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COVID-19 and World Order

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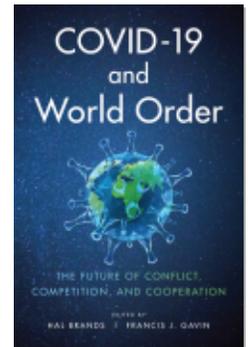
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The US-China Relationship after Coronavirus

Clues from History

Graham Allison

Coronavirus struck like a flash of lightning that illuminates for an instant distant horizons otherwise obscured. The impact of this pandemic highlights three central realities of world order—and disorder.

First and most fundamentally, coronavirus magnifies the underlying structural reality that will be the defining feature of world order and disorder for as far as any eye can see. In what we are coming to recognize as the Great Rivalry, a rising China is seriously threatening to displace a ruling United States from its accustomed position at the top of every pecking order. In twelve of sixteen cases over the last five hundred years, such Thucydidean rivalries ended in war.

Second, despite this inevitable and inescapable rivalry, coronavirus also provides a vivid reminder that each nation faces external threats it cannot defeat by itself acting alone. However unnatural, however uncomfortable, each must come to recognize the other as its insufferable but inseparable conjoined twin. As American and Russian Cold Warriors learned painfully as they acquired superpower nuclear arsenals capable of destroying their adversary, neither could survive a nuclear war. To coexist rather than co-destruct, both came to recognize the necessity to constrain their competition.

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Third, this deadly pathogen has condemned the United States and China, despite their hostility, to work together, at least to the extent necessary to ensure their national survival and well-being. In their search for a new strategic rationale for their relationship, perhaps they can find a way forward by combining an ancient Chinese concept of “rivalry partners” and an insight President John F. Kennedy came to after having survived the Cuban Missile Crisis. He called for the United States and the Soviet Union to coexist in a “world safe for diversity.”

Each of these central realities is best understood through the lens of Applied History: the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing the historical record.¹ First, we need to assess how coronavirus will change the nature of world politics. In a tweet: much less than most of the commentariat is currently claiming.

“A Possession for All Time”: Applying History to Clarify the Coronavirus

Imagine a conversation between two great Applied Historians: Thucydides and George Marshall. Thucydides asserted that “as long as humans are human, the future will resemble the past.” In contrast to the celebrated playwrights of classical Greece who left Oedipus no choice about killing his father and marrying his mother, Thucydides analyzed the past in order to inform future statecraft. As he explained in the introduction to his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, his purpose was to help future political leaders, soldiers, and citizens understand war so that they could avoid mistakes made by their predecessors. As the founder of realpolitik, as well as history, his analysis of the great war that destroyed the two leading city-states of Greece begins with underlying structural realities and basic motives of human behavior. In his summary, these were “fear, honor, and interest.” Thus, as he wrote, he hoped his history would be “a possession for all time.”²

In their classic *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, Ernest May and Richard Neustadt hold up Marshall as a model Applied Historian for his ability to think in “time-streams”—seeing connections between the past, present, and future. In their summary, “The essence of thinking in time-streams is imagining the future as it may be when it becomes the past—with some intelligible continuity but richly complex and able to surprise.”³ Both in directing America’s war effort and in constructing the European Recovery Act, Marshall was sensitive to choices that could set the course of events on a different path. As May and Neustadt put it, he knew that “what matters for the future in the present is departures from the past, alterations, changes.”⁴

If these two men lived today, what might they say about the impact of this novel virus and the pandemic it has caused? Marshall would likely ask, “What will change?” Thucydides might answer, “Not the fundamentals.”

When facing immediate threats to survival, human beings respond: me and mine first. As long as states remain the primary units in international relations, and heads of state remain dependent on support from the citizens of their state for their jobs, President Donald Trump will not be the only leader who puts his own nation first.

