Why Worry? Sino-American Relations and World Order

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This essay explores the competitive dynamic in Sino-American relations with particular focus upon its dangers. There is beyond question a cooperative dynamic also that should not be ignored or understated, but there are grounds for serious concern lest rivalry overwhelms cooperation as the dominant narrative. The appalling record of our species' strategic history – meaning the influence of the use and threat of force on the course of history– should be allowed to advise us that terrible events and episodes have occurred, continue to occur episodically, and are by no means mysterious in the general reasons for their repeated occurrence.[1]

It is commonplace and correct to argue that "this time", in other words in our time (in this case the twenty-first century, but the claim has been registered previously), it will be different. Progress, certainly change, of a moral, political, economic, and technological character, allegedly is ensuring that the future will not resemble the past. At the level of anticipation in detail, such argument is conclusively persuasive. However, at the elevated level of human behaviour in society and the relations between societies and their states with governments, the claim is less convincing. This discussion seeks to avoid posing

unanswerable and therefore unhelpful, though not necessarily uninteresting, questions such as "might the twenty-first century be radically different in revealing a cumulatively radical downshift in the relative importance of history's strategic dimension?" Professor Stephen Pinker and his powerfully argued thesis on the decline in organized violence is interesting and may have some merit.[2] But, his recent argument does not suffice to douse the concerns that drive my exploration here.

The fundamental grounds for serious concern over the prospects for war, for rivalry short of active hostilities, or for peace that is more than merely the absence of warfare, are tersely well expressed in words well worth quoting, in order: from Thucydides -- an Athenian general and historian in the 400s BC; Nicholas J. Spykman -- a Dutch-American political scientist in 1942; and Yan Xuetong – a Chinese professor in 2011. The following are their pertinent words:

> It follows that it was not a very remarkable action, or contrary to the common practice of mankind, if we did accept an empire that was offered to us, and refused to give it up under the pressure of the three strongest motives, fear, honor, and interest. And it was not we who set the example, for it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger.
>
> Thucydides (c. 400 BC)[3]

Leaping forward nearly two and a half millennia:

> Without mechanical power – the ability to move mass – there can be no technology. Without political power – the ability to move men – technology cannot serve a social purpose. All civilized life rests, therefore, in the last instance on power.
>
> Nicholas J. Spykman (1942)[4]

Also:

> In international society, as in other social groupings, there are observable the three basic processes of co-operation, accommodation, and opposition.
>
> Nicholas J. Spykman (1942)[5]

And, in addition, for a Chinese authored restatement of ancient wisdom for the twenty-first century:

> With China's rising influence over the global economy, and its growing ability to project military power, competition between the United States and China is inevitable. This will mean competing with the United States politically, economically and technologically. Such competition may cause diplomatic tensions, but there is little danger of military clashes.
>
> Yan Xuetong (21 November 2011)[6]

The learned Chinese professor may be correct in his fairly confident dismissal of military danger, certainly one hopes that he is, but it is not prudent to assume that his optimism is to be trusted. Much that should not happen were history a relatively benign grand narrative, somehow happened anyway. As we strive to contemplate the century to come we should at least be warned, if not necessarily

alarmed, by the two and a half millennia of human experience to which we have variable, but nonetheless arguably adequate, access. We need not and ought not to march boldly on into the twenty-first century ignorant of, or indifferent to, contexts that have noteworthy and usually grim historical provenance. The ever quotable former American Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, once sought to shed some needed light on the critically important subject of the limits to our knowledge. In words that frequently have been repeated, and almost as often misunderstood, then Secretary Rumsfeld claimed that:

> … as we know, there are known knowns: There are things we know we know: We also know there are known unknowns: that is to say we know there are some things [we know] we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.[7]

It may seem pedantic to seek to improve on Rumsfeld's somewhat encyclopaedic attempt to classify our knowledge, but his helpful typology is considerably improved if one adds yet another category to the three he identifies. Specifically, there are "known knowns" that are in fact wrong; they are classified incorrectly. Such false facts are especially dangerous because they constitute assumptions that are believed to be facts. We know no facts with complete reliability about the future course of history; we are obliged, *faute de mieux*, to make assumptions on the basis of guesswork educated by our knowledge of the past and present. Although we are literally and of necessity ignorant about the future in detail, there is a rich storehouse of theory, which is

to say of explanation of how and why events have occurred in the past. What we call history is the past as historians have chosen to interpret and explain it. The past always requires explanation; otherwise it is simply a meaningless record of events. In the words of F.A. Hayek: "without a theory the facts are silent".[8] The above quotations from the three authors are all interpretations of history grounded massively in the empirical record. They are only theory, but as explanations of the course of history they constitute theory that is well evidenced empirically. Thucydides, Spykman, and Yan Xuetong combine across millennia and cultures to argue that: states are moved politically by fear, honour, and interest; politics is about power; and that political (*inter alia*) competition between leading and would-be leading states is inevitable. We have been warned!

