

China and the 'Thucydides Trap'

Written by Amrita Jash

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AMRITA JASH, OCT 16 2015

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world." This prophecy stands apt in defining the current shifts in the global power dynamics caused in part by the phenomenon of 'China's rise'. Since its opening up in 1978, China has registered a GDP growth of more than 2,000 per cent, holds around US \$2 trillion in foreign reserves; and its military power (land, sea, and air) is growing at around 12 per cent annually, and its non-financial overseas direct investment exceeds \$330 billion. In this view, 'China's rise' has significantly shifted the centre of gravity of the twenty-first century global balance of power from Euro-Atlantic to Asia-Pacific.

With a steady double-digit economic growth China superseded Japan in 2010 to become the world's second largest economy and has also seized the position of second largest military spender in the world. The rapid economic growth got translated into greater defence spending which resulted, most significantly, in a robust military modernisation. China's military strategy pledges for "active defence" as the essence of its military thought is aimed at "informationized local wars" by "maritime preparation for military struggle." China's key ambition is to build a 'blue water navy'. What is noteworthy is that China's defence spending is outpacing its economic growth. Hence, the much anticipated 'charm offensive' to China's rise gradually has given way to 'China threat', of which, the most prominent debate revolves around the query of 'can China's rise be peaceful'.

Offensive Realist John J. Mearsheimer predicts that a rising China "will attempt to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere." Therefore, the U.S. would go to "enormous lengths to prevent China from achieving regional hegemony...the result will be an intense security competition with considerable potential for war" – making China's rise "unlikely to be tranquil." This prediction seems to have merit. For example, the 2013 establishment of the East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) by China raised the security index calling for precautionary measures to safeguard the airspace, mainly shared by the U.S. and Japan. With an immediate response to China's ADIZ, the U.S. deployed two unarmed B-52 bombers with nuclear capability over the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Besides, the most significant reference point is China's augmented military posture and power projection in the South China Sea as reflected in the ongoing artificial island build up activities – which has created a new kind of security dilemma and resulting in a new form of balance of power in the region

China's rapidly expanding economic clout also raises concerns. China's 'charm offensive' as witnessed in terms of the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB), the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and others – directly challenge the U.S.' longstanding strategic supremacy in the Asia-Pacific region. Such actions on the part of China clearly reflect its revisionist tendencies as they call for changing the existing norms of the international order. These actions exemplify China's aspirations of fulfilling the 'dream' of getting back its due in world politics, that is, achieving the great power position that it held centuries ago. Additionally, it also clarifies that Deng Xiaoping's dictum of "keeping a low profile" is now a legacy of the past, for the present China is bold and confident in its actions. China's rise may be bringing an end to the Gramscian notion of western hegemony and thereby, creating a new kind of balance of power.

It is clear that 'China's rise' mainly challenges the U.S. dominated status-quo. This creates uncertainty in terms of China's intentions and futuristic actions, of which, one of the gravest concerns lie in evading a military collision between China and U.S. In response to the growing intensity in power dynamics, Graham Allison has raised a crucial

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query 'whether China and United States can escape the Thucydides Trap'. Drawing from historical precedents, it is an accepted fact that when a rising power rivals a ruling power, war is inevitable. In understanding Athens' challenging posture to Sparta in ancient Greece, Thucydides explained that: "it was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this inspired in Sparta, that made war inevitable." Along these lines, Allison states that: "the preeminent geostrategic challenge of this era is not violent Islamic extremists or a resurgent Russia" but "the impact that China's ascendance will have on the U.S.-led international order." While contradicting the idea of the 'Thucydides trap', Chinese President Xi Jinping in his recent visit to the U.S. said: "there is no such thing as the so-called Thucydides trap in the world. But should major countries time and again make the mistake of strategic miscalculation, they might create such traps for themselves."

It is conceivable that China and the U.S. would fall prey to the 'trap' based on China's accelerated power accumulation, thereby increasingly narrowing the disparity with the U.S. Here, it becomes important to note that the nuclear arsenals provide a strong deterrence in preventing any kind of military collision between the two powers. Thus, it is in the best interest of both parties to strike a win-win deal as in all likelihood 'use of force' does not guarantee 'greater' win to any as the loss will be incurred on either sides. The rationality lies in drawing commonality of interests such as nuclear arms control, energy issues, climate change, fighting terrorism and so on and thus, building on them.

Hence, while assessing the unfolding dynamics of China's actions on the international stage and the U.S.' reaction to it, it can be rightly said that on the one hand, the spiralling tensions are creating an atmosphere where a war between China and the U.S. is seen as inevitable but on the other hand, the growing economic interdependence and multilateral engagements between the two powers help to dilute such speculations based on the stakes attached. In addition, one needs to also ask, whether China wants to become a responsible stakeholder like the U.S. with its rise. If this is the case then China's rise, though coming with uncertainties, does not guarantee a fall into the Thucydides trap – and China may prove an exception by escaping it.

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