

Thucydides' Notions of Fear, Honor, and Interest in the US-China Strategic Dispute over Taiwan

Las nociones de Tucídides de miedo, honor e interés
en el conflicto estratégico entre Estados Unidos
y China respecto a Taiwán

Ángel Jaramillo Torres

ORCID: 0000-0003-3606-0577

angeljaramillo989@gmail.com

COMEXI

Ciudad de México, México

Fecha de recepción: 5 de marzo de 2025

Fecha de aceptación: 12 de mayo de 2025



Abstract. This article will describe the main strategic scenarios in the dispute between China and the United States over Taiwan, considering some themes proposed by the historian and political philosopher, Thucydides, developed in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. These issues will be examined in light of three components of the current U.S.-China confrontation: 1) the geopolitical situation and its likely future scenario; 2) the economic and technological component; and 3) and, last but not least, the ideological dispute over the Taiwanese political regime. The hypothesis of this paper is that since the rise or fall of China and The United States (or the U.S.) is not guaranteed in the coming years, the battle of the two superpowers over Taiwan will be decided by their behavior in the face of the Thucydidean triad of fear, honor and interest.

Key words: China, Taiwan, United States, Thucydides, dispute.

Cómo citar: Jaramillo Torres, Á. (2025). Thucydides' Notions of Fear, Honor, and Interest in the US-China Strategic Dispute over Taiwan. *China Global Review*, 3(5), 59-78. <https://doi.org/10.53897/REvChinaGR.2025.05.03>

Resumen. Este artículo describirá los principales escenarios estratégicos en la disputa entre China y Estados Unidos sobre Taiwán, considerando algunos temas propuestos por el historiador y filósofo político, Tucídides, desarrollados en su *Historia de la Guerra del Peloponeso*. Estos temas se examinarán a la luz de tres componentes del actual enfrentamiento entre Estados Unidos y China: 1) la situación geopolítica y su probable escenario futuro; 2) el componente económico y tecnológico; y 3) y, por último, pero no menos importante, la disputa ideológica sobre el régimen político taiwanés. La hipótesis de este trabajo es que, dado que el ascenso o la caída de China y Estados Unidos no está garantizado en los próximos años, la batalla de ambas superpotencias por Taiwán se decidirá en función de su comportamiento ante la tríada tucididiana de miedo, honor e interés.

Palabras clave: China, Taiwán, Estados Unidos, Tucídides, disputa.

Introduction

This paper will outline the main strategic scenarios in the dispute between China and the United States over Taiwan by taking into account some Thucydidean themes developed in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. These themes will be drawn from three components of the current U.S.-China showdown: 1) the geopolitical situation and its likely future scenario, 2) the economic and technological component, 3) and last but not least the ideological dispute over the Taiwanese political regime.

The hypothesis of this work is that, given the fact that the ascent or downfall of China and the United States is not guaranteed within the next several years, their endgame over Taiwan will be decided by the way they will behave in light of the Thucydidean triad of fear, honor, and interest.

Fear, honor, and interest over Taiwan

The theme of fear in the largest dispute between China and the United States has been discussed by Allison (2022). For him, it is the United States - representing Sparta in Thucydides' Peloponnesian War - the polity anxious about China's ascendance in the international scenario.

In this narrative, China is challenging the United States, which is still the current global hegemon, to overtake it in that role. Notwithstanding the arguments Allison provides to prove his main point, Thucydides'

Peloponnesian War fear not only cuts both ways but is only one of three legs that explain a polity's behavior; the other two are interest and honor. Allison only took into account one of them.

The Athenian Ambassadors' speech in Sparta - delivered after the Corinthian speech designed to convince Sparta to wage war against Athens - mentions three powerful motives that constrain Athens's behavior: fear, honor, and interest (Thucydides, 2009). These three motives ground China's behavior in trying to turn at least the East Asian Pacific into a kind of *mare nostrum*, in a similar fashion practiced by Theodore Roosevelt at the dawn of the 20th century in the Caribbean. By the same token, the three motives guide Washington's behavior when it comes to China's ascendance as a superpower.