Thucydides would thus be skeptical of the claims now being made by many in the American foreign policy establishment that coronavirus means the end of international relations as we have known it. He would likely remind us of the proclamations of an “end of history” at the end of the Cold War. He might contest Henry Kissinger’s proposition that “the coronavirus pandemic will forever alter the world order” and require “the post-coronavirus order.”⁵ He would likely reject the president of the Council on Foreign Relations’ claim that “today and for the century ahead, the most significant threats that we face are less other states than a range of transnational problems.”⁶ He would not agree with Larry Summers’s assertion that post-coronavirus, we will live in a “world where security depends more on exceeding a threshold of co-operation with allies and adversaries alike than on maintaining a balance of power.”⁷ And he would find delusional the “great awakening” many international observers have hailed in which enlightened leaders embrace the solidarity of all 7.7 billion inhabitants of planet Earth, create a “one world” vaccine, and bury petty nationalisms in a new era of globalism.⁸

If one small nuclear bomb devastates the heart of a great city, or a state launches a bioterrorist attack a hundred times deadlier than COVID-19 against an adversary’s major airport hubs, or China takes advantage of the world’s preoccupation to forcefully reintegrate Taiwan with the mainland, Thucydides would expect that those who have been unhinged by this novel virus will return to Earth.

A shared interest in defeating coronavirus will not override the US-China competition and redefine the future of the relationship. Instead, coronavirus will become yet another element in the greatest geopolitical challenge of our lifetime.

A Great Thucydidean Rivalry

In speculating about the world after coronavirus, Thucydides would begin with structural realities. Just as he identified that the rise of Athens and the fear it inspired in Sparta made war nearly inevitable, he would note that the defining feature of international politics going forward will continue to be an analogous

rivalry between a rising China and a ruling United States. Coronavirus has now become another dimension along which these rivals are waging their competition. How each nation addresses this challenge and how their response affects their nations' gross domestic products (GDPs), their citizens' confidence in their government, and their standing in the world will become another strand in this rivalry.

“THE BIGGEST PLAYER IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD”

What has happened to the relative power of the United States and China since the US victory in the Cold War introduced what most of the American national security establishment thought would be a unipolar era in which America would lead, other nations would take their assigned place in the new “liberal international rules-based order,” and peace would be ensured by McDonald's Golden Arches?⁹ In two words: tectonic shift. Never before in history has a rising power ascended so far, so fast, on so many different dimensions. Never before has a ruling power seen its relative position change so quickly.¹⁰

After nearly half a century of competition, when the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union disappeared, in 1991, the United States was left economically, militarily, and geopolitically dominant. But that was then. Although GDP is not everything, it does form the substructure of power in relations among nations. The US share of global GDP—nearly one-half in 1950—has gone from one-quarter in 1991 to one-seventh today.¹¹ China has been the chief beneficiary of this transformation. In the past generation, its GDP has soared: from 20% of the US level in 1991 to 120% today (measured by the metric that both the CIA and the International Monetary Fund judge the best yardstick for comparing national economies: purchasing power parity, or PPP).¹²

In Asia, the shift in the economic balance of power has been even more dramatic. Having emerged as the world's largest exporter and second-largest importer, China is the top trading partner of every other major East Asian country, including US allies.¹³ As an aggressive practitioner of economic statecraft, Beijing does not hesitate to use the leverage this provides, squeezing countries such as the Philippines and South Korea when they resist Chinese demands. Globally, China is also rapidly becoming a peer competitor of the United States in advanced technologies. Today, of the twenty largest information technology companies, nine are Chinese.¹⁴ Four years ago, when Google, the global leader in artificial intelligence (AI), the most significant advanced technology, assessed its competition, Chinese companies ranked alongside European companies. Now, that state of affairs is barely visible in the rearview mirror: Chinese companies lead in many areas of

applied AI, including surveillance, facial and voice recognition, and financial technology.

China's military spending and capabilities have surged as well. A quarter century ago, its defense budget was one-sixteenth that of the United States; now, it is one-third and on a path to parity.¹⁵ Moreover, this is the difference when measured in market exchange rate. If converted to PPP, China's defense budget is already as large as—and possibly larger than—the United States' defense budget.¹⁶ Unlike the United States, China's priority military missions include “internal domestic security.” But whereas the US defense budget is spread across global commitments, many of them in Europe and the Middle East, China's budget is focused on East Asia. Accordingly, in specific military scenarios involving a conflict over Taiwan or in the South China Sea, China may have already taken the lead.

