and as such determine the likelihood of military conflict between these two countries. Will the power dynamics between the USA and the PRC follow in the footsteps of the German Empire and the British Empire from 1914 or in the same line as the USA and the Soviet Union from 1945-1989? From a neo-realist perspective, each country is out for personal gain in a near Darwinian survival of the fittest system. Militarily speaking this means that as the PRC builds its armed forces it will be in the direct national security interests of the USA to combat this in any way possible to maintain the unrivaled position of hegemony it has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War. In terms of economic considerations, this follows the

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War." *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 28.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Snyder, and Keir A. Lieber. "Defensive Realism and the 'New' History of World War I." *International Security* 33, no. 1 (2008): 176.

<sup>15</sup> Barry R. Posen, "The Best Defense." Edited by John J. Mearsheimer. *The National Interest*, no. 67 (2002): 123.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Hanania. "Graham Allison and the Thucydides Trap Myth." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2021): 16.

same trend. As the PRC is set to become the largest economy of the world this becomes a threat to the USA's position of being able to use its soft power to influence the world to its own liking.<sup>17</sup> Finally, this paper will take a broader interpretation of the word ideology as a set point, this means that it will not only consider political ideological leanings of the two countries, and their compatibility, but also the discourse of the power centers to their constituents concerning the other country. As an example of this is the increased harsh rhetoric of Donald Trump during his presidency towards the PRC and the effect this has as a method of galvanising support of the public towards the possibility of armed conflict with the PRC and its necessity. Through these three factors it will become evident what the likelihood of armed conflict between these nuclear armed super powers is.

### 1.3.1 Thucydides Trap

The theory of the Thucydides trap can be attributed to its namesake, Thucydides, from his books on the Peloponnesian Wars between Athens and Sparta. In short, the Thucydides trap is explained, using the original Peloponnesian example, as the fear Sparta felt as the reigning power to the rise of Athens. Specifically the implications it could have to Sparta's position in the world and its ability to shape its surroundings to its liking.<sup>18</sup> Although, it must be stated that, according to Porter, a burgeoning rivalry between the rising power and the current leader are not predestined to the path of military conflict. As he explains, it was in large part due to the pressure exerted on the Spartans by their allies that they reluctantly engaged in war with the Athenians, it was not the Spartans' own zeal which led them to war.<sup>19</sup> Walling confirms Porter's claim that a Thucydides trap need not always lead to a war using the example of Great Britain prior to the First World War compromising with two rising contenders to its power, the USA and Japan.<sup>20</sup> It must however also be noted that Great Britain did this as a method for it to better combat against its most threatening contender, the German Empire. As such there is a fallacy in the argument

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<sup>17</sup> Derek Saul. "China And India Will Overtake U.S. Economically By 2075, Goldman Sachs Economists Say." *Forbes*. Accessed January 2, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereksaul/2022/12/06/china-and-india-will-overtake-us-economically-by-2075-goldman-sachs-economists-say/>.

<sup>18</sup> Robert B. Zoellick, "U.S., China and Thucydides." *The National Interest*, no. 126 (2013): 22.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Porter, "Thucydides Lives in Asia: Power Transition Traps Are Real." Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep39684>.

<sup>20</sup> Karl F. Walling,, and Graham Allison. "The United States, China, and Thucydides's Many, Many Traps." *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (2018): 155.

made by Walling seeing as the Thucydides trap was more between Germany and the British, which did lead to war, than between Britain and the USA or Japan. On the other hand, an example slightly closer to the present is the Cold War. The Thucydides trap between the USA and the USSR did not lead to direct military conflict between the two superpowers, which can in a large part be explained by the fact that if these two countries would go to war this would lead to a Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) war.<sup>21</sup> This would mean that a Thucydides trap does not in all certainty lead to war between the two nations involved.

This is contended by Forde who concludes that Thucydides saw the Peloponnesian war as a foregone conclusion. Even going as far as to claim that Thucydides claims the situation to be unresolvable until the war had taken its course.<sup>22</sup> He points out that Thucydides, although from a long gone age, can have relevance today in human nature, namely the nature of desire and ambitions that will lead players to act even against their own interest.<sup>23</sup> Krause agrees with this statement in an article where he explains the similarities and differences between the situation in East Asia in 2014 and Europe in 1914, but does also contend that the Thucydides trap is more useful in today's age to explain the likelihood of war as opposed to why a war starts.<sup>24</sup> I do stand in line with Forde that the Peloponnesian war was inevitable due to the pressures and ambitions of the Spartans, yet I also agree with Krause in his statement that the Thucydides trap should be more a measurement of likelihood instead of a hindsight reasoning to war in the present world. This is especially due to the manner in which war is conducted has drastically changed in the present compared to the time of the Peloponnesian war, with the inclusion of nuclear arsenals being the main factor in the case of the Sino-American Thucydides trap.

### 1.3.2 Sino-American Thucydides Trap

Although Thucydides first created the idea of the Thucydides trap, the theory has been re-popularized by American political scientist Graham T. Allison in his book *Destined for War:*

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<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Freedman, and Graham Allison. "Review of *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, AllisonGraham." *PRISM* 7, no. 1 (2017): 176

<sup>22</sup> Steven Forde. "Thucydides on Ripeness and Conflict Resolution." *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2004): 177.

<sup>23</sup> Steven Forde. "Thucydides on Ripeness and Conflict Resolution." *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2004): 178.

<sup>24</sup> Joachim Krause. "Assessing the Danger of War: Parallels and Differences between Europe in 1914 and East Asia in 2014." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 90, no. 6 (2014): 1430.

*Can American and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?* in 2017 in specific relation to the Sino-American case.<sup>25</sup> Allison does not consider the likelihood of a direct attack by one of the two nations on the other highly, but is more concerned with military conflict breaking out from an accident or a simple misunderstanding between the two nuclear armed nations. However, he also points out two factors that go in the face of this statement. The first is the historical defensive strategy of the PRC which will defend itself even in the face of nuclear threat, as can be seen in the Korean war and the Sino-Soviet border clashes during the Cold War. Secondly is that the situation has been changing lately by the clear reaffirmation of the independence of Taiwan by the President of the United States which could lead to a full scale war between the USA and the PRC if Taiwan were to be attacked.<sup>26</sup> This view is furthered by Duffield in his literary review of Allison's book, where he mentions the similarities of the German-British relationship before the First World War and the present relations between the PRC and the USA. He mentions that it was the capability of the contender that mattered most to the leading power whether or not to intervene militarily, and points at the increasing capabilities of the PRC.<sup>27</sup> Goswami agrees with Allison's and Duffield's assessments by pointing out that US strategic policy is resolutely unipolar in nature which means maintaining the status-quo by whatever method possible, even to the extent of war.<sup>28</sup> Chang agrees with Goswami's outlook by explaining that there are three options the USA has in terms of China, containment, incorporation, and conditioning. He further explains that successive US senators and congress members have been vocally in favor of the containment method, attempting to keep China in check by any means to retain US dominance.<sup>29</sup>

Fazal Rizvi, disagrees with Allison's *Destined for War* assessment of a Thucydides trap between the USA and the PRC. While Rizvi does mention that America would be more likely to start a military conflict than China would, he also points at the interconnectedness of the Chinese and American economies which make a war between them too costly for either party to properly contemplate, especially since the US would most likely be unable to persuade its own allies to

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<sup>25</sup> Parag Khanna. "Thucydides Trap or Tug-of-War?" *The National Interest*, no. 151 (2017): 41.

<sup>26</sup> Graham T. Allison, "Destined for War?" *The National Interest*, no. 149 (2017): 10.

<sup>27</sup> Blake Duffield, and Graham Allison. "Book Review: *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* By Graham Allison." *International Social Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2018): 1.

<sup>28</sup> Anubhav S. Goswami, "Balancing Grand Strategy for America to Offset Thucydides's Trap with China." *Journal of Strategic Security* 15, no. 2 (2022): 24.

<sup>29</sup> Johannes Han-Yin Chang, "China-US Relations: The Past as Looking Glass." *American Studies International* 38, no. 2 (2000): 65-66.

join in such a conflict.<sup>30</sup> As well as this, Chan also disagrees with Allison's statements on the Sino-American Thucydides trap. Chan points to the fact that it remains uncertain whether Sparta attacked Athens due to Athens rise in power or due to the Imperialistic agenda Athens had which led to its power. Chan further explains the significance of this distinction in the context of China, stating that whilst it is undeniable that China is a rising power, it does not have the same imperialistic attitude Athens had during its rise, and thus the Sino-American Thucydides trap may never close.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Heath and Thompson proclaim a different approach to the Sino-American Thucydides trap. They postulate that threats or cooperation between the two nations will not be enough to stave off war between these powers as they do not address the problems at the core of the issue, the USA's fears. Therefore, they suggest a change in the Sino-American relations by having the USA be more accepting of the changing status-quo as a method to keep the Thucydides trap from leading to war between these two nations.<sup>32</sup>

### 1.3.3 Sino-American Relations

The relations between the PRC and the USA have changed dramatically over the two decades. The meteoric rise of the PRC since the early 2000's had not gone unnoticed in the USA, yet the shift became ever more evident in 2013 with a meeting between Xi Jinping and Barack Obama. During this meeting it was suggested that the USA and the PRC work on a new system for relationships between a rising power (PRC) and a leading one (USA).<sup>33</sup> According to an article written by Joseph Nye, former Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, the USA and the PRC have a long history of cooperation despite ideological disagreements since the 1950's, and this is still the case today. Their relations will remain stable as long as the USA maintains its alliances with Japan and Australia.<sup>34</sup>

Zoellick, in response to Nye's assessments, suggests that whilst it would be in the benefit of both countries to cooperate on a higher international level, neither the PRC or the USA have been willing to give ground to the other in any negotiations and as such cooperation is stalled

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<sup>30</sup> "US-China Rivalry and 'Thucydides' Trap': Why This Is a Misleading Account." Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00131857.2020.1799739?needAccess=true&role=button>.

<sup>31</sup> Steve Chan, "Why Thucydides' Trap Misinforms Sino-American Relations." *International Relations* 21, no. 2 (2021): 235.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy R. Heath, and William R. Thompson. "Avoiding U.S.-China Competition Is Futile: Why the Best Option Is to Manage Strategic Rivalry." *Asia Policy* 13, no. 2 (2018): 92.

<sup>33</sup> Robert B. Zoellick, "U.S., China and Thucydides." *The National Interest*, no. 126 (2013): 22.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph S. Nye, "Perspectives for a China Strategy." *PRISM* 8, no. 4 (2020): 129.

between the two, souring relations.<sup>35</sup> This idea is further developed by Jeffrey Sachs who points at three different reasons as to why the USA is distrustful of the PRC, namely the expansionist ideology of the USA, its geographic isolation, and finally America's own low level of social trust.<sup>36</sup> Due to these three factors, the USA will be unlikely to try and improve relations with the PRC and more likely try to undermine the PRC's position in the world to further the US' own goals. This is in line with the points Seo and Trubowitz make as they mention the increased anti-Chinese advertisements run on American TV during election years by political parties as a way to get swing-states to vote in their favor, signaling a deep distrust of the American public and political spheres of China.<sup>37</sup>

Xuetong sees this differently. He presents the Sino-American relationship as the two nations pretending to be friends, where they eventually came up with the term "neither-friend-nor-enemy", popularly used by experts in both countries.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Saunders partially explains this phenomenon by stating that China's introduction into the world economy has set it in a playing field with strong economies, such as from the USA, where it has to compete with them on the one hand to grow its economy, yet also has to work together with the USA for the same reason.<sup>39</sup> This puts China in a position where they need to be on friendly terms with the USA whilst at the same time directly competing with it to gain more of a share of the world economy, creating a pretending to be friends situation between the two nations. Yet this goes against the recent developments of the last few years under the Trump presidency. Not only has the negative political rhetoric from the USA to China drastically increased, Trump signed multiple laws which increase the USA's ties with Taiwan at the expense of China. This clearly cannot be seen as pretending to be friends on the side of the USA, and as Lampton points out, this is not limited to the side of the Americans with the PRC viewing American policies as a method of containing the PRC.<sup>40</sup> Also, this aligns with statements made by Rigger, as he

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<sup>35</sup> Robert B. Zoellick, "U.S., China and Thucydides." *The National Interest*, no. 126 (2013): 25.

<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, "Will America Create a Cold War With China?" *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 13 (2019): 29-30.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Trubowitz, and Jungkun Seo. "The China Card: Playing Politics with Sino-American Relations." *Political Science Quarterly* 127, no. 2 (2012): 190.

<sup>38</sup> Yan Xuetong, "The Instability of China-US Relations." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 3 (2010): 263-92.