It is sensible to be cautious about allowing any authority to purported "lessons of history". In part scepticism is invited because such "lessons" may well reflect mainly the arguable though fashionable beliefs of some historians, rather than reveal objective truths. However, with prudent scepticism accorded its substantial due, an attitude of disdain for the conclusions reached by careful scholars of the past would be thoroughly insupportable. It is a fact that the contrast could scarcely be sharper between the experiential void that is the future, and the wealth of variably accessible evidence from which we can interpret the past. Whereas the past is the realm of experience, positive,

negative, and a mixture of the two, the future is a land only of hope and intentions.

The historical record, with its potent and apparently permanent (military) strategic dimension, tells us unmistakeably that Thucydides, Spykman, and Yan Xuetong are correct in their undeniably rather grim assessment of the enduring human political condition. One does not need to own a thoroughly reliable crystal ball, or to be a determined pessimist, in order to anticipate that China and the United States are bound upon a path that will be strewn with causes and occasions for competition, opposition, antagonism, and strategic danger. One can write this without prejudice to views about the actual or prospective substantive merit in the policy stances of the two states. To understand Thucydides' trinitarian template of theory, is to understand why a generally benign condition, dominated by cooperative behaviour, cannot prudently be assumed to be controlling in future relations between Beijing and Washington.

The great French sociologist, Raymond Aron wrote that "prudence is the statesman's supreme virtue".[9] The prudence in the contemporary content of assumptions, policy, strategy, and behaviour is ever liable to be arguable, but this essay has to record the view that perilous competition is likely, though not certain, to overwhelm the mutual interests in cooperation that certainly will be objectively, if not always subjectively, potent.

The alleged "lessons of history" are always problematic, but the past can be interpreted to flag warnings of danger: cautionary tales are waiting to be told.[10] There are powerful reasons indeed why the United States and China should be able to cohabit peacefully in a globalised world. Indeed, it is easy to persuade oneself that rationality and reason all but command a Sino-American relationship that, even if unavoidably troubled episodically in some particulars, surely must lend itself to careful mutual management. The trouble with such an optimistic prognosis is that it rests upon an imprudent assumption about the workings of rationality and reason in international politics.

The logic of rational strategic thought and behaviour may well be eternal and universal, but its particular content is ever at risk of being driven or at least influenced by such feelings of fear, considerations of honour, and assessments of interest that it is rendered unreasonable in the judgement of policymakers abroad. There is no law that mandates a primarily conflictual relationship between two pre-eminent states, but the historical record reveals that prudent statecraft always has been concerned to resist the growth of a state power that plausibly could have the capability to reduce markedly one's freedom of discretion over policy and strategy. It is well to remember that security is both subjective and objective. The concept of threat accommodates a fusion of capabilities and assessed (probably guessed, not fully revealed) intentions. In practice, one cannot really calculate the requirements of (national) security. The

reason is because security is a feeling rather than a verifiable calculable condition; as such it is a judgement that is beyond definitive material remedy. Once a state perceives malign intent on the part of a polity that is assumed to be a rival, almost no measure of prudent and defensively intended military preparation is likely to reward its political owner with the desired confidence of adequate security. In common with wealth, it is probably impossible to believe that one enjoys too much security.

The entire history of Mankind accessible to us records competition, rivalry, enmity and frequently war, between two leading states with somewhat comparable, if usually asymmetric, capabilities and ambitions or pretensions. It is entirely usual for states, and especially for great states, to seek as much control over their external environment as they are able at bearable net cost (and even sometimes at costs that are unbearable over the longer run). When an international political system contains two such states, the logic of prudence in their situation(s) commands reciprocal definition of rivalry and often enmity. The result frequently and unsurprisingly has been tragic, but the tragedy has been a consequence in part of apparently sensible prudential reasoning in statecraft. When statesmen enquire as they must in their processes of policymaking and grand strategy formulation, "who or what could do us great harm?" the answers arrived at in the capitals of two would-be dominant powers will be self-evident. They may well not be self-evidently true to an Omniscient

Observer who is able to see the depth, width and context of truly common interests between the two polities.[11] But, to the statesmen and their publics in a recognizably Thucydidean system of politics, the logic and prudence of competition is apt to be as irresistible as it is mutual and therefore reciprocated. Today's statesmen in Beijing and Washington assuredly harbour few, if any desires for perilous rivalry or dangerous adventures in bids for competitive advantage. But, in the wise cautionary words of Karl Marx, writing in 1852:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.[12]

In a vital sense the course of history has to be substantially linear and sequential, which is why chronology is so important for historical understanding. But, even a necessarily somewhat linear story, with events plainly produced from the ingredients of what went before, can be seriously ironic. Casual references to historical non-linearity tend to confuse change and surprise with true paradox, meaning literally contradiction. The relevance of these thoughts to the argument in this essay is their value as a reminder of the potency of Marx's thesis just quoted. "[T]raditions of dead generations weighs like a nightmare…" may be a shade too gloomy for some readers, but his central point, that although "men make their own history … they do not make it just as they please …", under circumstances of their choice, are golden words of

warning indeed. The stage on which, and arguably even much of the plot with which, Sino-American relations are played, are substantially 'given' for the living actors of today. Plot changes and variation in the delivery of lines may be attempted and can have some success, but contemporary political leaders are not at liberty to deny in their practice of statecraft and strategy the lasting merit in the thoughts of Thucydides, Spykman, Yon Xuetong and Marx, as quoted above.