Short of actual war, the best tests of relative military capabilities are war games. In 2019, Robert Work, a former US deputy secretary of defense, and David Ochmanek, one of the Department of Defense's key defense planners, offered a public summary of the results from a series of classified recent war games. Their bottom line, in Ochmanek's words: “When we fight Russia and China, ‘blue’ [the United States] gets its ass handed to it.”¹⁷ As the *New York Times* reported: “In 18 of the last 18 Pentagon war games involving China in the Taiwan Strait, the US lost.”¹⁸

In short, as the Singaporean statesman and world's premier China watcher Lee Kuan Yew once told me: “The size of China's displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance. It is not possible to pretend that this is just another big player. This is the biggest player in the history of the world.”¹⁹

When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, alarm bells should sound: extreme danger ahead. Thucydides explained this dangerous dynamic in the case of Athens's rise to rival Sparta in classical Greece. In the centuries since then, this story line has been repeated over and over. The last five hundred years saw sixteen cases in which a rising power threatened to displace a major ruling power. Twelve ended in war.²⁰

No argument that fails to ask the “Marshall question” is complete. After listening to, or indeed making a compelling case for a proposition, Marshall would often say, “Just one more question: How could I be wrong?” I can identify a dozen ways and am sure participants in the forum can think of more. Many forecast a significant slowdown in China's extraordinary growth rate and, indeed, have been doing so annually for the past two decades. Of course, as Stein's Law says: a trend that cannot continue indefinitely won't. But predicting that something will hap-

pen is much easier than saying when it will. President Xi Jinping's attempt to revitalize the Chinese Communist Party as the Leninist Mandarin vanguard of 1.4 billion people may flounder. As Lee Kuan Yew told him directly, he's trying to put 21st-century apps on a 20th-century operating system.²¹ China's military may behave recklessly and provoke a military confrontation that China loses—and that could lead to the overthrow of its new emperor. Xi could slip in his bathtub. And so forth. While US planners must consider all reasonable contingencies, basing our strategy to meet the China challenge on the expectation that the Chinese economy or political system fails would be a mistake.

Unless Xi is unsuccessful in his ambitions to “Make China Great Again,” China will continue challenging America's accustomed position at the top of every pecking order. If Xi succeeds, China will displace the United States as the predominant power in East Asia in his lifetime. Unless the United States redefines itself to settle for something less than number one, Americans will increasingly find China's rise discombobulating.

As Thucydides explained, the objective reality of a rising power's impact on a ruling power is bad enough. But in the real world, these objective facts are perceived subjectively—magnifying misperceptions and multiplying miscalculations. When one competitor “knows” what the other's “real motive” is, every action is interpreted in ways that confirm that bias. Moreover, beyond reality and psychology, Thucydidean dynamics are derived by a third factor: domestic politics. As we are now seeing vividly in the current US presidential campaign, a fundamental axiom of electoral politics declares never let a serious competitor get to your right on a matter of national security. Thus, both campaigns seek to protect their candidate from claims that he is “soft” on China and to demonstrate that he will be tougher in combating this rival than his opponent.

Are confrontation and competition inevitable? Yes. But is war—real bloody war—inevitable? No. To repeat, no. Debate about whether this competition would become “Cold War II”—a rivalry waged along every azimuth excluding uniformed combatants attacking the adversary's soldiers or citizens—began with Vice President Mike Pence's de facto declaration of cold war against China in earnest in late 2018.²² While the many differences between today's world and the world in which the “Wise Men” shaped America's Cold War strategy are at least as crucial as the similarities, one key likeness stands out. As in the Cold War, rivalry has begun to metastasize through every dimension of the US-China relationship, including the coronavirus. In turn, each nation's response to the coronavirus has magnified the sources of their Thucydidean rivalry.

ONE CORONAVIRUS, TWO SYSTEMS

In this competition to be number one, coronavirus presents a preview of “one crisis, two systems” performance—displaying vividly each government’s weaknesses and strengths.²³ The imperative for the US and Chinese governments today is to act to defeat this scourge. But as each attempts to do so, it must recognize that its response to the coronavirus crisis will have profound consequences for the larger rivalry for leadership. From economic growth over the next twelve months, to its citizens’ confidence in their government, and each nation’s standing around the world, successes and failures in meeting a test that has captured the mind of the world will matter hugely.

Unfortunately, most of the US commentary about this aspect of the current crisis has focused on China’s effort to manipulate the narrative. Where did the coronavirus first appear? In China. Who failed to nip the crisis in the bud? Chinese authoritarianism has displayed all its ugly features in suppressing initial reports, delaying transmission of bad news to superiors and dissembling. Of course, China is vigorously selling its story line and attempting to rearrange the facts to show itself in the best light. Despite the Chinese government’s best efforts to rewrite history, it cannot disguise the fact that there is much in this case for which China deserves blame. But the effort by many in Washington as well as the Blob (the foreign policy establishment) to make this the primary story line is escapist—an attempt to duck responsibilities for their own failures. Focusing on the words in this case rather than the deeds misses the mountain behind the molehill.