<sup>39</sup> Phillip C. Saunders, "Supping with a Long Spoon: Dependence and Interdependence in Sino-American Relations." *The China Journal*, no. 43 (2000): 56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667532>.

<sup>40</sup> David M. Lampton, "Reconsidering U.S.-China Relations: From Improbable Normalization to Precipitous Deterioration." *Asia Policy* 14, no. 2 (2019): 51.

explains that China views the USA as a nation trying its best to stem the growth of China and ultimately destroy the nation as a result of the rhetoric coming from the USA.<sup>41</sup> This view is further developed by Morris as he states a clear down-turn in bilateral relations between the two countries from 2011 onwards due to the incompatibilities of their self-images.<sup>42</sup>

It seems clear that there are many differing opinions of the discourses concerning the Thucydides trap in general and specific to the Sino-American case, as well as the state of relations between the PRC and the USA. I position myself on the theory of the Thucydides trap along the argument of Krause concerning its usage in the present age as a method of measurement of likelihood as opposed to using it as an explanation as to why war is inevitable, although this may have been the case during the Peloponnesian war, as Porter suggests. In the Sino-American case I am more hesitant to agree with Allison, Duffield, and Goswami's assessments of the likelihood of war being high due to the strategic policies of the PRC and the USA alike. Whilst an argument can be made in line with Heath and Thompson that war can only be averted by the changing of these policies on the part of the USA it seems more likely to me that Rizvi is correct in his assumption that war will be prevented as it would constitute a lose for both parties due to, among other reasons, the interconnectivity of the economies. Finally, the Sino-American relationship has seen many shifts since the turn of the century, yet at present it seems most likely to follow in line with the postulations of Sach and Zoellick as one of distrust and competition more than anything else. This is in large part due to the hostile rhetoric coming from the USA in not only election years but also in voting patterns from the senate and congress aimed at containing the perceived Chinese threat.

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<sup>41</sup> Shelley Rigger, "Theory and Policy in Sino-U.S. Relations." *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21 (2014): 145.

<sup>42</sup> Lyle J. Morris, "Incompatible Partners: The Role of Identity and Self-Image in the Sino-U.S. Relationship." *Asia Policy*, no. 13 (2012): 134.

## **2. Methodology and Source Criticism**

### **2.1 Source Criticism**

#### **2.1.1 Governmental Websites**

One of the most important fonts of information for these factors will be the governmental websites. These will give insight into factors such as, but not limited to, governmental defense spending, economic growth and trade figures, and political rhetoric concerning the other party. Additionally, governmental websites will give numerical figures on these factors that will allow for comparisons to not only the other nation in this case but also allow for comparison to Thucydides traps in the past and their comparisons. However, it must also be stated that this source of information can be limiting. The governmental website will only hold publicly accessible data and may not be a true representation of for example the military budget is allocated.

#### **2.1.2 NGO Websites**

Another important source of information that will be used is information gathered from NGOs such as the IMF and the World Bank for a better understanding of both nation's financial situations. This includes the economic growth of the countries, the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and PPP (Purchasing Power Parity), the amount of trade between the two countries and any trade deficits. This information will help to understand the economic situation and the level interconnectedness of the economies as a factor to the likelihood of the Sino-American Thucydides trap closing. On the other hand, NGO websites can only give projections about the future and cannot be fully relied upon to be fool-proof information sources, especially concerning investments that have not been finalized yet.

#### **2.1.3 Governmental Policies**

Governmental policies and governmental rhetoric will be analyzed as a primary source of information to the changing of relations between the PRC and the USA. Governmental policy



shifts, such as the USA's stance to intervention in Taiwan, will be crucial for understanding the likelihood of war breaking out as a result of an alliance network. Additionally, the rhetoric of the government can also highlight its own strategies and prerogatives, such was the case during the Trump administration's heavily anti-China rhetoric signaling a more combative and aggressive stance towards Chinese strategic goals in East Asia and the South-China Sea. Whilst governmental policies will give a good insight into what the country says, it does not necessarily mean that the government will actually do what it says. Therefore, rhetoric and policy will only give indications of intent and in many cases will not be set in stone. Furthermore, especially in the case of the USA, as the government changes after elections some policies may be adjusted or completely scrapped.

#### **2.1.4 Advisory Reports**

Finally, advisory reports to governments will be regarded. In many cases these reports are done by independent researchers at the behest of a government to give the government the best insight into possibilities and the overall picture. This will give a clearer picture to the analysis done in this report as well. These governmental reports may also have better access to information that at the time of the creation of the advisory report may not be in the public domain yet. However, it must also be noted that these reports may also face the same problem as this report where the information that is gathered may not fully reflect reality as nations may keep information confidential as state secrets.

#### **2.2 Methodology**

This paper will take the case of the Sino-American Thucydides trap as a starting point to determine the likelihood of war between the two nations. To understand and fully analyze the situation, the paper will make use of a theoretically informed case study methodology using neorealism as the theoretical framework. The neorealism framework will also be divided into its two sub-categories to create a better understanding of the case and the viewpoints of either side. The offensive realist theoretical approach will be more in line with a US perspective as it attempts to maintain its supremacy over the PRC in a survival of the fittest world. On the other hand the defensive neorealism may be better applied to the PRC in the face of US expansionism

which threatens the balance of power and thus the security of the PRC. To understand the case of the Sino-American Thucydides trap a collective case study approach will be utilized to not only contextualize the issue of the Thucydides trap in the present age but also gauge the likelihood of the Thucydides traps through comparison with other Thucydides traps with similar backgrounds in the past.

A case study methodology has been heavily influenced by Robert Stake who divided the method into three different categories which do not have to be mutually exclusive. The first of these is intrinsic, secondly instrumental, and finally collective (also known as comparative). This paper will make use of the last subcategory of the case study methodology, collective. As Stake explains, collective case studies is the method of using multiple cases as a comparison model.<sup>43</sup> Crowe *et al* explain the advantages of using the collective case study methodology as allowing more than just a generalized conclusion from a single case study. Furthermore, they explain that for more complex theoretical analysis a minimum of five case studies must be used for comparison purposes.<sup>44</sup> In the case of this paper this will mean using the Thucydides trap as a measurement tool for the likelihood of war between the PRC and the USA by comparing the situation to other Thucydides traps that have happened in the past, both ones that have and also have not eventually led to war. The likelihood will be analyzed through three different factors, military, economic, and ideological.

Starman helps in the definition of the case study methodology, explaining that a case study approach should first define what the subject event is before using comparative examples to build a foundation for the theory/argument.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Takahashi and Araujo build upon this argument by making the distinction between comparative and multiple case study. They define the difference between the two as comparative needing direct comparison between the case studies, even when in different contexts, whilst multiple does not require this direct comparison.<sup>46</sup> In the case of this thesis that would mean using the subject event of the

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<sup>43</sup> Robert E. Stake, "The Unique Case." In *The Art of Case Study Research*, 4–5. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publ, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Crowe, Kathrin Cresswell, Ann Robertson, Guro Huby, Anthony Avery, and Aziz Sheikh, "The case study approach." *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 11, no. 100 (2011): 6.

<sup>45</sup> Adrijana B. Starman, "The case study as a type of qualitative research." *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies*, 1 (2013): 35

<sup>46</sup> Adriana R. W. Takahashi, and Luis Araujo. "Case Study Research: Opening up Research Opportunities." *RAUSP Management Journal* 55, no. 1 (November 23, 2019): 100–111. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RAUSP-05-2019-0109>.

Thucydides trap to find comparable examples in history as a method to create a conclusion to this specific case study.

Bartlett and Vavrus outline four pitfalls to the collective case study approach and how to overcome these to create a stronger result. The first of these problems is having a set boundary in research material. Bartlett and Vavrus explain that the boundaries are set by the researcher and are therefore adjusted as needed thus creating boundaries too soon in the project can lead to bias and a lesser conclusion.<sup>47</sup> The second and third problem are linked and are that many case studies are bound to a specific place or community, which should be combated by binding the case study to encompass not only the specific place but also the space around it and the relations that affect it.<sup>48</sup> In the case of my thesis this would mean not specifically binding the case study to the Sino-American relations but also include other relations these nations have that affect the Sino-American one. The fourth problem is the limiting of case studies, for which Bartlett and Vavrus suggest using more case studies. According to them, using more case studies will allow for better comparisons by increasing the insights gained on a theoretical level for the topic.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Lesley Bartlett and Frances Varvus, "What's Wrong with Case Studies? Pitfalls and Promises." *Teachers College Record*. (2018): 2.

<sup>48</sup> Lesley Bartlett and Frances Varvus, "What's Wrong with Case Studies? Pitfalls and Promises." *Teachers College Record*. (2018): 2.

<sup>49</sup> Lesley Bartlett and Frances Varvus, "What's Wrong with Case Studies? Pitfalls and Promises." *Teachers College Record*. (2018): 4.

### **3. Military Considerations**

The first aspect of the chances of the Thucydides trap between the PRC and the USA to close that will be analyzed is the military aspect. For this, there are four main points that need to be taken into consideration to fully analyze the chances of the trap closing. First of all will be the military spending and the sizes of the militaries which would be considered a deterrent for war between the two nations. Furthermore, the nations' capabilities will be examined to determine the rationality of how feasible an attack would be. This also includes non-conventional methods of warfare such as cyber warfare, which could not only be considered a deterrent but also due to the ambiguousness of this method of attack could also be a catalyst to war breaking out between these two countries. Secondly, it is important to note that these countries do not stand alone, both of these nations have alliance networks which constitute their own military capabilities. It is crucial to understand whether this balancing of power is enough of a deterrent to the nations to start a war.

Having said this, it is possible to circumvent many of these alliance networks under specific circumstances due to past agreements made. An example of this would be the USA's ambiguous pledge to add Taiwan in war if China were to attack the island, yet this would not trigger article 5 of the NATO agreements, and therefore would have the possibility of leaving the USA alone in its fight against the PRC. Finally, the most effective deterrent method up to date would be the amount of nuclear weaponry the two countries possess. The reason this is such an effective deterrent would be due to the possibility of a direct military conflict between the two nations to evolve into a Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) war. If either the USA or the PRC would feel as if their country is at threat of being overrun by the other, they would keep the possibility of launching nuclear strikes against the other, which could affect an identical strike from the other. This would lead to a lose-lose situation as both nations could possibly be completely wiped out, or at the very least become so radiated that they would be unable to recover.

#### **3.1 Military Spending and Capabilities**

The first deterrence to an invasion from either the USA or the PRC on the other is the amount that each country spends on their defense budget. Appendix A displays the top ten countries' defense budget spending in 2023. As can be seen in the table, the USA far outstrips any other

nation in the amount of money it spends on its military. As a comparison to the PRC, the USA invests more than three times as much money in its defense budget annually. In the eyes of a more offensive realist country such as the USA there would be no limit to the amount of spending needed to ensure national security, however for a defensive realistic country such as the PRC it makes more sense to limit its expenditure so as not to outright threaten the world stability and therefore its own security.<sup>50</sup> In simple terms this means that the USA, as the current world hegemon, can only feel that its position is secured by an ever increasing spending on its military. This would put the USA in a position where no other nation in the world would be able to threaten the USA militarily and as such ensure its nation's security. On the other hand the viewpoint would be very different from the PRC. It makes more sense for the PRC to limit its military spending to a level where they are able to fend off any invaders' threat yet not outright threaten US supremacy lest they run the risk of a preemptive attack from the USA in an effort to limit the PRC's growth.

This trend for both nations can be seen in the change in spending between 2020 (Appendix B) and their spending in 2023 (Appendix A). Whilst the argument can be made that the PRC has increased its military expenditure in this time by approximately \$40billion the USA has increased their spending by approximately two and a half times that number, \$100billion. As Gray points out in an article written in the U.S. Naval War College review, the technological edge that the US has over the USSR in the early 1980's would be the best form of deterrence to Soviet aggression.<sup>51</sup> This same reasoning could be applied in the relationship between the USA and the PRC. The technological edge the USA has over the PRC means many of the Chinese military preemptive strike capabilities become ineffective and obsolete. As a result, this would deter the PRC from making the first move to engage in a military conflict between the two countries as it would be at a stark disadvantage. Furthermore, this would also mean that at least from the perspective of the PRC the Thucydides trap would not be very likely to close.

However, the budgets allocated to military spending do not give a complete understanding of the situation between these nations. A certain amount of the money spent on the military will be towards equipment and research whilst another amount will be for personnel

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<sup>50</sup> Shameer M. "Power Maximisation And State Security," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 21, no. 2 (2017): 11.

