

# Can China, US overcome 'Thucydides Trap'?

## Editor's Note:

Whether China and the US can overcome the "Thucydides Trap" and establish a new type of major power relationship is intensely debated by scholars. What insights can we find through the history of China-US engagement? Global Times (GT) reporter Lu Jingxian and Liu Jianxi talked with Patrick Mendis (Mendis), Harvard Kennedy School's former Rajawali senior fellow and a current associate-in-research of the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University, on the issues. Mendis has lectured at over 25 Chinese universities and visited all the provinces of China. He also served as an American diplomat under Secretaries Madeline Albright and Colin Powell, and as a military professor in NATO and the US Pacific Command.

**GT: Your book *Peaceful War* analyzes China-US relations from the perspective of culture and reaches an optimistic conclusion. There are quite a few changes in international politics since 2013, for example, the continuous economic recession of the West and rising populist sentiment in the US and Europe. Do these factors change your view on the future Sino-US relations?**

**Mendis:** I like to look at the future via history, and we can learn from history in order to avoid the pains, agonies and tragedies we went through. The China-US relationship has been a unique one from the very beginning. From 1776 until the First Opium War, the two countries were very close, especially in trade relations. The first US merchant vessel, *Empress of China*, left New York Harbor for China's Guangzhou on George Washington's birthday, February 22, 1784, sending a message that the US wanted to trade with China. The *Empress* brought tea, silk and other Chinese products back to the US after a round-trip voyage of more than one year, and encouraged other states to trade with China.

However, Sino-US trade relations ended during the opium wars. While China was mired in wars with imperialist powers and domestic fighting, the US was also engaged in its civil war. The two countries were inward-looking, and their trade relations did not continue at that time. Later, China and the US went through many ups and downs under Sun Yat-sen. Again from 1911 to 1949, China saw an internal struggle between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and Kuomintang (KMT). Then CPC chairman Mao Zedong wanted to develop good relations with the US, but unfortunately, the US, because of historical reasons, took KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek's side.

If the US understood Mao's vision, the two countries would have had a harmonious relationship throughout the Cold War. We made mistakes during that time.

But now we are in the situation where we, on China's side, have an educated and sensible leader. President Xi Jinping is a man of literature and tries to guide the nation by looking at history. But on the other side, the US has

a president who hardly reads anything and whose idea of the country is very extreme. Donald Trump is very unpredictable as well, and this is one of the greatest concerns for me and many US scholars. We hope people around him are wise enough to give him sensible advice, and more importantly, Trump follows that advice to guide the China-US relationship into a better future.

**GT: A pessimistic view holds that if US supremacy in the Western Pacific is challenged by China's rise, the possibility of a war cannot be excluded. What's your view?**

**Mendis:** We need to look at history when analyzing the future of the Sino-US relationship. Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of the US, advocated a strong central government led by a strong commercial economy. His vision of pragmatism is instituted in the US Constitution in what is called the Commerce Clause. The founding father taught that the best way to bring people together is to trade. Trade brought China and the US together since the *Empress* sailed from the New York Harbor to China's Guangzhou, and this trading relationship is still bringing the two countries and peoples closer. The US is exchanging not only goods, but also services and knowledge with China, which was unbelievable during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. China's interests in investing in the US are increasing as well. The two countries have joint programs to

protect our trade. For instance, there are both American and Chinese militaries fighting against

pirates in the Horn of Africa to protect our trading routes. Wherever we have trade, the military naturally engages for national interests.

I don't see ideological differences between the two countries. China has very sensible leadership whose view is to trade without interfering with other countries' domestic affairs. This is the same with the US founding view – commerce with all nations, alliance with none. President Trump is actually putting this vision into practice. He is less interested in other countries' human rights conditions. It seems to me, President Trump is emulating China for economic reasons and job creation that he promised to American people.

I don't see the US wants to engage in a war with China as there is no winner in this war. Both countries have their own problems. While the US has to concentrate on its infrastructure development, China needs to address its aging population, poverty and environmental issues. Both countries have pains even in peaceful times. Why do we want a war? We need to learn from history and avoid repeating mistakes.