Unlike the rhetorical debate about this issue, or governments’ attempts to shape a narrative, coronavirus is providing a test in which citizens can see for themselves who delivers and who does not. Crises are, in effect, showtime, when the curtain is drawn and the lights are up. Whatever the words and promises that have gone before, the audience can judge for itself whether those on the stage can play their instruments or sing. Governments’ claims about their capabilities and rhetoric about who or what is the greatest fade as the truth is revealed.

Markets are now betting that China has essentially succeeded in the first battle in this long war. After a bungling start that wasted weeks and imposed significant costs on itself and on the world, once China’s President Xi and his team grasped the magnitude of the challenge, they acted boldly and decisively to contain its spread and then to defeat it. To do this, they drew a cordon sanitaire around not only the eleven-million-person city of Wuhan, but the entire province of Hubei with its sixty million people—in effect, quarantining a population the size of New

York and California combined. They then flooded this province with health workers supported by thousands of People's Liberation Army soldiers, imposed a lockdown in which citizens had to shelter in their apartments, and conducted massive testing. When individuals were found to be infected, or even thought to be likely to be contagious, they were separated strictly from the healthy population. Announcements from the Chinese government can never be taken at face value. Its government has manipulated data and even the criteria for what counts as a new case. But despite this noise, at this point, the evidence from all sources suggests that these efforts have actually succeeded in bending the curve of infections toward zero.

On the other hand, the United States remains mired in this mess. It has experienced more infections and more deaths than any other country on the planet; closed down its own economy and society, leading to an economic decline larger than any experienced since the Great Depression; added \$3 trillion to its national balance sheet; and is still struggling to find its way. The current patchwork reopening of its economy and society has been followed by waves of new infections and poisonous political recriminations.

Lest the reader despair at this point, a reminder from history may be in order. Democracies are notoriously slow to awaken to change but when finally aroused and focused are ferocious in their response. American democracy's record provides the extreme case of this weakness. Had any of its wars been declared over at the end of the first quarter—from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War to World Wars I and II—we would have lost. Despite our miserable record in the first rounds of what promises to be an extended war against coronavirus, it is much too soon to count us out. Historically, when finely focused, Americans have proved indomitable.

Since the coronavirus crisis will be testing us for many months, if not years to come, no one can be sure today what these results will show six months from now or this time next year. But if an impartial Martian strategist were to judge America's and China's performance in this war today, the answer would be clear: the USA lost.

The geopolitical consequences of these responses for the United States and its rivalry with China must be assessed in four dimensions: (1) impact on each nation's GDP, (2) impact on citizens' confidence in their government, (3) impact on each nation's capacity and will to assist other nations as they attempt to ensure the lives and well-being of their citizens, and (4) impact of all of the above on the reputations of the United States and China and their standing in the eyes of governing classes in every other nation.

The Chinese government understood and accepted that its response would hit the economy hard. But after a single quarter in which its economy declined by almost 7%, China reopened for business and has now returned to positive growth in the second quarter and beyond.²⁴ The American response has caused its economy to suffer a sharper decline than in any equivalent period in the Great Depression and has put the United States on track to enter 2021 with a GDP smaller than it had last year.²⁵ If China now returns to robust economic growth, on the one hand, and the United States teeters on the brink between an extended recession and a genuine depression for months, the gap between the GDP of China and the United States will grow.

The initial missteps in responding to coronavirus raised serious questions about China's party-led government and especially about its president, who as "COE"—chief of everything—has projected a "cult of competence." But the rapid turnaround and the results that followed have renewed Chinese citizens' confidence in their leader and in their form of government—especially as they watch the United States continuing to stumble. Coronavirus has amplified America's dysfunctional democracy in an already vicious election year. Moreover, if an authoritarian government demonstrates competence in ensuring its citizens' most basic human right—the right to life—as a democratic, decentralized government flounders, propagandists about China's virtues or vices will be a sideshow.