<sup>51</sup> Colin S. Gray, "Defense, War-Fighting and Deterrence," *Naval War College Review* 35, no. 4 (1982): 42.

itself. As has been made clear in Appendix A, the USA spends more than the PRC on their military, although, as can be seen in Appendix C, the actual number of active personnel heavily favors the PRC over the USA. The reason this is significant is due to the nature of direct invasion of any country and the personnel it possesses to fend off such an attack. Taking the Korean War as an example of this point, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), China's land based ground forces, overwhelmed the US army that was technologically superior as well as had more than 100 times more firepower in terms of artillery and aircrafts.<sup>52</sup> This in itself also becomes a large deterrent for a US invasion of the PRC's mainland which could lead to a protracted war of attrition leading to a US defeat regardless of the difference in military spending. This also would lower the chances of war between the USA and the PRC as it would limit the USA's chances of winning a fast war on the Chinese mainland, and could potentially fall into a similar protracted war of attrition such as the Vietnam war that would turn public opinion against the war.

One manner in which to keep a war from becoming attritional is through the military capabilities of each nation. Whilst it has been established that the USA spends by far the most money on its military budget and that the PRC has almost double the amount of active military personnel available to it than the USA, the capacity to even be able to wage a war both close by and far off would have to be analyzed to understand the likelihood. Given that state actors are rational, it is only rational not to engage in a situation where the nation is either unable to respond or is heavily disfavored. In short, it is important to understand whether both the USA and the PRC would have the military capabilities to engage in distant wars. It has been well established since 2001 that the USA has the military capabilities to fight distant wars from its shores, as shown by the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively.

What is less evident is the capabilities of the PRC to engage in the same manner. According to an advisory report made by the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, the PRC has been increasing in capabilities for distant wars, in some cases even surpassing the USA and its allies' capabilities. However, one of the major areas where the PRC lags behind in its ability for global power projection is in the area of aircraft carrier capabilities.<sup>53</sup> This would leave the PRC at a major disadvantage to the USA and therefore dissuade it from starting a direct conflict

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<sup>52</sup> Hao Yufan, and Zhai Zhihai, "China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited," *The China Quarterly*, no. 121 (1990): 105.

<sup>53</sup> Joris Teer, Tim Sweijjs, Paul van Hooft, Lotje Boswinkel, Juliëtte Eijkelkamp, and Jack Thompson. "China's Military Rise and the Implications for European Security," *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, (Nov. 2021): 47

between the two nations. Although it must be mentioned that a report in 2019 by the Defense Intelligence Agency concluded that whilst the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) currently is lagging behind in carrier capabilities, the PRC is currently building its first domestically created aircraft carriers to boost this. Furthermore, the report also concluded that the PRC is working on building the world's largest transport aircraft which would further Chinese global power projection and ability to field armies in distant lands.<sup>54</sup> As such, whilst it currently remains improbable that the PRC will attack the USA as it does not have the capabilities as of yet to engage in distant wars, this factor is changing rapidly as the PLAN modernizes and increases its range of operations. On the other hand, disregarding any other factor, it seems a distinct possibility that the USA would invade China due to the current difference in capabilities as well as the USA's proven track record of being able to field armies in distant lands with little issues. This is furthermore backed by the empirical study conducted by Benjamin Fordham where he concludes that there is a correlation between capability and the use of force in the case of the USA.<sup>55</sup> The more capable the armed forces are, the more likely they will be deployed in combat to influence the world.

The final aspect to take into consideration is the newest frontier of warfare, one where war could be fought over long distances without ever having to send an army outside the borders, cyberspace. As more vital infrastructure, both military and civilian, become linked to digital networks cyber warfare could become one area where an unconventional attack could lead to a conventional conflict between the USA and the PRC. Between 2014 and 2020 the US government has been the target of over more than 60 thousand cyber attacks, this has happened to such a degree that it has been deemed the largest threat the US faces today by the director of US National Intelligence.<sup>56</sup> It is nearly impossible to prove what amount of these 60 thousand cyber attacks were sanctioned, financed, or ordered by the Chinese government due to the level of sophistication and the plausible deniability when dealing with hacker groups that do not have direct links to a government. On the other hand, the Chinese government also claims to be a victim of cyberwarfare from the United States being targeted tens of thousands of times, targets

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<sup>54</sup> "China Military Powers: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win," *Defense Intelligence Agency*, (2019): 33

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin O. Fordham, "A Very Sharp Sword: The Influence of Military Capabilities on American Decisions to Use Force," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 5 (2004): 652-653.

<sup>56</sup> Ra. Atreus, "Cyberwarfare: Threats, Security, Attacks, and Impact," *Journal of Information Warfare* 19, no. 4 (2020): 18.

including governmental agencies.<sup>57</sup> Retaliation by both nations can take many forms, one of which, albeit unlikely unless severe enough, would be through military means.<sup>58</sup> For the USA one of the primary concerns is Chinese build up of cyber capabilities to target crucial American infrastructure during a time of crisis.<sup>59</sup> Such an attack would leave the USA with no other recourse than to use military measures against the PRC in an attempt to stop the attack as well as deter the PRC and other nations from engaging in such activities against it. Whilst such an event seems unlikely, it becomes ever more possible with an ever increasing dependency on digital interconnectedness it could take one miscalculation or an independent group with former ties to the Communist Party of China (CPC) that could escalate from a cyber attack to a more conventional war.

### **3.2 Alliance Networks**

It is important to understand that although the US's and the PRC's own militaries are important as methods of deterrence for a military invasion there are other militaries that would also play a role in a conflict, increasing the amount of deterrence given. One such example would be for the USA in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). One of the more important aspects of NATO is its article 5 which states that an attack against one of the nations will be considered an attack against all of the signatory states.<sup>60</sup> Specifically due to this article of the treaty it is crucial to take into consideration the large network of alliances that take place for the USA in the event of Chinese aggression. Originally set up during the Cold War as a bulwark of the US aligned states against the Communist Eastern European states NATO has shifted in its prerogative. An example of this can be seen in 2001 when article 5 of the NATO charter was invoked for the first time in its history to declare war on Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks in the USA. Additionally, it can further be seen by the growing influence NATO presents against China in Asia in the

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<sup>57</sup> "China Accuses US of 'tens of Thousands' of Cyberattacks," France 24, September 5, 2022. Accessed April 30, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220905-china-accuses-us-of-tens-of-thousands-of-cyberattacks>

<sup>58</sup> Sico van der Meer, and Frans Paul van der Putten. "US Deterrence against Chinese Cyber Espionage: The Danger of Proliferating Covert Cyber Operations." Clingendael Institute, 2015. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05348>.

<sup>59</sup> Scott Harold, Martin C. Libicki, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos. Chapter in *Getting to Yes with China in Cyberspace*, 7-8. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> NATO. "Collective Defence and Article 5." NATO. Accessed April 30, 2023. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_110496.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm).



planning of opening a NATO office in Japan.<sup>61</sup> As Russett and Stam point out, the expansion of NATO has the potential to lead to a new alliance bloc being created between Russia and the PRC as these two powers become isolated against the Western bloc.<sup>62</sup> Such an event would create a much larger deterrent for both sides to start hostilities but would also create more possibility to do so as the nations become increasingly entwined with commitments to other nations.

Another of these entanglements that helps in deterrence, but also increases the chance of conflict is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). QUAD is an agreement between the USA, Australia, Japan, and India partially to hem in the PRC and counter its growth and influence in the region.<sup>63</sup> This becomes apparent when regarding South Korea's decision to opt out of the QUAD. Having to choose between its dependency on security from the USA and the growing economic ties it has with the PRC.<sup>64</sup> One of the main reasons this could potentially lead to an indirect war is due to the existing territorial issues that both Japan and India face with the PRC, in the case of India having already led to war in the past and has had numerous flare ups since 2020. However, QUAD does not have the same assurances for the USA to get involved in the conflict between India and the PRC as NATO does. Having said this, the USA would be put in a position where they would have to choose losing a strong regional ally or engaging in conflict with China, directly or indirectly. As such, it stands to reason that a rational actor would determine it being in the national security interest of the USA to at the very least indirectly oppose the PRC by funding and supplying the Indian armed forces in such a conflict.

This same situation also plays out with Japan where China has claimed the Japanese held Senkaku Islands. This becomes problematic due to the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States of America where article 5 clearly states that any attack on either party within the territories under Japanese administration would ensure both

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<sup>61</sup> Daniel Hurst, "Nato Planning to Open Japan Office to Deepen Asia-Pacific Ties – Report," *The Guardian*, May 3, 2023, World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/03/nato-planning-to-open-japan-office-to-deepen-asia-pacific-ties-report>.

<sup>62</sup> Bruce Russett, and Allan C. Stam, "Courting Disaster: An Expanded NATO vs. Russia and China," *Political Science Quarterly* 113, no. 3 (1998): 362. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2658072>.

<sup>63</sup> Patrick G. Buchan, and Benjamin Rimland. "Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue," March 16, 2020. Accessed May 1 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-diamond-past-present-and-future-quadrilateral-security-dialogue>.

<sup>64</sup> "Beyond North Korea: The Japan-South Korea-US Trilateral in the Indo-Pacific." Accessed May 1, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/beyond-north-korea-the-japan-south-korea-us-trilateral-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

parties would be involved in beating back the attack.<sup>65</sup> Similar to NATO's article 5, this treaty could put the USA, even if unwillingly, in direct military confrontation with the PRC if Japan were to be attacked. The last US alliance network in the region that needs to be discussed as increasing the potential for conflict with the PRC is the AUKUS agreement. A security and technology sharing agreement signed by the governments of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the USA has the potential of boxing the PRC in, as one of the main security points of this agreement would be the increased presence of forward operating US troops in Australia.<sup>66</sup> From a realist standpoint, a country is unable to be sure what other nation's intentions are and therefore cannot fully trust them. To this point, the increased presence of a Chinese rival in a region deemed of importance to China has the potential of creating more hostility between the PRC and the USA. On the other hand this could potentially dissuade China from being more aggressive in the region as they would now have to contend with more military powers than solely the regional power of Australia.

Alliance networks however are not solely limited to the USA. The PRC maintains a special relationship with nations, such as Iran and Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK), that have been dubbed part of the 'Axis of Evil' by President George W. Bush in 2001.<sup>67</sup> These nations may comparatively not have the same military capabilities as the USA or the PRC, but remain a threat to the US or its allies. In the case of the DPRK this becomes especially problematic due to its proximity to the US ally of South Korea. This is furthermore inflamed by the fact that the DPRK and South Korea are officially still in a state of war as they never signed a peace agreement following the Korean War, only a ceasefire. It can be argued that neither the PRC nor the USA is obligated to come to the defense of the DPRK or South Korea respectively, yet neither the PRC nor the USA is willing to give up the influence they hold in the region to a potentially hostile regime.<sup>68</sup> It is important to note however that there has been an increasing amount of scholars and politicians in the PRC that see the DPRK as more of a liability than an asset to its national security and it comes into question whether or not the PRC would stand

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<sup>65</sup> "MOFA: Japan-U.S. Security Treaty." Accessed May 1, 2023. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Bates Gill, "Explaining the Troubled Australia-China Relationship: A Perspective from Australia," *China Review* 23, no. 1 (2023): 264.

<sup>67</sup> Manoj K. Mishra, "Assessing The Chinese Threat To American Interests," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 25, no. 1 (2021): 138.

<sup>68</sup> Oriana S. Mastro, "China's Evolving North Korea Strategy," US Institute of Peace, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20184>.

directly behind the DPRK in a conflict.<sup>69</sup> The informal alliances that the PRC has with both Iran and the DPRK may work as a deterrent to US aggression, yet do not specifically state that the PRC is obliged to join in any conflict with the DPRK or Iran. Due to this, it decreases the chance of a direct military conflict between the USA and the PRC as a result of one of the PRC alliances. The question on this does remain however whether or not the PRC will decide to join in a conflict supporting the DPRK if it were to be attacked by either South Korea or the USA, favoring its influence and border security over the problematic relationship it has with Pyongyang.

### **3.3 Geological Considerations**

Having considered the alliance between the DPRK and the PRC it is important to note that this still remains a potential flashpoint between the PRC and the USA for a direct conflict. The Korean Peninsula plays a particularly difficult role in the scenario of Sino-American relations and its Thucydides trap. Whilst there are some aspects that both sides agree to, such as the denuclearization of North Korea, the approaches taken differ immensely from each other.<sup>70</sup> As a result of this, North Korea has been able to steadily increase its nuclear capabilities and therefore become a direct threat to the USA, in part due to the PRC's unwillingness to intervene more harshly on the situation. As well as this, South Korea, an ally of the USA, and North Korea, an ally of the PRC, are technically still at war. The Korean war ended in a cease-fire and not a peace agreement. This means that if hostilities were to resume between these two countries, both the USA and the PRC would be involved on opposing sides. Whilst this would mean that neither the USA nor the PRC would be considered the aggressor in the war, both nations have a national security interest in ensuring their side become victorious in the conflict. As a result of this, both nations would be unwilling to allow the other to win which creates an increasing amount of pressure on either side to attack the other directly in the face of an imminent defeat on the peninsula.