Like Roosevelt's America, Xi Jinping's China is playing the civilizational card whereby Beijing has a kind of manifest destiny to reign in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

But this justification for exerting hegemony in the sea may be older than modernity as the belief in the centrality of China is almost as ancient as the existence of the Chinese polity (Kissinger, 2011). Taiwan is a tricky question for the Chinese Politburo for three reasons: first, China considers Taiwan a part of Chinese civilization, but second, the bosses in Beijing profoundly dislike the Taiwanese liberal democratic regime, and third, the Politburo is keenly aware that Taiwan, even if it becomes part of China's sovereignty, should be regarded as an autonomous state.

In Xi Jinping's view of a Greater China, Taiwan must be part thereof (Allison, 2022). The reasons for that are offered by Thucydides' triad of interest, fear, and honor.

Just as for Thucydides both Athens and Sparta fought for the same reasons, in the showdown between Beijing and Washington, both polities behave according to its interest, honor, and fear. In the following pages, these motives will be examined in light of the strategic game played by both hegemonic powers regarding Taiwan.

Background

The current political framework dictating the China-United States relationship is the Indo-Pacific strategy that Washington decided to pursue in 2017. The renaming of USPACOM as USINDOPACOM was not merely a change of name but a new geopolitical orientation towards the region. By bringing India and Indochina to the table, the American regime attempted to set New Delhi and

its area of influence as a maritime rival of Beijing (Lan, 2025). The Chinese government, for its part, understands the term Indo-Pacific as the name of an American strategy that treats China a rival. Instead of Indo-Pacific, the Politburo prefers to use the term Asia-Pacific (He and Li, 2020).

Since Taiwan has been incorporated into the Security Partners framework of the Indo-Pacific strategy of Washington, the Chinese government cannot but regard such a framework as a risk to both its strategic security and territorial integrity.

One paradox of Taiwan is that, at the moment, it is the owner of its own destiny after centuries of dependence on the decisions of other powers, yet has not been recognized as a full-fledged nation by most of the nations of the world. However, Taiwan was an independent entity until it fell first under the Aegis of the late Ming Dynasty and then under the administrative control of the Qing Dynasty in 1689 (Trigger, 2011).

By the end of the nineteenth century and having been subjugated by Western powers, the Qing Dynasty became so weak that it lost a war against Japan, a new power that did not lose an opportunity to rob China of Taiwan's control. The island then was part of the Japanese Empire for fifty years (Liao and Wang, 2006). Since the decoupling of the two Chinas in the mid-twentieth century, relations between the two polities have oscillated between two moments which Richard Bush called "the paradigm of mutual persuasion" and "the paradigm of power asymmetry" (Bush, 2013). According to the former view, China and Taiwan reached a seemingly amicable relationship, whereas concerning the latter, both countries exhibit a relationship of great economic, political, and military tensions.

The fears of Beijing and Washington regarding Taiwan

The main fear of both Washington and Beijing is that their rivalry could cause a military conflict between the two countries over Taiwan. This is the background against which the Thucydidean theme of fear will be analyzed. Traditionally, the Chinese government argues that the United States has no business in patrolling seas far from the Western Hemisphere with its navy, whereas the American government has asserted that Taiwan represents a strategic chokepoint to forestall first the Soviet Union and then China from

damaging the expansion of liberal democracy and the consolidation of free markets in Asia (Blackwill and Zelicow, 2021).

Today Xi Jinping's regime continues its military harassment of Taiwan. Beijing has recently deployed part of its air force near the island of Formosa as part of a military exercise, likely in response to President Lai Ching-Te's declaration that Taiwan is a sovereign country (Davidson, 2025). Now, a Chinese incursion into Taiwan would not be an easy feat. First, Taiwan is ranked 24th in the world in terms of military power. Furthermore, no intelligence service in the world knows China's logistical and military weaknesses like Taiwan. If an amphibious attack by China could become a nightmare for Beijing, an air deployment with missile launches would have a devastating impact on the international community opinion concerning Beijing's behavior.

Furthermore, its military impact would be very limited (Kaplan, 2014). Beijing undoubtedly has coercive options short of an all-out war (Miller, 2022). One possibility would be a maritime and air blockade, which would certainly shut down Taiwan's economy. Let's not forget the fact that the factories of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) —the most important enterprise in the island— are mainly located on the Eastern coastline of Taiwan next to the Taiwan Strait. Thus China might have an economic incentive to harass Taiwan's eastern side (Miller, 2022).

