

A Great Game, but the Greatest Threat?

In a new chapter of Global Power politics, the risk of an accident grows

Summary:

- Recent American and Chinese military maneuvers have heightened global geopolitical tensions.
- While confrontation is unlikely, potential accidents pose the greatest risk of unintended consequences.
- Historically, rising powers have challenged the supremacy of an existing superpower. Why is it different today?
- Beyond the U.S. and China, further risks of accidents between major powers have been compounded in Syria, after Russia's recent entrance into the conflict.

Commentary:

Yesterday, the U.S. Navy sent a guided missile-equipped destroyer ship within a 12 nautical mile radius of the Spratly Islands, an archipelago claimed by China. While this move was perceived as provocative by Beijing, it came as no surprise. Indeed, the island and reef chain located 500 miles from China's mainland has been a significant strain in Sino-American relations over the past year. Despite efforts to challenge the claims, such as a Philippines dispute in the Hague arising in 2013¹, China has unrelentingly stood firm in its position on declaring their sovereignty. In an seeming effort to counterbalance a rising Chinese naval capability in the East Pacific, the decision to dispatch the *USS Lassen* within the boundary of the Spratlys may be a response to recent Chinese incursions off the Alaskan coast. Early in September, on the last day of a visit by President Obama to Alaska, five Chinese warships were spotted in the Bering Sea.² While the vessels were clearly operating within the parameters of international maritime law, it undoubtedly represented Beijing's muscle-flexing timed to coincide with Obama's visit.

¹ The Economist, July 18, 2015

<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21657807-tribunal-ponders-chinas-claims-see-u-court>

² Washington Post, September 3, 2015

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-sends-warships-into-bering-sea-as-obama-concludes-alaska-visit/2015/09/03/c4dc94fo-5240-11e5-8c19-ob6825aa4a3a_story.html

Risks of Great Power Accidents

While an American tit-for-tat response to China's moves has been expected, any heightened tensions between two superpowers are an unwelcome development. However unlikely a direct confrontation may be, there is a risk that an accident could catalyze a downward spiral to the brink of conflict. Leading Chinese policy experts have warned of low-probability/high impact events and the resulting deterioration of communication that could lead to unthinkable consequences (Shirk 2007). Of course, for the sanctity of global economic and political stability, diplomacy should be adroitly utilized to minimize the likelihood of such an ominous scenario. Fortunately, the vital trade relationship between the U.S. and China incentivizes officials on both sides to dampen nationalist impulses that have fueled increasing militarization.

A "Thucydides Trap?"

Graham Allison, a leading expert and dean of the Harvard Kennedy School, recently penned an [article](#) in the Atlantic Monthly that questions the downplaying of a potential military conflict arising between the U.S. and China. He writes that "War between the U.S. and China is more likely than recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not."³ Allison bases his analysis on the "Thucydides Trap," a reference to the famous Ancient Greek historian. Thucydides' underlying premise was that a rising economic, political, and military power will inevitably challenge the existing power and status quo. In Ancient Greece, the city-state of Athens faced a burgeoning threat from militaristic Sparta, ultimately leading to war. Allison argues that the current geopolitical environment illustrates analogous circumstances. In this case, a rising China will challenge the dominance of U.S. power, including its military.

It is almost impossible to imagine a U.S.-China military conflict. For one, each country maintains a vast nuclear weapon arsenal, albeit at a significant advantage for the United States who holds an inventory of approximately 7,100 warheads compared to an estimated 260 in China.⁴ A nuclear exchange, even if limited, would have utterly catastrophic human consequences. If a nuclear conflict was avoided, a conventional war between the two sides would undoubtedly be devastating, also. Of course, most analysts would argue that there is virtually no chance of a military conflict between the U.S. and China, simply on the basis of these unthinkable scenarios.

³ Allison, Graham. "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" Atlantic Monthly, September 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

⁴ Arms Control Association (Org): "Who Has What at a Glance." 2015. <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>

However, prudence would dictate that we should not ignore history. One might recall pronouncements prior to 1914, namely that war was inconceivable in the 20th century since the costs to human lives and commerce would be unfathomable (Agnell 1909). While a similar conjecture could be made today, we should nevertheless accept the possibility of conflict, however improbable it may be.

+ Russia

In addition to heightened geopolitical tensions stemming from America and China, relations between the U.S. and Russia have faltered to levels not seen since the Cold War. Ever since Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014 and subsequent arming of rebel fighters in Eastern Ukraine, the United States has led efforts to isolate it both economically and politically. American and EU sanctions have helped to cripple the Russian economy, with a massive depreciation of the Ruble and wide-ranging import restrictions. Many analysts have argued that this isolation has prompted Russia to double down on support for the Assad government in Syria, as seen in recent airstrikes against Sunni rebel groups opposed to its client in Damascus. With American and Russian warplanes increasingly operating within close range of each other, the possibility of an accident over Syrian airspace is frighteningly real. Hopefully, if any such incident occurs, cool heads will prevail. Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin has raised the risks of direct confrontation by entering the Syrian conflict, resulting in a dangerous game of chicken.

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