Additionally, another region that could create conflict between the PRC and the USA is the island of Taiwan and the Taiwan strait. The state of Taiwan is the remnants of the

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<sup>69</sup> Patricia Kim, "How China Sees North Korea: Three Critical Moments in History and Future Directions," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2018. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17323>.

<sup>70</sup> Farah Mohammed, "Can the US and China Avoid the Thucydides Trap?" JSTOR Daily, November 5, 2018. <https://daily.jstor.org/can-the-u-s-and-china-avoid-the-thucydides-trap/>.

Kuomintang political party of China. Due to this fact the PRC claims Taiwan as a breakaway province of the country that will one day be reunited with the mainland. This has even gone so far with the PRC instituting the One-China Policy which states that any nation that wishes diplomatic ties with the PRC must not have them with Taiwan. Although the USA may not have formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, it passed the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979-1980 which ensures by law that the USA must supply Taiwan with the military means to effectively defend itself in the event of an invasion.<sup>71</sup> Since Xi Jinping became premier in the PRC in 2012, he has undergone definitive action to ensure the reunification with Taiwan to be a part of his legacy.<sup>72</sup> Even though it has been stated that the PRC wishes for a peaceful reunification with Taiwan, in a speech given by Xi Jinping in 2019 it was explicitly stated that the PRC will not renounce the use of force if needed taking all necessary measures.<sup>73</sup> The peaceful reunification between Taiwan and the PRC seems increasingly unlikely under the current political system of the PRC which would mean that if Xi Jinping intends for the reunification to happen under his leadership it will have to be done forcefully.<sup>74</sup>

US policy has been ambiguous towards the question of Taiwan, although as deLisle explains, this allows the US to back the country which it deems is less at fault in the situation.<sup>75</sup> It stands to reason that were the PRC to invade Taiwan, the US would back Taiwan in this conflict as the PRC would be the aggressor and therefore Taiwan to be less at fault between the two. Furthermore, the ambiguity has been clarified even further by Joe Biden's 2022 declaration that US forces would help in the defense of Taiwan if the PRC were to invade the island.<sup>76</sup> This would put the PRC in a difficult situation as Xi Jinping is committed to the reunification of the PRC and Taiwan, yet if this were to occur in a non-peaceful manner the PRC would be in a

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<sup>71</sup> Rep. Clement J. Zablocki, [D-WI-4. "H.R.2479 - 96th Congress (1979-1980): Taiwan Relations Act," Legislation, April 10, 1979. 04/10/1979. <http://www.congress.gov/>.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Gries, and Tao Wang. "TAIWAN'S PERILOUS FUTURES: Chinese Nationalism, the 2020 Presidential Elections, and U.S.-China Tensions Spell Trouble for Cross-Strait Relations." *World Affairs* 183, no. 1 (2020): 42.

<sup>73</sup> Lily Kuo, "'All Necessary Means': Xi Jinping Reserves Right to Use Force against Taiwan," *The Guardian*, January 2, 2019, World news. Accessed May 1 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/02/all-necessary-means-xi-jinping-reserves-right-to-use-force-against-taiwan>.

<sup>74</sup> Robert D. Blackwill, and Philip Zelikow. "China Confronts Taiwan." *The United States, China, and Taiwan: Council on Foreign Relations*, 2021: 28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28673.9>.

<sup>75</sup> Jacques deLisle, "United States-Taiwan Relations: Tsai's Presidency and Washington's Policy," *China Review* 18, no. 3 (2018): 20.

<sup>76</sup> David Brunnstrom, and Trevor Hunnicutt. "Biden Says U.S. Forces Would Defend Taiwan in the Event of a Chinese Invasion." *Reuters*, September 19, 2022, World. Accessed May 1 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-says-us-forces-would-defend-taiwan-event-chinese-invasion-2022-09-18/>.

direct conflict with the USA. Aside from the island of Taiwan, the Taiwan strait also is of importance in the question of the possibility of war between the USA and the PRC. Since 2001 the Taiwan strait has become increasingly more militarized.<sup>77</sup> Whilst, in the past Taiwan strait crises, the USA was able to cow the PRC away from military invasion of Taiwan, the increase in military spending and the modernization of the PLA and PLAN makes this solution increasingly less effective as a deterrence to Chinese ambitions. As well as this, one of the major factors that play a role for the USA concerning the Taiwan strait is its importance as an economic shipping lane. This will be further discussed in Chapter 4.2.

The last major geographical consideration to take into account is the South China Sea (SCS). The conflict of claims due to the PRC nine dash line policy with SouthEast Asian nations, the continued militarization of the islands in the SCS, and the freedom of navigation act by the USA make this region a potential powder keg. The nine dash line, as seen in Appendix D, is the region in the SCS that the PRC claims as part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in direct contest to other competing claims from SouthEast Asian nations. One main issue in the contest between the PRC and the USA is concerning the Scarborough Shoal which both the PRC and the Philippines claim. The Philippines is a US ally in the region and could become a point of contention between the PRC and the USA as the PRC pushes this claim against the Philippines. Although the Scarborough shoal does not fall under the mutual defense treaty between the USA and the Philippines, it has been suggested by Filipino lawmakers that the loss of this territory would also mean the end of the US-Filipino alliance.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, whilst the USA may not be obligated to come to the defense of the Philippines in this conflict it may still be inclined to do so in an attempt to maintain this strategically important alliance in SouthEast Asia. To this point, Zheng Wang suggests that currently many Chinese scholars remain ambiguous concerning the nine dash line due to China's inability to forcefully implement its idea yet will act when they are strong enough to do so.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the militarization of the SCS by the PRC has created an area that has become increasingly hostile for the USA to traverse, as well as making any strike on the Chinese mainland more improbable from the region.

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<sup>77</sup> Kurt M. Campbell, and Derek J. Mitchell. "Crisis in the Taiwan Strait?" *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 4 (2001): 17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20050223>.

<sup>78</sup> Lyle J. Morris, "A U.S. Option Playbook for Contingency Planning to Reclaim Scarborough Shoal." RAND Corporation, 2019: 2-3. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19892>.

<sup>79</sup> Zheng Wang, "Chinese Discourse on the "Nine-Dashed Line": Rights, Interests, and Nationalism," *Asian Survey* 55, no. 3 (2015): 514.

After the creation of military bases on the Spratly islands China issued an official warning to the USA about sending naval air flights over the region.<sup>80</sup> Depending on both the USA's continued presence in the region and the PRC's dedication to its claims could potentially end in conflict between the two nations. The head of the Malaysian Institute for Maritime Affairs even declared that the PRC is seeking to replace the USA as the dominant power of the region.<sup>81</sup> The USA's department of defense has put forth statements, using the Freedom of Navigation Act as reasoning, that they believe excessive maritime claims would hinder the US's ability to, among other things, field global mobility of US troops.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, the PRC's embassy in Indonesia has also made a statement in 2022, stating that the USA is in fact the real threat to peace and stability in the South China Sea, directly as a result of the Freedom of Navigation Act Operations it carries out.<sup>83</sup> Finally, this region also is of national security interest to both the USA and the PRC due to the amount of maritime trade that passes through the SCS, which will be further discussed in Chapter 4.2.

### 3.4 MAD War

The final military consideration that needs to be addressed is the deterrence of the nuclear arsenals both nations possess leading to the possibility of a MAD war. Since the invention of the nuclear bomb there has been a marked shift in global politics where any war between nuclear armed countries could end in the destruction of both nations. The idea is that with the possibility of destroying an enemies' cities with a single bomb is enough of a deterrent to ensure that the nation will not be attacked.<sup>84</sup> This idea was first developed during the Cold War as the US

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<sup>80</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, "Circles of Steel, Castles of Vanity: The Geopolitics of Military Bases on the South China Sea." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 4 (2016): 1003.

<sup>81</sup> Michael G. Gallagher, "China's Illusory Threat to the South China Sea," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 170. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539152>.

<sup>82</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. "DoD Releases Fiscal Year 2022 Freedom of Navigation Report." Accessed June 19, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3370607/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2022-freedom-of-navigation-report/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F3370607%2Fdod-releases-fiscal-year-2022-freedom-of-navigation-report%2F>.

<sup>83</sup> "The US Actually the Real Threat to Regional Peace and Security—Reality Check IV: Falsehoods in US Perceptions of China." Accessed June 19, 2023. [http://id.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202206/t20220622\\_10707647.htm](http://id.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202206/t20220622_10707647.htm).

<sup>84</sup> Robert J. Art, "Between Assured Destruction and Nuclear Victory: The Case for the 'Mad-Plus' Posture," *Ethics* 95, no. 3 (1985): 498.

strategy to deter aggression from the Soviet Union.<sup>85</sup> This has continued to be a key point in the US' deterrence strategy.<sup>86</sup> In this effect, the PRC also is a nuclear capable nation and would therefore fall under one of the few nations that would create a MAD war if attacked. However, for this deterrence to be feasible and credible it is crucial to analyze the nuclear capabilities and arsenals of the USA and the PRC.

Both the USA and the PRC have access to the technology needed for the creation of the Neutron bomb, the strongest nuclear bomb currently in deployment. However the respective strategies of both countries follow a neo-realistic approach. The USA's strategy is to ensure it has enough nuclear capabilities for each potential rival as well as any potential nuclear bomb launched at it, whereas the PRC's strategy is more of maintaining a status quo having only enough to effectively defend its territory and deter other nations from aggression towards it.<sup>87</sup> The nuclear strategies employed by both nations do serve as a strong deterrence for military conflict between the two superpowers as both nations have a large enough arsenal and a sophisticated enough capability to use their arsenal to threaten each other's national security. This in and of itself will most likely be one of the core reasons that a Cold War would be more likely between the PRC and the USA as opposed to a Hot War.

The USA may spend the most amount of money on their military but the PRC has the largest number of active personnel. Both of these factors play a role that it becomes increasingly likely that the Thucydides trap will not close between these two nations. Furthermore, especially in the case of the USA there is a further deterrence method in the amount of alliances it has created that would also come to its defense, such as NATO. However, this is a double-edged sword as this may also lead the USA into an unwanted war with the PRC as it may be obligated to defend an ally or a territory from an attack by the Chinese. Whilst these two points concerning the military considerations of both countries greatly reduce the chances of war between the two nations, there are a few geographical points that may yet still lead to that conflict. The Korean peninsula

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<sup>85</sup> Richard N. Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein. "Deterrence and the Cold War." *Political Science Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (1995): 159. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2152358>.

<sup>86</sup> David S. McDonough, "Nuclear Superiority or Mutually Assured Deterrence: The Development of the US Nuclear Deterrent," *International Journal* 60, no. 3 (2005): 823. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40204064>.

<sup>87</sup> Li Bin, "Introduction: Differences Between Chinese and U.s. Nuclear Thinking and Their Origins," UNDERSTANDING, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016: 11-15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26903.5>.

remains a volatile region with both the PRC and the USA backing opposing sides in a conflict that, whilst not active at the moment, is not over yet. A spark up of this war would mean that either side, in a bid to maintain their national security interest, would lead to increasing escalations from both sides, highly increasing direct conflict between the USA and the PRC.

Moreover, the island of Taiwan and the Taiwan strait could become flashpoints between the PRC and the USA in Xi Jinping's goal of reunification and Biden's commitment to the sovereignty of the nation of Taiwan. As well as this, the area of the SCS can become the start of a battleground between the PRC and the USA as China's competing claims with US allies pit both nations against each other as well as the increased pressure for the USA to maintain its presence and influence in the region under the Freedom of Navigation Act. However, although the geographical considerations could potentially spill out into direct conflict between the two nations, there will have to be heavy considerations to be made on both sides as a direct war between the PRC and the USA could lead to a MAD war which neither government wishes to have happen.