Nations that have successfully managed challenges within their own borders have the resources to lend a helping hand to those desperately seeking assistance. After World War II, the United States accounted for half of the world's GDP. It therefore had the means to conceive and launch the Marshall Plan for Europe. That allowed a devastated Britain, France, Germany, and Italy to survive, recover, and become parts of the American NATO alliance against the Soviet Union. As Germany's great end-of-Cold War Chancellor Helmut Kohl never tired of saying, in the ruins of a defeated country, as a teenager who was cold and hungry, he received his first overcoat and food from American soldiers who had less than a year before been in deadly conflict with Nazi armies.

Which way is aid flowing in this crisis? With whom have both the United States and France placed orders for millions of face masks?²⁶ Who is the major supplier to the world of protective equipment, ingredients for tests, ventilators, and other medical supplies? As the United States has wrestled with its ally France over whose delivery of masks from China comes first, China has provided protective equipment and medicines to more than one hundred countries, focusing in particular on countries it sees as important in its campaign for global influence.²⁷ Italy is one

of these, and Italians who were overwhelmed by endless videos of hospitals being overrun and lines of coffins will not soon forget who provided protective equipment, ventilators, and hundreds of doctors and who, including their EU partners and the United States, sent get-well cards. China's usurpation of the role the United States has played for the past seven decades as the benevolent provider of assistance to states in their most desperate moments may become the metaphor for historians writing the requiem for the American century.

In addition, the United States and China are each doing everything in their power to win the vaccine race. Anyone who has any doubts about which population the winner will vaccinate first is still in need of a dose of reality.

Moreover, we should never forget the larger canvas. There China's meta-narrative is a story of its inevitable rise and America's irreversible decline. A nation that began the century with a GDP less than a quarter of America's has now overtaken the United States to create an economy larger than ours. A military that was forced to back down in the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996 when the United States sent two carriers to the theater has over the past two decades built up an arsenal of "carrier-killer" missiles that would force the United States to make different choices today. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, China's leadership was emboldened by its success in returning to rapid growth as the United States was stuck in secular stagnation. Unless the United States can find a way to meet the current coronavirus challenge, China could be tempted to take greater risks, including forcibly bringing Taiwan under Beijing's rule.

In sum, as the United States and China navigate the coronavirus crisis, they are simultaneously facing off in the competition between their two fundamentally different conceptions of governance. Americans and Chinese will see how well—or poorly—their form of government ensures their safety. Others around the world will draw conclusions about the relative strengths and weaknesses of an American-style decentralized democracy with its core commitment to individual liberty, on the one hand, versus China's party-led autocracy in which order is the paramount political value, on the other.

Inseparable Conjoined Twins

Despite this rivalry, coronavirus also provides a vivid reminder that each nation faces external threats it cannot defeat on its own. Even if one nation succeeds in driving the rate of new domestic infections to zero, when its citizens return from abroad, they can bring it with them, creating further waves of infections. This

dilemma illuminates a fundamental feature of the relationship first learned by American and Soviet cold warriors: the United States and China, like the United States and Soviet Union, are insufferable but inseparable conjoined twins.

COLD WAR WISDOM

After exploding its first bomb in 1949, the Soviet Union rapidly developed a nuclear arsenal so substantial and sophisticated that it created what nuclear strategists recognized as mutual assured destruction, or MAD.²⁸ This described a condition in which neither the United States nor the Soviet Union could be sure of destroying its opponent's arsenal with a nuclear first strike before the enemy could launch a fatal nuclear response. Under such conditions, one state's decision to kill another is simultaneously a choice to commit national suicide. President Ronald Reagan's one-liner captures the central truth: "A nuclear war cannot be won and must therefore never be fought."

If Reagan was right, then between nuclear superpowers, the menu of viable strategic options cannot include nuclear attack. In rivalries between nuclear superpowers in which neither has dominance on every rung up the escalation ladder from conventional war, the use of conventional military forces to attack the adversary also becomes almost unthinkable—for anything short of a threat to national survival. History saw these constraints emerge in the Cold War, beginning with the Berlin blockade of 1948, and the US government's refusal to come to the rescue of Hungarian freedom fighters when they rose up in 1956 or Czech freedom fighters trying to escape Soviet domination in 1968.