If Beijing took some control over the TSMC that would devastate not only the semiconductor market on which a great part of the world economy is founded, but it would cause significant damage to the American economy, not to mention to Taiwanese welfare. To avoid this weakness, the Trump administration is betting on bringing TSMC investment into the United States. However this might work in the long term, the truth of the matter is that TSMC in Taiwan territory continues to be a strategic asset for the Western economy and thereby for the interest of the United States.

A Chinese blockade on Taiwan might be the litmus test as to whether the United States and Japan, not to mention South Korea and Australia are serious about using coercive means against China. It's not obvious that Tokyo, Canberra, or Seoul would immediately react, they will likely wait to see if Washington takes action first.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the United States and its allies in the region —Japan and Taiwan— would defeat China in case of an amphibious invasion of the Island of Formosa (Cancian,

2023). However, the cost to both China and the United States, not to mention Taiwan, would be devastating. The continuing rule of the Chinese Communist Party might be in jeopardy, as well as the United States global hegemony in the world (Cancian, 2023).

Let's not forget, moreover, that the clash between China and the United States could potentially lead to a nuclear showdown. Neither Beijing nor Washington can possibly avoid tgamimg out a likely scenario of a nuclear war over Taiwan. China has had nuclear weapons capabilities since 1964 and has carried out improvements to its program ever since. The doctrine of minimum deterrence seems to be China's proposition but the country has not signed any bilateral nuclear arms control agreement.

There seems to be a contradiction between the Chinese suggestion of a "no first use" agreement" and "China's development of "launch-on-warning capacity". A United States Department of Defense report of 2023 states that "China currently possesses more than 500 operational nuclear warheads, and that number is expected to double by 2030 (Rahn, 2024). Whatever may be the case, the critics of the use of nuclear weapons are as correct today as they were when they spelled out, during the worst years of the Cold War, that the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) was actually mad. Both Beijing and Washington will do anything they could to avoid a doomsday scenario.

If one turns the attention from futuristic scenarios to current affairs, the situation as it stands now finds the Trump administration seemingly lost in a Hamlet mindset as to whether the United States would energetically respond or not to China's provocation in Taiwan. Washington is keenly aware that Chinese missiles can reach its chips not only within the Taiwan Strait but beyond as far as Guam or even Hawaii. This consideration must be taken in mind by the Trump administration in any decision they might take regarding Taiwan.

Taiwan proclaims its Independence

China's chief fear regarding Taiwan is naturally that it proclaims its independence and begins to ask for international recognition. This scenario seems unlikely even though half of the Taiwanese would welcome their country's independence. The United States shares with Taiwan the fear of an attempt on the part of China to unify by violent means what they call the Great China.

The government of Taiwan finds itself in the position of needing the acceptance of most of the countries in the world. When Thomas Jefferson announced the American republic's independence from Britain in 1776, he could count, with the consent of many countries, the acceptance of, albeit at a different pace, the American people's will.

Taiwan might be not so lucky. Most countries have accepted the One China Principle, whereby there is only one Chinese state and not two or more, whose capital is currently Beijing. To make things more difficult for Taipei, China's policy of forcing countries to switch recognition from Taiwan to China has proved successful (Hu, 2018). As of May 2024, only 12 nations in the world recognized Taiwan as a sovereign country, all of which significantly reduced Taiwan's diplomatic efforts in the world (World Population Review, 2025).

American foreign policy on Taiwan

The United States understood that it should turn Taiwan into an ally and had to protect it under the Truman administration when North Korea started the war against South Korea. Initially, the protection of Taiwan fell under the imperatives of the Cold War, but by 1978, President James Carter switched allegiance from Taipei to Beijing, albeit keeping its relations to Taiwan.

A few years afterwards, the Reagan administration added the six assurances to Taiwan forging a stronger basis for Washington's relation with Taipei (Hu, 2025). Currently, it could be argued that five major documents encompass the framework of Washington's policy vis-a-vis Taiwan. Three of them are communiqués (including the crucial Communiqué of Shànghái of 1972), one is the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, and the other is the so-called Six Assurances.

Taken together, they represent a kind of balanced policy that guarantees China that the United States will not violate the One-China Policy, but it nonetheless offers assurances to Taiwan that the United States considers its autonomous existence a part of the American security space.

Historically, it has been the preference of the government in Washington to keep the situation as it stands now. Thus, the administrations of George Herbert Walker Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama tried to accommodate their foreign policies toward Taiwan to the specifications of the five documents (Abidde et al., 2025). An argument can be made that the administrations of Donald Trump and Joseph Biden tried to change gears by engaging in a new Indo-Pacific strategic vision (Hung,

2025). When everything is said and done, however, the new strategy did not turn away from the framework of the five documents.