## **4. Economic Considerations**

The second point to consider in a potential conflict between the PRC and the USA surrounds the economic aspects of the two countries. In 2013, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the PRC commenced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>88</sup> In essence, the BRI increases Chinese influence in the world through infrastructure projects financed in the form of loans. This becomes important for two different reasons in this paper, firstly as the BRI may limit US influence in the world which would constitute a threat to US supremacy. Furthermore, it could also become important in the possibility of war due to the ability of the PRC to diversify its economic imports and exports, causing it to lose dependence on countries aligned with the USA as well as the USA itself. The BRI, in its ability to increase Chinese influence in the world, could also lead to fights for strategic resources in the world. One major flashpoint in the world is the ever increasing need for specific rare materials to fuel economies as well as militaries. There is a distinct possibility that if the USA finds itself in a position where it may be close to losing access to such resources would lead a preemptive strike against Chinese interest to maintain its hold on said resources. However, on the other hand, the current economic interconnectedness and dependency would make a direct conflict between the USA and the PRC very costly for both nations. This would become very difficult to justify politically at home, as well as to other nations that are dependent on one of the two economies. This currently is still a large deterrent to military escalation between the two nations. Although, the PRC currently is also, due to the BRI and the current war in Ukraine, in the process of diversifying its trading partners and capabilities. Whilst it remains improbable that the PRC's and the USA's economies will become completely independent from each other, the degree of interconnectedness has a likelihood of dropping, and as such the level of deterrence with it.

### **4.1 The BRI**

First envisioned under the rulership of Xi Jinping, the BRI has been considered as the PRC's effort to create a new silk road from ages past. As of 2020 there were a total of 138 nations that

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<sup>88</sup> "From Initiative to Reality: Moments in Developing the Belt and Road Initiative." Accessed April 24, 2023. [http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/infographics/2015/04/23/content\\_281475094425039.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/infographics/2015/04/23/content_281475094425039.htm).

had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the PRC to join the BRI.<sup>89</sup> One of the major problems for the USA in this system is the amount of influence that the PRC is gaining through this system. Clarke reasons that there have been three major responses by world governments to the BRI project. The first of these is the goal of the PRC to break out of US encirclement, secondly is the aspect that the BRI is an offshoot to Chinese economic growth, and finally, is the soft power the PRC wishes to garner to become an alternative to the US's hegemony in the world.<sup>90</sup> All three of these views pose a threat to the USA to varying degrees. In the reasoning of the breaking out of US encirclement, the USA depends on this system to surveil the growing power of the PLA and the PLAN and react accordingly to safeguard itself and its allies.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, the growth of the Chinese government in itself is also problematic for the USA, currently still the largest economy of the world, due to the decreasing gap in size of the economies, which would make the USA lose soft power and therefore influence in the world. Finally, the most problematic of the three views for the USA would be the challenge to US hegemonic influence in the world.

This would set the PRC to become host to many of the major economic hubs in the world and have large portions of world trade go through its sphere of influence as well as having access to many natural resources that it currently depends upon, only speeding up Chinese economic growth.<sup>92</sup> This shift in power tips the balance of power more in favor of the PRC which would elicit a response from the USA that has the potential of escalating into a military conflict between the two nations as the PRC attempts to grow and the USA attempts to limit it. One of the conflicts that can arise from the BRI is the projects in US aligned states such as Germany. As the BRI increases Chinese influence in the world, it will cause issues for the USA as US allies become more entrenched in Chinese debts as a result of the BRI. Whilst this is not the case yet, there are already railways linking Beijing to Paris and Berlin which have been funded by BRI loans.<sup>93</sup> Even more problematic for the USA is when the Chinese influence extends to regions

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<sup>89</sup> Christoph N. Wang, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - Green Belt and Road Initiative Center," April 19, 2021. Accessed May 2, 2023, <https://green-bri.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Clarke, "The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Grand Strategy?" *Asia Policy*, no. 24 (2017): 71-72.

<sup>91</sup> Sarah Kirchberger, "Who Is Encircling Whom?: Security Policy Aspects of China's Relationship with Japan," Federal Academy for Security Policy, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22214>.

<sup>92</sup> Weixing Hu, "The United States, China, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Rise and Return of Strategic Competition," *China Review* 20, no. 3 (2020): 136-137.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Frankopan, Chapter in *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, 511-12. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

that are deemed of importance to national security for the USA. One such example is the region of Pakistan where Chinese influence is growing with the creation of deep water ports and other infrastructure projects. Pakistan also is a major US ally in the fight against terrorism and nuclear proliferation, which can cause a major retaliation from the USA as it feels its security fall under threat from this growth in Chinese influence.<sup>94</sup>

The BRI also has the added benefit for the PRC of in essence buying countries and governments. Whilst many of the BRI infrastructure projects can easily be defended as solely economic boosting projects in less developed nations, there are also examples where this is not fully the case. It has been suggested by Mishra and Mishra that the PRC has looted the resources and exploited the markets of the small economies indebted to it through the BRI.<sup>95</sup> It has furthermore been dubbed a ‘debt diplomacy’ by former Vice-President of the USA, Mike Pence.<sup>96</sup> The Colombo and Hambantota ports in Sri Lanka are good examples of this case as they have been leased out to the PRC for 99 years after Sri Lanka defaulted on their loans to the PRC given through the BRI.<sup>97</sup> These two ports are not only in economically significant areas but also hold militarily strategic locations. As a result of this, the PRC is able to exert more influence and send the PLAN further away from the homeland. This is a troubling development for India, the PRC’s regional rival, as well as for the USA, India’s ally.<sup>98</sup> Another example of this is the foreign base set up by the PRC in Djibouti which was possible due to the indebtedness of Djibouti to the PRC from BRI loans. This military base is a few kilometers away from a US base in the same region, and former National Security Advisor to the Trump administration, John Bolton, even claimed that Chinese military are using lasers to blind US pilots when trying to land in Djibouti.<sup>99</sup> The USA has attempted to counter the BRI by passing the BUILD Act in 2018 to

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<sup>94</sup> Gal Luft, and Joseph S. Nye. “The Anatomy of the BRI’s Impact on US Interests.” Silk Road 2.0: Atlantic Council, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16785.7>.

<sup>95</sup> Mansi Mishra, and Vivek Kumar Mishra. “China’s Belt And Road Initiatives: EXAMINING DEBT TRAP DIPLOMACY FOR REGIONAL SUPREMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF SRI LANKA.” *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 25, no. 1 (2021): 128.

<sup>96</sup> “Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration’s Policy Toward China – The White House.” Accessed May 2, 2023. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/>.

<sup>97</sup> Stuart Heaver, “Sri Lanka’s Chinese-Built Port City Stirs White Elephant Fears,” Accessed May 2, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/2/17/sri-lankas-chinese-built-port-city-stirs-white-elephant-fears>.

<sup>98</sup> Anjana Pasricha, “Chinese-Funded Projects Deepen Sri Lanka’s Economic Woes,” VOA, December 23, 2022. Accessed May 2, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-funded-projects-deepen-sri-lanka-s-economic-woes-/6888652.html>.

<sup>99</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “National Security Advisor Unveils Administration’s Africa Strategy.” Accessed May 2, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1713212/national-security-advisor>

help finance private infrastructure investments in developing countries to give an alternative to the BRI and therefore stem growing Chinese influence.<sup>100</sup> This race to finance and buy influence in the world has the potential to escalate as the USA faces more pressure from the loss of prestige and hegemonic power, and the PRC's gain in influence emboldening it to take more risks.

Finally, the BRI also has the possibility of creating a new economic global order that does not have the USA as the world's economic hegemon. Through a large network of infrastructure built by the PRC and thus joined in a Chinese trading system there is a possibility of a parallel economic system that has the PRC at the top. Haibing *et al.* explain that there are two possibilities from the US trade war with China, firstly he points out that it has the potential to backfire and not hamper Chinese economic growth which would put US companies at a global competitive disadvantage. The second possibility they argue is that if Chinese economic growth does stagnate it can have the effect of the PRC creating a parallel system to the USA which would cause immense damage to the US's world leadership position.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, such a system would allow the PRC to economically coerce nations that do not acquiesce to its wishes to comply to much greater extent and without the interference from the USA.<sup>102</sup> The idea of the PRC creating a parallel economic system also holds to the change in the Chinese economy as its integration in the current world economy causes the CPC to lose more power and thus come under internal pressure from nationalist and protectionist circles within the PRC.<sup>103</sup> This would follow realism as the greater regional power, in this case the PRC, would be able to exert its influence and bend its neighbors to its strategic interests. Moreover, this would impact the US's ability to use its own economic influence on nations to gain a more advantageous position in the region. As a result of this economic struggle between the USA and the PRC it stands to reason

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[unveils-administrations-africa-strategy/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FNews-Stories%2FArticle%2FArticle%2F1713212%2Fnational-security-advisor-unveils-administrations-africa-strategy%2F](https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1713212/national-security-advisor-unveils-administrations-africa-strategy).

<sup>100</sup> Patrick Mendis, and Joey Wang, "Unveiling China's Grand Plan: How America Is Waging a Futile War with Other Means." *Harvard International Review* 40, no. 3 (2019): 39.

<sup>101</sup> Zhang Haibing, Matthew P. Goodman, Chen Dongxiao, Nigel Cory, Peter Raymond, William Reinsch, Stephanie Segal, et al. "The Belt and Road Initiative: How China and the United States Could Avoid Conflict and Promote Cooperation." *Perspectives on the Global Economic Order in 2019*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22588.6>.

<sup>102</sup> Terry Mobley, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Insights from China's Backyard," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (2019): 56.

<sup>103</sup> Phillip C. Saunders, "Supping with a Long Spoon: Dependence and Interdependence in Sino-American Relations," *The China Journal*, no. 43 (2000): 55–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667532>.

that the Thucydides trap is more likely to trigger a war than not, especially when taking into consideration that the PRC has linked the economy to its military strategies.<sup>104</sup> This specific aspect of linking the economy to the military for the PRC has the potential to trigger a military escalation between the USA and the PRC as they compete for economic dominance in not only the region but the world as a whole.

#### **4.2 The Fight for Resources and Trade**

As the USA and the PRC fight for economic dominance there will also be the matter of natural resources that needs to be discussed. One of these resources is water. Water is essential to all life on earth, yet is decreasing in availability. It has often been stated in academic circles that there is a high likelihood that the wars of the next century will revolve around the use of water and ownership of water sources.<sup>105</sup> From a Chinese classification 300 of 668 of its largest cities are experiencing water scarcity, 108 of these are serious, and sixty-six of these are in a critical condition.<sup>106</sup> The decreased availability is therefore putting increasing amounts of pressure on the CPC to act and fix the issue, yet this may also bring it into direct conflict with other nations in the region which experience similar problems, some of which are US allies. A PRC war with any of these neighbors can have a cascading effect where the USA would be obligated to step in as well causing these two superpowers to be engaged in a direct conflict with each other over water. However, water is only one of the multitude of resources that could cause a conflict between the PRC and the USA to occur. Moreover, the gathering of Coltan may also cause an escalation between the PRC and the USA. Tantalum is a mineral derived from Coltan that is used in the production of electronic equipment and is primarily mined in central African nations. The USA has no local source of this resource and has labeled it as a critical resource to its national security.<sup>107</sup> The problem occurs as the PRC's electronics industry grows at a breakneck speed that also requires the same materials as the USA does. It has already been suggested that some of

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<sup>104</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, "Chinese Strategy and Military Forces in 2021," (August 2021): 3

<sup>105</sup> Karin R. Bencala, and Geoffrey D. Dabelko. "Water Wars: Obscuring Opportunities." *Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 2 (2008): 21.

<sup>106</sup> Todd Hofstedt, "China's Water Scarcity and Its Implications for Domestic and International Stability," *Asian Affairs* 37, no. 2 (2010): 72-73.

<sup>107</sup> Dena Montague, "Stolen Goods: Coltan and Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *SAIS Review (1989-2003)* 22, no. 1 (2002): 114.

the conflicts plaguing the region of the Democratic Republic of Congo are financed by the PRC and the USA in a bid to gain a favored position in the mines.<sup>108</sup>

As well as this, energy resources can become a major flashpoint between these two nations. In the span of two decades, the PRC has gone from a new exporter of oil to the world's second largest importer of the substance, surpassing even the United States which stands at third place.<sup>109</sup> Whilst the USA and the PRC may have similar interests in this case, such as the relatively low price of oil that would benefit both, as demand continues to soar they may also start to engage in direct competition for sources of oil. Since both the USA and the PRC deem oil to be a resource crucial to national security and stability it may lead both nations to act ever more hostile to each other as they continue to compete for sources.

Not only are the USA and the PRC in a struggle for resources, in particular ones that both national economies and militaries are dependent on, they also are in competition for shipping lanes and trading routes. There are three specific areas in which this could cause competition between the USA and the PRC, namely, the SCS, the Taiwan Strait and the Strait of Malacca. These three areas account as a passageway for almost a third of global trade.<sup>110</sup> Again, it must be stated that the USA and the PRC are aligned to a certain degree in the assurance that trade progresses through these shipping lanes. However, the core problem is the agreement of responsibility and ability to exert influence. As mentioned before, the US Freedom of Navigation Act is the USA's idea that they uphold the ability to freely deploy their navies in international waters.<sup>111</sup> Yet this becomes problematic given the increased pushing on claims by the PRC in the SCS, with the USA already having tested Chinese resolve multiple times in the past few years.<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, China views these trading ports and shipping lanes as vital to its economic

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<sup>108</sup> James H. Smith, "Tantalus in the Digital Age: Coltan Ore, Temporal Dispossession, and 'Movement' in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 1 (2011): 22.