There are many actual and potential reasons to worry about the future course of Sino-American relations, with particular concern for their possible consequences in strategic history. I choose to comment very briefly on just three broad sources of trouble for the relationship. These are not entirely beyond human (political) discretionary control, but nonetheless effectively they are fixtures on the historical stage, to refer to Marx's metaphor. Specifically, causes for worry include: The play of friction, chance and contingency; the essential unity of politics, meaning that the politics of domestic and foreign policy necessarily are closely connected; and finally, the probability of error in management of the anticipated, predicted tectonic shift in the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, and its meaning for regional and even world order. Admittedly, these are subjects with a huge domain and awesome complexity, but noone has claimed recently that statecraft can be a profession for the faint-hearted or the unsophisticated.

First, to quote the pithily eloquent Donald Rumsfeld one more time, "stuff happens" (words spoken on 11 August 2003, referring to the disorder in liberated/conquered and occupied, but unpoliced Baghdad). "Friction" was the compound omnibus concept employed by Carl von Clausewitz to cover all the reasons why things go wrong on the night; why even truly cunning plans need to be adapted to unexpected circumstances.[13] Plans and their execution in action always differ, typically for reasons that were not anticipated, let alone specifically predicted. The more that China and the United States interact, the greater will be the number of friction-prone happenings, including non-happenings when expected, perhaps reciprocally, behaviour does not occur. Friction, chance, and contingency characterise all human relations, not excluding the political, but they only have the potential to do great harm when they occur on a stage already set for competition and worse, as well as for cooperation.

Second, the contemporary IT revolution has a turbo-charging consequence for the salience of the old maxim that 'all politics are local'. These days at least, foreign policy has to play well enough at home if it is to be sustainable abroad. Not for nothing did Clausewitz flag the passion of the people as a key element in his theory of war.[14] Chinese and American political leaders may be cool and rational, but they are unable to be indifferent to the sometimes chauvinistic sentiments of politically influential fractions of their domestic publics. The

contemporary dynamism of the Chinese context includes efforts to achieve reform, curb and punish corruption, and cope with demographic and other massive near-systemic social problems. It is inevitable that Beijing's external policy and strategy must be considerably hostage to the logic of domestic considerations, many of which are as unwelcome as they are unavoidable. In China as elsewhere, essential domestic harmony can be promoted by the legitimacy of a state authority that can be enhanced periodically by 'standing up' for China. A modern historical narrative dominated by the theme of national victimization, can be tapped to correct for a feared current legitimacy deficit. As for the United States, a domestic political scene troubled deeply, though popularly denied vociferously of course in a Presidential election year, by the issue of national decline, is one ever likely to push the makers and explainers of foreign policy towards an unreasoning truculence. It is hard for many Americans to wrap their brains around the idea, let alone the reality, of a transition that is a global, certainly a regional-plus power shift, from the seemingly unchallengeable status of unipolarity to something rather less. The shift is a relative one, but the plain evidence of excessive ambition in Iraq and Afghanistan, notwithstanding unpersuasive claims to the contrary, in the context of undeniable failure of domestic financial governance, compounds to help produce a volatile domestic context for American foreign policy.

Third and as it were summatively, there are non-trivial reasons for worry over the ability of the Chinese and American polities to continue to manage their political, including their strategic, relations with the caution that will be needed in support of a relatively stable world order. As observed already, the reasons why all should be well enough for the conflict in the relationship to be containable, are intellectually and materially impressive. It would be unjust to accuse Professor Yan Xuetong of complacency, and certainly I shall not do so; nonetheless his claim that "there is little danger of military clashes" has to be labelled a rather bold guess. It is not and cannot be a calculation, because there is no way in which the claim can be tested. What does seem to be beyond plausible argument is that an obviously rising China, in its self-elevation (including cumulatively long-term military modernization), has to pose a dynamic challenge to the long-standing world order authored and underwritten largely by the United States. Great states typically do not yield pole position in the power stakes by means of a friendly and cooperative process of power transition (demotion). Effort to remain Number One, or at least First (Nearly) Equal, in principle at least must engage fuel for danger identified in the quoted judgements that launched this discussion.

[1] Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategy History*, 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp.1-3.
[2] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

[3] Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, rev. tr. Richard Crawley (New York: The Free Press, 1996), p.43.
[4] Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), p.11.
[5] Ibid., p.15.
[6] Yan Xuetong, "How China Can Defeat America", *International Herald Tribune*, 21 November 2011, p.12.
[7] Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), p.xiii.
[8] F.A. Hayek (Austrian born Nobel Prize winning economist, 1899-1992), quoted in John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), p.6.
[9] Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p.585.
[10] See Michael Howard, *Lessons of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), ch. 1.
[11] See Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars and other essays* (London: Counterpoint, 1983), pp. 215-17.
[12] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon", in Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, Vol. 1 (1852: Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 247.
[13] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, tr. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (1832-4; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 119-21.
[14] Ibid., p.89.

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