Cold War strategists learned that survival under these conditions necessitated shaping the competition around five Cs: caution, communication, constraints, compromise, and cooperation. To guard against the risk of their "cold" war turning "hot," the United States and the Soviet Union accepted—for the time being—many unacceptable facts on the ground. These included Soviet domination of the captive nations of Eastern Europe and the Communist regimes in China, Cuba, and North Korea. In addition, the rivals wove an intricate web of mutual constraints around the competition, constraints that President Kennedy called "the precarious rules of the status quo." To reduce the risk of surprise nuclear attacks, for instance, they negotiated arms control treaties that provided greater transparency and instilled greater confidence in each party that the other was not about to launch a first strike. To avoid accidental collisions of aircraft or ships, they negotiated precise rules of the road for air and sea. Over time, both competitors tacitly agreed to each other's three nos: (1) no use of nuclear weapons, (2) no di-

rect overt killing of each other's armed forces, and (3) no overt military intervention in each other's recognized sphere of influence.

Nevertheless, while superpower arsenals create what students of security studies have called a "crystal ball effect" that reminds policy makers of the devastating consequences of war and thus engenders additional caution, in confronting the Soviet Union in the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy still took what he judged to be a one-in-three chance of nuclear war.²⁹

Nuclear weapons, in effect, made the United States and the Soviet Union (and now Russia) inseparable conjoined twins. While each still had a head, a brain, and the will to act, their backbones had been fused to become one. In their united breast beat a single heart. On the day that one stopped the other's heart from beating, both would unquestionably die. As awkward and uncomfortable as this metaphor is, it captures the defining fact about the US relationship with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. And it remains the defining truth many 21st-century Americans imagine somehow vanished when the Cold War ended. While the Soviet Union disappeared, its superpower arsenal certainly did not.

Today, China has developed a nuclear arsenal so robust that it creates a 21st-century version of MAD with the United States. Thus, however evil, however demonic, however dangerous, however deserving to be strangled it is, the United States must struggle to find some way to live with it—or face dying together.

21ST-CENTURY MINI-MADS

The shared fate of the United States and China does not stop with mutual assured nuclear destruction. In our interconnected world, it instead goes beyond to a number of "mini-MADs," challenges that threaten mutual assured "defeat," if not "destruction," for both countries that neither can overcome alone.

Viruses carry no passports, have no ideology, and respect no borders. When droplets from an infected patient who sneezes are inhaled by a healthy individual, the biological impact is essentially identical whether the person is American, Italian, or Chinese. When an outbreak becomes a pandemic infecting citizens around the world, since no nation can hermetically seal its borders, every country is at risk. The inescapable fact is that all 7.7 billion people alive today inhabit one small planet Earth. As President Kennedy noted in explaining the necessity for coexistence with the Soviet Union in facing mutual, existential nuclear danger: "We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."³⁰

Pandemics are one mini-MAD. Climate change is another. Given the fact that every citizen on planet Earth lives inside a single biosphere, unless the United

States and China—as the number one and number two emitters of greenhouse gases, respectively—can find ways to restrain emissions or limit their effects, by century’s end, citizens could find the climates in both countries unlivable. The Paris Climate Agreement took a small step toward recognizing this fact and beginning to act to address the challenge. President Trump’s withdrawal from the pact and denial of the problem is hard to understand.

Financial crises, like the events of 2008 that occurred after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, which produced a Great Recession and threatened a second Great Depression, can also only be managed if the two largest economies in the world work together. In 2008, they did. As former secretary of the treasury Hank Paulson—the key player for the United States in that event—has said, the Chinese cooperation in coordinating a Chinese fiscal stimulus was at least as important, and perhaps more important, than American action in what could have become a global depression.³¹ (And those who have forgotten the political consequences of the Great Depression of the 1930s should google *fascism* and *Nazism*.)

Rivalry, indeed intense rivalry, between the United States and China is inevitable. But coronavirus is a reminder that in key arenas of international affairs, neither country can live without the other.

Condemned to Cooperate

As long as the United States and China depend on each other for their security in the face of mutual threats, cooperation will be as much a defining feature of world order as rivalry. This deadly pathogen has condemned the United States and China, despite their hostility, to work together, at least to the extent necessary, to ensure their national survival and well-being.

Victory for each will require an effective vaccine. In the current race for that vaccine, we see both the benefits of cooperation and the inevitability of rivalry. Even as both countries rush to create a vaccine that will almost certainly be used on the winners’ own population first, important aspects of its development have been team efforts. By quickly sequencing the genome of the virus and posting it on the Web, China provided essential data for scientists around the world. Joint ventures between a German biotech firm and a Chinese partner, Harvard Medical School and Guangzhou Institute, and others underscore the fact that science advances fastest when scientists everywhere combine their strengths.