<sup>109</sup> David Zweig, and Bi Jianhai. "China's Global Hunt for Energy," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20031703>.

<sup>110</sup> "Dire Straits for Flow of Trade through Malacca," *The Insurer*, September 14, 2022. Accessed May 3 2023, <https://www.theinsurer.com/viewpoint/dire-straits-for-flow-of-trade-through-malacca/>.

<sup>111</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. "DoD Releases Fiscal Year 2022 Freedom of Navigation Report." Accessed May 3, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3370607/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2022-freedom-of-navigation-report/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FReleases%2FRelease%2FArticle%2F3370607%2Fdod-releases-fiscal-year-2022-freedom-of-navigation-report%2F>.

<sup>112</sup> Brad Lendon "US Navy Challenges Beijing's South China Sea Claims, Gets Angry Reaction." CNN, March 24, 2023. Accessed May 3, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/24/asia/us-navy-operation-paracels-china-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

interests due to an approximate 40% of its total trade running through this area.<sup>113</sup> The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies concluded in an advisory report that the situation is further complicated by China's reliance on these shipping lanes for the much needed oil to maintain its economic growth that comes from the Persian Gulf.<sup>114</sup>

It is important to understand that although the USA is not a claimant of land in the area it still has a vital interest in the region as it gains many raw materials which it is dependent on through these shipping lanes, trade totalling over \$1.2trillion.<sup>115</sup> Additionally, if the PRC decides to close off these straits to US shipping needs the cost of trade for the USA through this region could increase by approximately \$2.8billion which could have potentially disastrous effects for the US economy.<sup>116</sup> Due to these factors as both nations are dependent on the shipping lanes and could face great losses if their trade were to be impeded in this region, it can only lead to two distinct possibilities for the region. The first of which would be that the PRC and the USA work together to ensure the continued free-flow of trade through the region. This seems an unlikely avenue due to the increased presence of the PLAN and PLA on the Paracel and Spratly island chains and the US's Insistence in continuing the freedom of Navigation Act in the region thus making it difficult for either nation to trust the other. The second possibility can only be a direct competition between the two nations further militarizing the strait of Taiwan, the SCS, and the Strait of Malacca which could lead to an outbreak of war if trade were impeded for either nation. This possibility also becomes more likely with the increased patrols of both the PRC and the USA in the region as both attempt to safeguard their economic and strategic interests in the region which may lead to a fall in the amount of trade passing through.

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<sup>113</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, , Arleigh A. Burke, and Max Molot, "The Critical Role of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea," *China and the U.S.: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 2019.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22586.30>.

<sup>114</sup> Joris Teer, Tim Sweijs, Paul van Hooft, Lotje Boswinkel, Juliëtte Eijkelkamp, and Jack Thompson. "China's Military Rise and the Implications for European Security," (November 2021): 76-77.

<sup>115</sup> Christine E. Macaraig and Adam James Fenton. "Analyzing the Causes and Effects of the South China Sea Dispute: Natural Resources and Freedom of Navigation." *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 8, no. 2 (2021): 46.

<sup>116</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, Arleigh A. Burke, and Max Molot. "The Critical Role of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea." *China and the U.S.: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 2019.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22586.30>.

### 4.3 Economic Interconnectedness

Even though the PRC is currently in the process of diversifying its trading network and its dependencies there is still a vast amount of trade that happens between these two nations. Although it must be stated that economic ties may not necessarily stop a Thucydides trap from closing, as can be seen in the example of Great Britain and the German Empire at the onset of the First World War, it does create an additional barrier to its closing.<sup>117</sup> It therefore becomes important to analyze the amounts of trade between these two nations to discuss the possible barrier to the closing of the Thucydides trap between them. As can be seen in Appendix E, since 2001 there has been a steady increase in the amounts of trade between these two countries, the highest amount being around the year 2015. It also becomes evident that the PRC exported more than double the amount in USD than imported from the USA. However, with the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the USA in 2016 trade started to sharply decrease between these two countries as he instituted a trade war with the PRC over the next few years. This trade war brought trade between the USA and the PRC to the lowest point it had been in the last twenty years, as can be seen in Appendix F.

Additionally, the Coronavirus pandemic also hampered the trade between these two nations. As a result of these events it becomes clear that the barrier for the closing of the Thucydides trap becomes smaller. However, there has been a clear increase in the amount of bilateral trade between the USA and the PRC during the Biden administration which once again raises the barrier of war. One of the major concerns to the trade between the USA and the PRC is its inequality. As Fordham and Kleinberg point out, the uneven trade relations between two nations can cause concerns as the balance of power and influence changes to favor one nation over the other.<sup>118</sup> This is specifically also the case in the trade relationship between the USA and the PRC and one of the major driving factors for former President Donald Trump to initiate a trade war. It furthermore also puts the PRC in a more advantageous position as its exports to the USA far outweigh the amount it imports from the USA and therefore is less dependent on the relationship in comparison to the USA. However, partly as a result of the trade war and partly due to the changing relationship between the PRC and the USA, the PRC has been looking for

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<sup>117</sup> Edgar Crammond, "The Economic Relations of the British and German Empires." *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 77, no. 8 (1914): 777. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2340924>.

<sup>118</sup> Benjamin O. Fordham, and Katja B. Kleinberg, "International Trade and US Relations with China." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 3 (2011): 217-218.



other trade partners that it can depend on and can influence more effectively, lessening the reliance on the US market.

One of the major points that could break away the economic tethers between the USA and the PRC is the diversification of the Chinese economy and trade. The PRC has increasingly attempted to create free trade agreements(FTA) with countries that would become heavily dependent on it, therefore increasing its power in the relationship. One example of this is the FTA that was signed between the PRC and Chile in 2005. This agreement ensured that a large portion of Chilean trade would be with the PRC, creating an asymmetrical relationship, whilst the PRC would receive large amounts of copper, which was crucial to its production and manufacturing industries.<sup>119</sup> These FTA's lower the PRC's reliance on any one country for the resources it requires to continue its economic growth and further lowers its reliance on the Sino-American trade relationship. Furthermore, as mentioned before, the increased militarization in the SCS creates a need for the PRC to garner alternative methods to procure its energy resources, such as natural gas. In 2014 a new gas pipeline was announced between Russia and the PRC for the transport of over 10 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year.<sup>120</sup> Under normal circumstances this would be largely a symmetrical relationship between the PRC and Russia, however after the ostracization of Russia by the European Union due to the war in Ukraine, the PRC was able to profit off of a desperate Russia whilst gaining a much needed diversification of supplier for natural gas.<sup>121</sup>

This furthermore also ties into the point made in Chapter 3.2 where there is a large possibility of a Russo-Chinese alliance to be made, which would further decrease the PRC's reliance on the USA as a trade partner. Moreover, the PRC is also in the process of lowering dependence on the outside world for its own needs. It is the largest investor of renewable energy sources, accounting for approximately 23% of the global market in renewable energy sources.<sup>122</sup> This decreased reliance on other nations will place the PRC in a more advantageous position in

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<sup>119</sup> Ka Zeng, "China's Free Trade Agreement Diplomacy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, no. 3 (2016): 284.

<sup>120</sup> Chen Aizhu, "Russia, China Agree 30-Year Gas Deal via New Pipeline, to Settle in Euros," *Reuters*, February 4, 2022, Asia Pacific. Accessed May 4, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/exclusive-russia-china-agree-30-year-gas-deal-using-new-pipeline-source-2022-02-04/>.

<sup>121</sup> Sergey Vakulenko, "What Russia's First Gas Pipeline to China Reveals About a Planned Second One," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Accessed May 4, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89552>.

<sup>122</sup> Nicholas Cropper, "Will China's Future Be Cleaner?" American Security Project, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25622>.

global diplomacy as it will have fewer ways in which it can be coerced into action against its will. Although, it must also be mentioned that currently the PRC is not in that position as of yet and is still dependent on the US's Freedom of Navigation act to secure its supply of oil from the Persian Gulf, yet are currently in the process of increasing the presence of the PLAN all the way to the strait of Hormuz.<sup>123</sup> However, until this is complete it remains highly unlikely that the PRC will engage in a direct conflict with the USA as they would be unable to keep the US navy from blocking oil exports through the strait of Hormuz to China, grinding its economy and military vehicles to a halt.

Another point that must be considered is the cost-benefit analysis of a war between the PRC and the USA. Simply stated this would mean whether or not the financial costs of a war are higher than the perceived gains for such a war, what would both nations lose if a war were to break out. As mentioned above, one of the major costs for the PRC would be the loss in oil imported through the strait of Hormuz due to an American blockade. To understand the monetary losses of each of the countries in the event of a military conflict between the USA and the PRC, the Sino-American trade war will be taken as an example. Whilst the obvious point is that a trade war and a conventional war are not the same and in the event of a conventional war the losses would be far greater, the example is given to give a basic understanding of the minimum costs both countries would face if a conventional war were indeed to break out. During the trade war it was estimated that Chinese manufacturing would entail a loss of over \$15billion, and the USA would lose an approximate of 2.1 million jobs.<sup>124</sup> Additionally, it has further been estimated that both economies would at the very least contract by at least 0.5%, hitting the PRC harder in the short term due to its larger reliance on the USA as a trading partner, yet would ramp up for the USA over time.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, the PRC has been able to weaponize food exports to the USA during the trade war, and has successfully coerced US foreign policy with the threat of withholding food exports.<sup>126</sup> This could have potentially disastrous effects for the USA in the

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<sup>123</sup> Sunil V. Shinde, "China's Assertive Behavior in South China Sea and Us Response," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 76, no. 3 (2015): 693.

<sup>124</sup> Yuhan Zhang, "The US-China Trade War: A Political and Economic Analysis," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 31, no. 1/2 (2018): 54.

<sup>125</sup> Deborah H. Y. Tan, and Chen Chen. "Modelling the Economic Impact of the Sino-US Trade Dispute: A Global Perspective." In *The Chinese Economic Transformation*, edited by Ligang Song, Yixiao Zhou, and Luke Hurst, 216. Views from Young Economists. ANU Press, 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvp7d4j8.18>.

<sup>126</sup> Zhang Hongzhou, "The U.S.-China Trade War: Is Food China's Most Powerful Weapon?" *Asia Policy* 15, no. 3 (2020): 61-62.

event of a conventional war with the PRC, however as Ukraine becomes more aligned with the USA, this loss in food imports from the PRC could potentially be offset by new imports from Ukraine.

It must therefore be deduced that although economic interconnectedness does not in itself prevent a Thucydides trap from closing between each other, it does increase the barriers for war. However, as a result of the increased militarization of the SCS and the Taiwan strait and the increased uncertainty of each other's intentions the chance of a conventional war does increase between the USA and the PRC. Moreover, as resources continue to become scarcer and both nations continue to grow there will be a continued struggle to claim these resources between these nations. Although this may not necessarily lead to a conventional hot war between the PRC and the USA, it is surmised that at the very least proxy wars have already started between them in an attempt to get access to resources such as tantalum. Additionally, the diversification of the PRC's economy into greener energy sources, and its reduction in reliance on energy resources from the middle east allow it more freedom to pursue its own strategic goals without fear of US blockades keeping vital resources away from its shores. This fear is further reduced by the increasing presence of the PLAN in areas between the strait of Malacca and the strait of Hormuz, allowing the PRC to defend its own interests if needed. However, it must be stated that even in the most conservative figures taken from the 2018 Sino-American trade war were to be the costs for the war between the USA and the PRC, both nations stand to lose large amounts, with contractions of the economies to the potential loss of a major food import route. With the points from only this chapter taken into consideration, the estimation would be that the overall gain would be larger for the USA than the economic losses in the event of a conventional war. Whilst this may not be the case for the PRC as of yet, the PRC is heading towards the same balance sheet where the costs will be lower than the economic, security, and influence gains made.