However, recent major changes in the geopolitical landscape could destabilize the situation in the Taiwan Strait. The invasion of Ukraine by Putin's regime in Russia might trigger the Chinese Politburo's ambition to take over Taiwan as it thinks Europe and the United States are no longer willing to intervene militarily. By the same token, the arrival of a second Trump administration, with its aggressive international policies, might mean that the Chinese government could reassess its views on the security in the region, which could mean that Taiwan's takeover is in the offing.

Although the Trump administration is currently following the traditional policy framework concerning Taiwan's security set in the five major documents mentioned above, there are certainly some signals that the American government might change track. Firstly, the Trump administration is behaving more aggressively against its traditional allies, including Taiwan.

Whereas in his first term, President Trump ordered an increase in arms sales to Taiwan, the United States Navy often patrolled the Taiwan Strait, and there was an amicable conversation between President Trump and President Tsai Ing-wen, in his second term, he has been more critical of Taipei (Davidson, 2025).

Not only has Trump taken issue with the authorities in Taipei for not spending more resources on their own defense, he has lambasted the Taiwanese government for what he regards as stealing of the American semiconductor industry. Taipei has responded to Trump's strictures not only by promising to increase defense spending but also by pledging to expand Taiwanese high-tech investments inside the American territory.

The interest of the superpowers in the Taiwan strait

China's Mare Nostrum?

This section will deal with the Thucydidean theme of interest. Both China and the United States have a geopolitical interest in controlling the South China Sea because this is a strategic chokepoint that connects the Pacific with the Indian and Arabic civilizations and secures access to the Mediterranean and, ultimately, to Europe (Kaplan, 2022).

As Robert D. Kaplan has argued, China may have realized that its future power lies in its maritime regional hegemony in the Pacific, and that's

why it hastened to sort things out first in Central Asia and the border with Russia. This is the meaning of such initiatives as the Belt and Road Strategy and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. With its Western border more or less secure, China has decided to engage more deeply in the Pacific by developing a naval power alongside air and missile capabilities.

Over the issue of who will dominate the South China Sea in the future, there are fundamentally two schools of thought. On the one hand, some think China will shortly overtake the United States when it comes to naval power (Allison, 2022; Kaplan, 2011). If this is true then China would return to leadership in the Indo-Pacific as it has done for most of its history (O'Rourke, 2024). One strategic problem China has, however, is its dependence on energy resources, primarily oil and natural gas. Because of this dependence, the authorities in Beijing put into practice a two-pronged strategy to get the energy it needs, namely: importing oil from Central Asia and getting energy resources through commerce in the Malacca Strait. The problem is that China cannot yet maintain order on the oceans in the way America's navy has been able to for several decades. This is a huge strategic problem because Beijing regards the South China Sea as part of its sovereignty. (Rosydin, 2017).

Curiously enough, China has relied on American geopolitical theoreticians for its naval development. Chinese strategists have avidly read Alfred Thayer Mahan and learned his lessons, according to which naval power is the key to world domination (Mahan, 2016; Holmes, 2008). This grand strategy partly explains the Putin-Xi Jinping rapprochement in light of the West's sanctions against the Russian regime in the aftermath of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Up to a point, Beijing's turn to the sea and its capability to take control of Taiwan will depend on successfully setting up a peaceful relationship with Russia. For several reasons both Beijing and Moscow share interest today and that may play out to their advantage in the Pacific Rim.

China also has an interest in ensuring that North Korea avoids a political collapse that might lead to an all-out war with South Korea. Such an event might trigger a wave of migrants into mainland China, potentially depriving it of access to the East China Sea. Losing access to this strategic chokepoint would elevate the importance of securing control over the Island of Formosa. Since China relies on the Indian Ocean for part of its energy resources, it has to secure an advantageous relationship with India. This is part and parcel of the rationale for the Belt and Road Initiative.

The success of this initiative would put Beijing in an advantageous position to think about what to do with Taiwan. Control of the Island is geopolitically significant for China's dual strategy of becoming both a land power and a sea power. The burning matter is whether China can achieve hegemony in the South China Sea over the objections of Taiwan or whether its hegemony is compatible with some kind of cooperation on the part of Taipei. The scholar Zhang Mingjiang, for one, believes this is possible (Miliang, 2012).