**GT: China's Belt and Road initiative, especially the 21st century Maritime Silk Road, can be seen as a rejuvenation of Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433)'s voyage to Asia, Africa and the Middle East. What's your take on the prospect and implication of the initiative?**



Patrick Mendis Photo: Liu Jianxi/GT

**Mendis:** The ancient Silk Road can be dated back to China's Tang dynasty. It is during this period that China prospered. The Silk Road goes from Xi'an, then the Chinese capital city, to the West. Tang's Zhang Qian is the first Chinese ambassador to explore the West. Before the Tang dynasty, there was a Chinese monk called Faxian who brought a large number of Buddhist books back to China after his Western trip. Inspired by Faxian's books, Xuanzang, another Chinese monk during the Tang dynasty, travelled to the West and his experience became popular with the book *Journey to the West*. All of them were trading knowledge with the world, and this is the evolution of the Silk Road Economic Belt.

Then during the Ming dynasty, Admiral Zheng He sailed to Asia, Africa and the Middle East. This is the ancient maritime Silk Road. Zheng's voyage was not for colonial purposes, but for the respect for the Chinese culture. The Belt and Road initiative is the Chinese vision of bringing people together.

Indeed, there are challenges. The previous administration of Barack Obama was reluctant to join the Belt and Road. But US allies participated in the initiative from the very beginning. Now Trump has come into office, and he is more open to this infrastructural idea. There is chemistry between Xi and Trump, and this will bring the two countries closer together in trade. By sending a delegation to the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May, the White House is sending a message to China that it is open to the initiative.

**GT: What do you think the possibility of the US being drawn into a conflict with China by its allies, for example, a clash between China and Japan, or because of Taiwan?**

**Mendis:** Trump had a phone conversation with Tsai Ing-wen in December, but, after the Chinese government's protest, reversed his entire Taiwan policy and clarified the adherence to the One China policy. The US had the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 to "protect" Taiwan from any military action. The Trump administration takes advantage of the act to sell weapons to Taiwan, and this is a strategy of Trump as a busi-

nessman. Whatever he can sell, he will sell, as this is good for US companies and employment.

The US has long-lasting commitments to South Korea, Japan and other allies as well. Trump claimed that US allies need to shoulder more responsibilities for defense costs, as these countries have tremendously benefited from US security guarantees.

The question is whether US security guarantees would have a negative effect on China's rise. I don't think so. China's engagements with our allies are very strong and increasing, and there is no way that we can hinder this kind of relationship. Not only do our allies have close relationships with China, the US also has warm ties with the Chinese government and businesspeople. I foresee this trend will continue. And meanwhile, I don't think US military engagements in the South China Sea or the East China Sea are going to stop China's activities in the region. Regional countries have responsibilities to take care of their own people and take their countries out of misery. If China can help, these countries will accept China's assistance, because this is in their national interests.

**GT: You said China and the US are moving closer in the nature of their foreign policy. President Trump said he is less interested in the issue of human rights and it seems he is less ideological than his predecessors. Has the era of Sino-US ideological confrontation already gone or is it just a temporary suspension?**

**Mendis:** I think it's temporary. The US has been always driven by Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian visions. The country wanted to have unalienable rights for everybody at the very beginning of its history. Struggles by African Americans, Native Americans and women for equal rights are promoted by the Jeffersonian vision. Jefferson talked about human rights, religious freedom, liberty and democracy at the grassroots level, and this vision is ingrained in America's DNA. At the same time, we have the Hamiltonian vision. For five days of the week, you carry credit cards and cash in your wallet for trade, this is the Hamiltonian vision; when it comes to the weekend, you go to church and give that money to the church, and this is the Jeffersonian vision. America's DNA is mixed with Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian visions.

I think the Hamiltonian vision is more pronounced in the Trump administration. But at the same time, there is also a Jeffersonian vision at the US Congress calling for democracy, religious freedom, solutions to global climate change and a peaceful world. The Jeffersonian vision is kind of dormant right now because of the pronounced vision of Trump. I think Sino-US ideological confrontation is in temporary suspension. America's DNA is always a mix of Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian visions.