RIVALRY PARTNERS

The United States' core national interest is "to preserve the United States as a free nation with our fundamental institutions and values intact," as the defining statement of Cold War strategy put it.³² But could that goal be achieved in a world that also included an Evil Empire, as Ronald Reagan rightly called the Soviet Union? Or, today, in a world with a rapidly rising authoritarian China?³³

In the first chapter of the Cold War, leaders we now revere as the "Wise Men" answered "no." George Kennan's Long Telegram identified the Soviet Union as "a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with the United States there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*."³⁴ According to Kennan's diagnosis, the Soviets "believed it was necessary that our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power was to be secured."³⁵ As America's first secretary of defense, James Forrestal, put it: Soviet Communism is "as incompatible with democracy as was Nazism or fascism."³⁶

But after having survived the Cuban Missile Crisis in which he confronted the prospect of a nuclear war that could have killed hundreds of millions of people, President Kennedy had second thoughts. In the most significant foreign policy speech of his career, delivered just five months before he was assassinated, Kennedy signaled a major shift in American Cold War strategy. While never wavering in his conviction that the Soviet Union was evil and the US-led free world good, he nonetheless concluded that an unconstrained effort to bury Soviet-led totalitarianism had become unacceptably dangerous.

Going forward, the United States and Soviet Union would have to find ways to constrain their competition and even compromise: to live and let live in a world of diverse political systems with diametrically opposed values and ideologies. In a bit of rhetorical jiu-jitsu that stood President Woodrow Wilson's long-standing call for a "world safe for democracy" on its head, he insisted that hereafter, the priority in the Cold War would be to build a "world safe for diversity."³⁷

What led President Kennedy to such a dramatic change of mind? The experience of existential nuclear danger. He really believed that the confrontation in which he had stood eyeball-to-eyeball with the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev could have ended in nuclear Armageddon. Having survived, as he gave thanks, he vowed that hereafter he would do everything in his power to ensure that neither he nor any of his successors would ever have to do that again.

Could Kennedy's insight offer clues for Americans and Chinese strategists today as they think about how to escape Thucydides's Trap? Could it be enlarged and enriched by a concept of "rivalry partnership" that emerged a thousand years ago in ancient China?

Rivalry partners sounds like a contradiction. But it describes the relationship the Song Emperor of China established with the Liao, a Manchurian kingdom on China's northern border, after concluding that his armies would not be able to defeat them. In the Chanyuan Treaty of 1005, Song China and Liao agreed to compete aggressively in some arenas and simultaneously to cooperate intensely in others. In a unique version of Chinese tributary relations, the Chanyuan Treaty required the Song to pay tribute to the Liao, who agreed to invest that payment in economic, scientific, and technical development in Song China.³⁸

Sustaining this rivalry partnership required managing recurring crises and adapting to new conditions. Nonetheless, the era of peace between the two rivals that followed lasted 120 years. Moreover, the payments created an early form of a market, stimulating economic growth in China that supported the development of arts and learning in what Chinese historians now describe as a "golden era."

The question today is whether American and Chinese government leaders could find their way to a 21st-century analogue of the Song's invention—one that would allow them simultaneously to compete and cooperate.

The toxic cocktail of pride, arrogance, and paranoia engulfing both rivals is a serious challenge to cooperation. But what may be an alien concept to world leaders today is normal for the leaders of our most dynamic companies. Apple and Samsung, for example, are fierce competitors in selling smartphones. But Samsung is also Apple's essential supplier of components for smartphones.³⁹ Coronavirus makes incandescent the impossibility of identifying China clearly as either foe or friend. Rivalry partnership may sound complicated, but life is complicated.

Conclusion

What lasting impact will coronavirus have on relations between the United States and China? While the future is uncertain, I'll record my bet that Thucydides will be a better guide than those who are now proclaiming a transformation of international relations.

Could a rivalry partnership in a world safe for peaceful competition between diverse political systems serve as the starting point for a new strategic concept for managing the dangerous dynamic between China and the United States today? For political leaders unable to see shades between black and white, this may prove

too demanding. If so, Thucydides would say they chose their fate. But since our survival is at stake, we must hope that political leaders learn from history to navigate a complicated, difficult, challenging rivalry—one in which the United States and China have both competing interests and shared interests they have to manage in order to survive.

NOTES

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