## **5. Ideological Considerations**

The final consideration to analyze the possibility of war between the PRC and the USA is ideological. This chapter will outline the increased threat of war between the two countries as they galvanize public opinions in their countries as well as increasing international polarization. It can be argued that the PRC and the USA already are engaged in war with each other. Although this may not be militarily in nature at the moment, they are engaged in an information war, a war to win the hearts and minds of people at home as well as abroad. This can be seen through the increased amounts of fake news that has become common on social media which attempt to sway populations in favor of one of the two countries. Furthermore, there has also been a sharp increase in the amounts of negative press and news coverage of the other nation in each country. This indicates a lowering of the needed justification in each country if they were to decide to declare war. Additionally, under the Obama administration there has been a shift in US policy surrounding its focus. Termed “the Pivot to Asia”, the USA’s focus has decreased in other parts of the world in favor of a more focused approach to East Asia. This entails an increased presence of US military troops and hardware in the region and is seen by many as an attempt of containing Chinese growth in influence. Moreover, this pivot to Asia also means that the USA has commenced a strategy of fostering closer ties with countries in the region that share similar goals to the USA, such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea, to hem China in. Finally, there has been a sharp increase in anti-Chinese rhetoric in the USA, both in the public and the political spheres. This could partially be attributed to the ongoing information war between the two nations as well as the change of strategic focus of the USA to Asia, yet can also be explained by the Trump administration’s admonition of China. These factors would be reasons that the Sino-American Thucydides trap is more likely to close and war break out as opposed to make the event less likely.

### **5.1 Information War**

One of the more important aspects to being able to wage a war, especially in a democratic nation is the backing of the populace in such a war. In both the case of the USA and the PRC there has been an increase in the amount of fake news concerning the adversary in a bid to sway the populations. According to Watts the PRC, although not at the level of Russian fake news, has in the last few years increased its fake news capabilities through the use of AI and the science of

successful techniques.<sup>127</sup> One of the major struggles that the USA faces in the fight against disinformation is the lack of cohesive trust the citizens have in the government and governmental agencies.<sup>128</sup> This is in large part owed to the increased polarization of American politics especially during and after the Trump administration. As a result of this, countries such as the PRC may find it increasingly easy to sway public opinion in the USA in a way to their advantage. This already has been the case according to Kurlantzick as the PRC has, during the Corona pandemic, increasingly sowed doubts about the origins of the virus as well as promoting the PRC to be a global champion during those troubling times.<sup>129</sup>

For the USA this becomes a problematic phenomenon as it becomes increasingly difficult to convince its populace of the dangers of the PRC and the threat it may pose to the USA or more importantly one of the USA's allies where it would be obligated by treaty to defend. On the other hand, the PRC, which has more direct control over social media and internet access in the country than the US's government does for its citizens, allows it greater amounts of protection against fake news. With a large state-sponsored censorship and all large local social media organizations at least in part beholden to the CPC, it becomes very easy to disseminate the information that the CPC wishes the people to see and take out the information it does not want them to see. This is called the 'Great Firewall of China' where the CPC has effectively been able to shut out foreign internet services such as Twitter and whatsapp while at the same time hold immeasurable power over the information that is available to the population.<sup>130</sup> This puts the USA in a difficult position whether or not to maintain the freedom of the internet for its citizens knowing that it will be in a disadvantageous position in regard to the spread of fake news from the PRC or to clamp down on the freedoms with the possibility of further alienating the population. As an example of this the Federal Communications Commission formally requested that both Google and Apple remove the app Tik-Tok from their application stores as it was

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<sup>127</sup> Clint Watts, "Disinformation's Dangerous Appeal: How the Tactic Continues to Shape Great Power Politics," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 44, no. 2 (2020): 21.

<sup>128</sup> Jude Blanchette, Scott Livingston, Bonnie S. Glaser, and Scott Kennedy. "Conclusion and Implications for the United States." *Protecting Democracy in an Age of Disinformation*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28659.10>.

<sup>129</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, "How China Ramped Up Disinformation Efforts During the Pandemic," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29835>.

<sup>130</sup> James Sundquist, and Margaret E. Roberts. "Review of Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall, RobertsMargaret E." *China Review International* 23, no. 4 (2016): 407.

deemed a national security risk.<sup>131</sup> It is interesting to note that in the USA fake news was not only used to discredit the PRC but also the democrat party in an attempt to keep anti-Chinese president Donald Trump in power. A study conducted by Sanderson et al. found Donald Trump to be a central pillar for the spread of misinformation in the United States, especially, but not limited to, in relation to election results.<sup>132</sup> This is backed by a study done by the Washington Post which states that in the first 497 days of his presidency, Donald Trump lied or misled the people 3,259 times.<sup>133</sup>

As well as state sponsored fake news, there is also the matter of the news media that plays a role in the persuasion of the populations in the nations. According to Chandran Nair, Western news media repeatedly spin negative stories about the PRC for three reasons: that the PRC is a threat to the world, that the PRC is linked to events that affect the Western world, and that everything must be done to prevent the rise of the PRC.<sup>134</sup> Pinxteren explains this by saying that it is the role of the media to act as a watchdog and therefore generally have a more negative tone.<sup>135</sup> While this may be true in a general sense there is a prevailing sense of negativity in Western media concerning the PRC in comparison to other Western countries. To give an example of this, the difference of how the Western media portrayed the reelection of Xi Jinping in 2023 compared to the election of Olaf Scholz in Germany in 2021. The tone for the future possibilities is remarkably different, further polarizing the people of the Western world with the PRC.

Furthermore, the last aspect in the information war is not directly related to the changing of the internal populations' minds, is the information war that is taking place within third nations. Not only does fake news affect the citizenry of the nation itself, it can also be a useful tool to sway other countries' populaces to the nation's cause. A strong example of this is the PRC's

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<sup>131</sup> Garrett Martin, "China's Strategic Devaluing of American Social Capital," *Journal of Strategic Security* 16, no. 1 (2023): 11.

<sup>132</sup> Zeve Sanderson, Megan A. Brown, Richard Bonneau, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua A. Tucker. "Twitter Flagged Donald Trump's Tweets with Election Misinformation: They Continued to Spread Both on and off the Platform." *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, August 24, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-77>.

<sup>133</sup> Rob de Wijk, Chapter in *De Nieuwe Wereldorde: Hoe China Sluipenderwijs de Macht Overneemt*, 115. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 2019.

<sup>134</sup> Chandran Nair, "Anti-China Rhetoric Is Off the Charts in Western Media," Accessed May 7, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/anti-china-rhetoric-is-off-the-charts-in-western-media/>.

<sup>135</sup> Garrie van Pinxteren, Clingendael. "Foreign Media on China: Beyond Positive and Negative Reporting." Accessed May 8, 2023. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/foreign-media-china-beyond-positive-and-negative-reporting>.

attempts to sway the Taiwanese elections in 2015 where Chinese state sponsored groups flooded presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen's facebook page with Pro-Chinese slogans including that Taiwan was part of the PRC.<sup>136</sup> Although this attack does not seem highly sophisticated, it must be remembered that the PRC has been continuously developing its information war capabilities, with a large rise during the Corona pandemic in 2019-2021. Additionally, it has been stated that the PRC currently uses disinformation as a method of swaying opinions of other nations whilst censoring negative coverage of the PRC.<sup>137</sup> Using the same example as before, Tik-Tok was banned by EU parliamentary work phones, as well as from its diplomatic staff's work phones, in an attempt to counter the influence from the PRC in not only spying but also the spread of misinformation.<sup>138</sup> This spread of misinformation to other countries divides the global opinion between the USA and the PRC and furthers the PRC's rhetoric of being an alternative to the US hegemony. Additionally, it has also, and can further, create a sense in the USA that this is a national security threat to its safety and stability which could cause further escalation between the two nations.

## 5.2 The Ineffectiveness of Global Institutions

Moreover, the information war between the USA and the PRC also has further implications on an international scale as it highlights the ineffectiveness of global institutions, such as the United Nations, from being an arbiter in a conflict between the USA and PRC. The increasing influence that the PRC exerts over other nations in the world plus the increasing polarization as the information war continues would cause a split in the UN general assembly. As it stands right now, the PRC holds considerable clout in the UN general assembly being a part of the so called Group of 77, nations in the global south that attempt to gain more say in the UN workings.<sup>139</sup> However, the UN general assembly is more of an indicator of where nations stand in relation to each other and which nations hold the most clout as any resolution passed is non-

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<sup>136</sup> Atlantic Council, "Methodology of Chinese Strategies on Promoting Discourse Power," Chinese Discourse Power. Atlantic Council, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27615.6>.

<sup>137</sup> Munira Mustaffa, Review of *Review of Beijing's Global Media Offensive: China's Uneven Campaign to Influence Asia and the World*, by Joshua Kurlantzick, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 45, no. 1 (2023): 142.

<sup>138</sup> POLITICO. "Brussels Banned TikTok. Europe Has Questions," March 3, 2023. Accessed May 7, 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-brussels-ban-tiktok-europe-has-questions/>.

<sup>139</sup> "Mixed Report Card: China's Influence at the United Nations | Lowy Institute." Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/mixed-report-card-china-s-influence-united-nations>.

binding and does not have any true consequences. The UN group that would have the potential to affect actual change would be the UN security council. However, the most glaring issue with the United Nations in the case would be the fact that both the USA and the PRC are permanent members of the UN security Council and thus hold veto power. As a result of this, any by either the PRC or the USA to have the UN step in for peacekeeping missions or to intervene would simply be vetoed by the other nation. As a result, this system would not be effective in finding a solution to conflicts between the PRC and the USA. Furthermore, in the example of sanctions placed on the DPRK by the UN security council there have been numerous accusations and linking evidence that the PRC has repeatedly broken these sanctions by shipping materials for rocket technology to the DPRK.<sup>140</sup> This further strengthens the argument of the ineffectiveness of the UN concerning any conflict involving either the USA or the PRC, let alone both.

### **5.3 The American Pivot to Asia**

Additionally, this change in the public perception in the USA to the threat of the PRC has given the Obama administration the opportunity to shift the US's focus from Europe and the MiddleEast to East Asia in what is named 'The Pivot to Asia.' Under the Obama administration the first step was made by the US government to counter the growing influence of the PRC ranging from issues such as the militarization of the SCS to cyber security.<sup>141</sup> Although, it has been expressed that the Pivot to Asia is not designed to contain the growth of the PRC.<sup>142</sup> Former Secretary of State in the Obama administration, Hillary Clinton, further explained this pivot as one of the central pillars being an increased military presence in Japan and South Korea as well as the addition of new military personnel in Australia and Singapore.<sup>143</sup> This increased US military presence in a region where China is continuously growing in influence can only be seen by the PRC as a threat as it cannot be sure of the intentions of the USA. Moreover, while some of the strategic goals of the PRC and the USA coincide, many of those strategic goals also wildly differ. As a result of this, the Pivot to Asia can only be seen as an increased attempt to contain the growth of the PRC.

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<sup>140</sup> Lowell Dittmer, "Trump on China." *Asian Perspective* 41, no. 4 (2017): 691.

<sup>141</sup> Weixing Hu, "Trump's China Policy and Its Implications for the 'Cold Peace' across the Taiwan Strait," *China Review* 18, no. 3 (2018): 62.

<sup>142</sup> Janine Davidson, "The U.S. 'Pivot to Asia,'" *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21 (2014): 78.

<sup>143</sup> Nicholas D. Anderson, and Victor D. Cha. "The Case of the Pivot to Asia: System Effects and the Origins of Strategy." *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 4 (2017): 598.



## 5.4 Anti-Chinese Rhetoric

The final aspect to address within the ideological considerations is the increase in Anti-Chinese rhetoric stemming from the USA. Whilst this trend started with Obama, it picked up exponentially during the Trump administration's heavily anti-Chinese stance. As stated by Daojiong, at the end of the Obama administration the relationship between the PRC and the USA were already souring, and the two primary candidates for the next presidency, Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton, both espoused anti-Chinese rhetoric.<sup>144</sup> The interesting point to this is that although a Hillary Clinton administration was considered to have policies more likely to be against the national interests of the PRC than Trump's administration would, many Chinese officials still would take Clinton due to the instability a Trump presidency would create for them.<sup>145</sup> The Trump administration however has also heavily criticized the PRC and its practices. In what could be described as similar language to the language the US used about the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the Trump administration exclaimed that the PRC was a danger to the freedoms of the world.<sup>146</sup> Trump even claimed that the main problem between the USA and the PRC is the fact that the USA is not using its power to strong-arm the PRC into favorable actions.<sup>147</sup> This trend did not end after the Trump administration came to an end, but has taken a different turn. Whilst it is true that the Biden administration is not as obstreperous as the Trump administration in their admonishment of the PRC, the Biden administration has taken a hard stance on the PRC. Among other points, the Biden administration is considering boycotting Chinese sporting events, reminiscent of the US boycotts of Soviet sporting events during the Cold War.<sup>148</sup> As such, anti-chinese rhetoric from the presidential office in the USA may not be as overt anymore, but still remains in the mannerisms of treating the PRC.

Furthermore, not only is the anti-Chinese rhetoric an American political phenomenon, there has also been a sharp increase in the anti-Asian rhetoric and feeling in US society overall.

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<sup>144</sup> Zha Daojiong, "China-US Relations Under Trump: More Continuity Than Change," *Asian Perspective* 41, no. 4 (2017): 701.

<sup>145</sup> Isaac S. Fish, "Why Chinese Elites Endorse Hillary Clinton." *Foreign Policy* (blog), November 7, 2016. Accessed May 7, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/07/why-chinese-elites-endorse-hillary-clinton/>.

<sup>146</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, "No New Cold War: Why US-China Strategic Competition Will Not Be like the US-Soviet Cold War," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26078>.

<sup>147</sup> Robert Sutter, "Barack Obama, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump—Pragmatism Fails as U.S.-China Differences Rise in Prominence," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 24, no. 2 (2017): 81.

<sup>148</sup> Roberta Haar, "The Biden Administration's Incompatible Views on Multilateralism," *Atlantisch Perspectief* 45, no. 5 (2021): 23.

During the Corona pandemic, in a one month period reported attacks on Asian Americans increased steeply to around 1,500 as anti-Asian sentiment rose throughout the USA.<sup>149</sup> This rise in anti-Asian sentiment in the USA has been partially attributed to the Coronavirus pandemic as well as the rise in negative information, primarily from right-wing news outlets and social media groups, presented to the population.<sup>150</sup> As well as this, the anti-American sentiment has also risen in the PRC. With the naming of the Coronavirus as the China virus, the PRC expelled US journalists and Chinese state media proclaimed the USA as a diminishing power with hostile intent towards the PRC.<sup>151</sup>

Through the increased usage of fake news it becomes more possible that war will take place between the USA and the PRC. Both nations, but especially the Democracy of the USA, are reliant on the population supporting their decision of war and so sowing discontent in the other nation through this medium makes it more difficult for the other nation to instigate and initiate hostilities. Furthermore, the PRC has a much larger advantage in this field than the USA due to its control of the digital space in the country with the Great Firewall of China. However, both countries are using fake news and the media as methods to control the narrative and keep the populations on their side in case of a conflict. This makes the possibility of war more likely as both nations attempt to gain their populations backing whilst spreading misinformation in the others populations. As well as this, in the event of an escalating situation between the USA and the PRC there is no global authority that can stop this situation from leading to war between the two nations. The most important global institutions for this measure, the UN, would be unable to change the course as the general assembly has not true authoritative power to control the USA or the PRC. Moreover, the one group in the UN that could potentially have the power to affect change, the Security Council, has both the USA and the PRC as permanent members with veto power. Due to this fact, the Security Council would be unable to come to an accord as both the USA and the PRC would veto any resolution that would go against their interests in the matter.

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<sup>149</sup> Jennifer Lee, "Asian Americans, Affirmative Action & the Rise in Anti-Asian Hate," *Daedalus* 150, no. 2 (2021): 194.

<sup>150</sup> Jonathan A. Greenblatt, "Fighting Hate in the Era of Coronavirus," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 17 (2020): 212.

<sup>151</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, Yanzhong Huang, Jerome A. Cohen, Adam Segal, and Julian Gewirtz. "How 2020 Shaped U.S.-China Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29954>.

Finally, there has been a marked shift of US policy towards Asia, specifically in a bid to keep the PRC in check. The American Pivot to Asia, although not directly stated by the President, in essence was confirmed by the Secretary of State to be a more direct approach to the rise of China and the USA's response to this new rival. Additionally, around this time, US political rhetoric has become ever-more hostile towards the PRC, and the PRC has begun to respond in kind to the USA in a similar manner, which is akin to the Cold War rivalry rhetoric between the USSR and the USA. This is not limited to just the political spheres, the public of the USA has also been increasingly hostile towards asians as well. All of these points lower the barriers of war between the USA and the PRC and increase the likelihood of war.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of military, economic, and ideological considerations it can be concluded that the PRC and the USA will more likely than not escape the Thucydides trap. This is despite the growing military rivalry between the two, the loss of influence the USA faces on a global scale, and the race for resources. Due to the inability of either country to be certain of winning the war it becomes highly unlikely for a rational actor to make the first strike. Whilst the USA's defense spending gives it the edge in training and equipment, the size of the PLA creates the distinct possibility for a war of attrition which the USA would have significant troubles winning. As well as this, the PRC also seems unlikely to declare a war directly on the USA due to the alliance networks the USA has formed, most formidable being NATO. A war declared on the USA would trigger Article 5 in the NATO charter and would therefore mean a declaration of war against all NATO members. Furthermore, the addition to this of nuclear warheads that both nations possess and would be able to use in the event of a conflict further reduces the chance for war between these two nations.

Moreover, although there is the possibility of a war breaking out between the USA and the PRC for the procurement of natural resources that are deemed national security interest by either country it seems more likely that they will continue to engage in proxy wars as is shown in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo for access to the Coltan mines. Moreover, the economic costs for both countries are an added obstacle to engaging in military conflict, albeit more so for the PRC than for the USA. Having said this, it does seem possible that war breaks out between the USA and the PRC due to miscalculations. Given the increased militarization of the Taiwan strait and the SCS the increased competition between the USA and the PRC could break out into war under specific circumstances. One of these circumstances would be the invasion of Taiwan by the PRC which would, as has been reaffirmed by President Joe Biden, put US soldiers in the conflict as well. Furthermore, if the PRC were to press the claims of the Senkuyu islands against Japan or the Scarborough Shoal against the Philippines it would trigger a mutual defense pact the USA has signed with those countries also plunging into war with the PRC. Additionally, although the likelihood is low that a war will break out between the USA and the PRC both nations are fighting an information war to garner as much support as they can both

domestically and internationally whilst trying to sow discontent and confusion in the other nations populace.

It is important to note that this report is limited to the information in the public domain. There are many factors that play a role in further discussing the Sino-American Thucydides trap that cannot be discussed due to the classified nature of the information. As well as this, it is equally important to understand that even people in authority positions that would have access to much more classified information, such as former minister of foreign affairs in the USA Henry Kissinger, all maintain that there is no certainty of whether war will or will not take place as geopolitical considerations can change dramatically in a short period of time.

One point for further research to be done is on the nature of the Thucydides trap. Whilst not in the scope of this report, the Thucydides trap may seem to be more outdated for contemporary situations. As the world, until the Cold War, never had to deal with the consideration of MAD wars, it stands to reason that conflict between great powers may become nigh on impossible due the rational reasoning of nations to ensure their own security as well. Furthermore, another aspect that has not fully been considered in previous Thucydides traps is the potential for non-conventional warfare becoming just as devastating as conventional warfare through the use of cyber warfare, and whether this can be included in the Thucydides trap theory as having led to war without soldiers being deployed.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Top Ten Defense Budgets per Country (2023)

Country	Defense Budget
United States of America	\$876.9 billion
People's Republic of China	\$292.0 billion
Russia	\$86.4 billion
India	\$81.4 billion
Saudi Arabia	\$75.0 billion
United Kingdom	\$68.5 billion
Germany	\$55.8 billion
France	\$53.6 billion
South Korea	\$46.4 billion
Japan	\$46.0 billion

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## Appendix B: Top Ten Defense Budgets per Country (2020)

Country	Defense Budget
United States of America	\$778.0 billion
People's Republic of China	\$252.0 billion (estimated)
India	\$72.9 billion
Russia	\$61.7 billion
United Kingdom	\$59.2 billion
Saudi Arabia	\$57.5 billion (estimated)
Germany	\$52.8 billion
France	\$52.7 billion
Japan	\$49.1 billion
South Korea	\$45.7 billion

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**Appendix C: Top Ten Countries with Highest Number of Active Military Personnel**

Country	Active Duty Personnel
People's Republic of China	2,185,000
India	1,455,550
United States	1,388,100
North Korea	1,280,000
Russia	1,014,000
Pakistan	654,000
Iran	610,000
South Korea	599,000
Vietnam	482,000
Egypt	438,500

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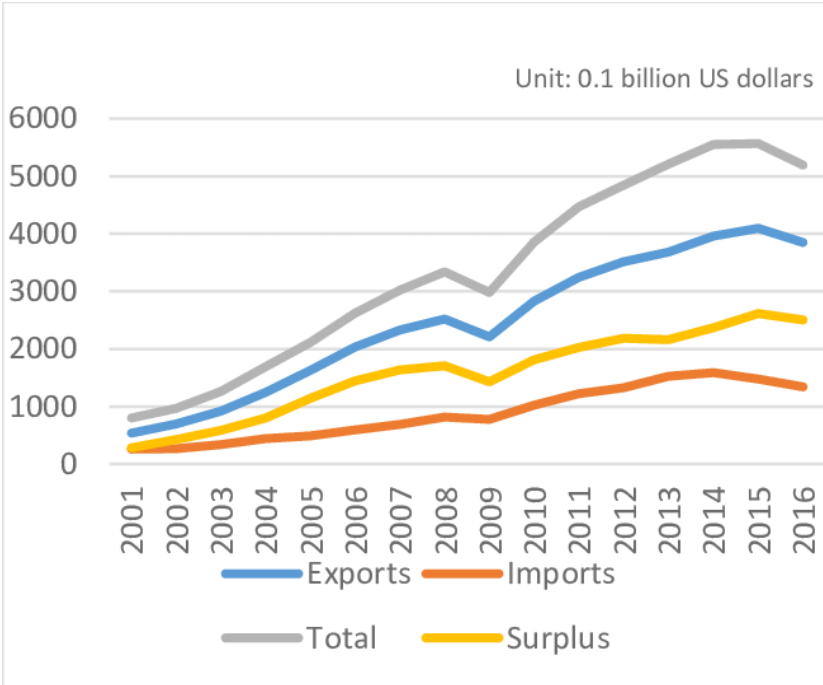
**Appendix D: Nine Dash Line**



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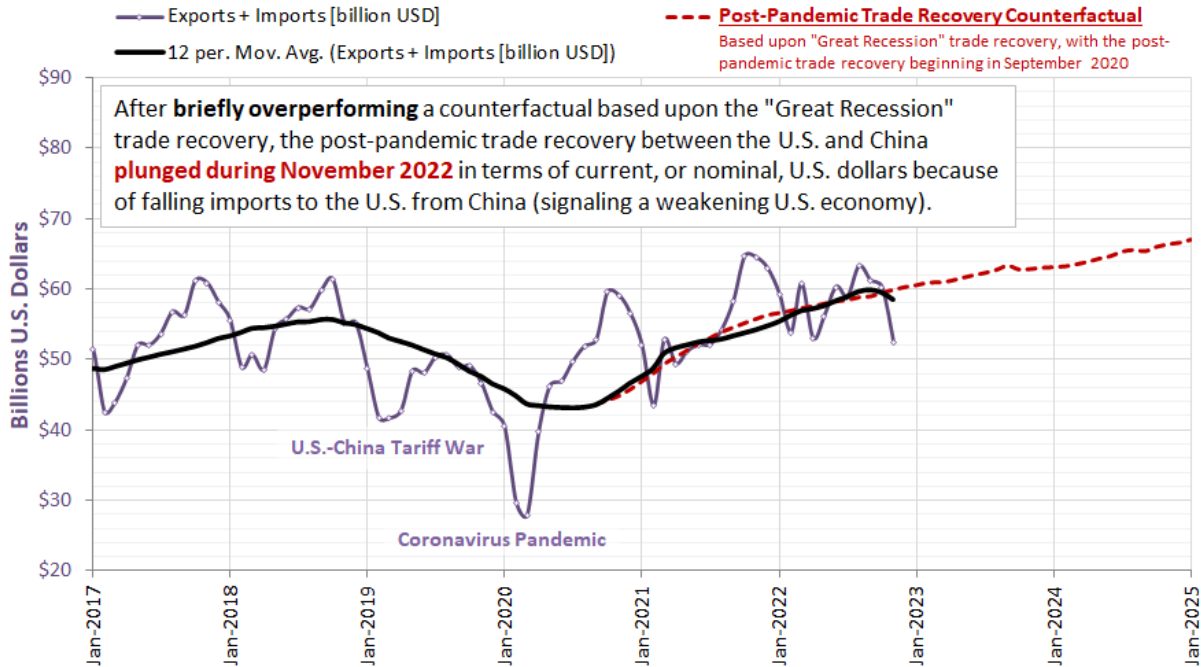
**Appendix E: China-US Bilateral Trade 2001-2016**



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Appendix F: China-US Bilateral Trade 2017-2023

## Combined Value of U.S. Exports to China and U.S. Imports from China January 2017 - November 2022



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Author's Calculations

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