The balance of power in the Indo-Pacific at stake

From a realistic point of view, Washington and Beijing are interested in maintaining a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. As Henry Kissinger has argued, if there is a region of the world where the rules of the Westphalian system are currently applicable, this is the Indo-Pacific. After painful colonial pasts, many countries in the region have energetically embraced the overriding principle of sovereignty.

However, China sees itself not merely as a nation-state but rather a civilization-state. In contradistinction, having been the creator of a nation-state-based international system, the United States regards the Indo-Pacific as a network of sovereign countries.

Beijing and Washington have different standpoints of what the balance of power might look like in the region. When the United States is concerned, this assessment has been valid at least since the Woodrow Wilson administration, yet it might change with the Trump administration, who might wind up agreeing with the Chinese Politburo hegemonic powers may dictate their will on lesser powers (Dugin, 2025). The confluence of Chinese and American visions of global affairs would mean that China could exert more power over Taiwan without effectively waging war against it while the United States would not intervene to forestall it.

Taiwan remains a democratic, liberal republic

Since the end of the 1980s, it has undoubtedly been in the interest of the United States that Taiwan remains a liberal, democratic republic. Taiwan might be the most successful case of what the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington called the third wave of democracy. Replicating how Deng Xiaoping got rid of Maoism in China, Chiang Chingkuo and Li Denghui were able

to do away with Chang Kai Check and his Kuo Ming Tang authoritarian style of politics.

As a republic, the United States has regarded the government in Taipei as a regime quite advanced when it comes to observing the rule of law, respecting minorities, and holding competitive and fair elections. By many measures, Taiwanese republican institutions can be said to be among the most robust on the face of the earth.

This posture might change, however, with the arrival of Trump to the American presidency. The Trump administration has put less importance on the moral and institutional kinship between fellow liberal democracies than on what he can do to advance the economic interest of the United States. With a new antiglobalization outlook and a view of world economics founded on mercantilist policies, the United States may no longer constitute a traditional ally for the Taiwanese state.

Trump's tariff war, especially against China, might have the effect of decreasing Chinese-American economic and political coordination. This vacuum might be taken advantage of by Xi to intervene militarily or by other means in Taiwan. Today traditional American allies in the region might decide to switch sides as a direct result of Trump's unilateral imposition of tariffs. As a response to the Trump administration's imposition of tariffs on China, Beijing sought to secure a regional agreement with Tokyo and Seoul and embarked upon a diplomatic visit to Southeast Asia.

Taiwan as a democratic Sinic Civilization and its implications

The ideological and political-philosophical component is seldom discussed when it comes to the analysis of the Taiwanese geopolitical situation. And yet it could certainly be argued it will be of critical importance in the future.

The issue can be recounted thus: in terms of its culture Taiwan is part of the Chinese civilization (Huntington, 1996). As has been stated elsewhere Taipei¹⁰¹ is said to combine oriental philosophy with Western technology. Chinese civilization can be described as a cultural axis comprised of an amalgam of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist elements, what the aristocrats of the Tang Dynasty called the three teachings (Kissinger, 2022). The great difference between mainland China and Taiwan that makes their societies markedly distinctive is that while China mixed up its traditional cultural

Thucydides' Notions of Fear, Honor, and Interest in the US-China Strategic... • pp. 59-78

heritage with what the political philosopher Leo Strauss called the second wave of modernity—that is to say with communism—Taiwan combined the same cultural elements with the first wave of modernity: liberalism. Although there is a debate as to whether China's main ideology comes from its ancient tradition or whether it is fundamentally modern along Marxist lines, there is no doubt that this regime is at odds with liberal democracy (Bell, 2010; Rudd, 2024). This fact renders Taiwan a political and ideological rival of China and, for the time being, and depending on the Trump factor, a political and philosophical ally of the United States.

Thus China's issue with Taiwan is not merely a matter of the need to exert sovereignty over the island, but also about the fact that the political model of liberal democracy adopted by Taipei since the late 1980s signifies a cultural and political challenge to mainland China's civilizational pathway.

Keenly aware of this situation, the Chinese government has been quite successfully in trying to convince young Taiwanese that Taiwan and China are part of the same historical destiny (Bauer, 2025). The political scientist Zhang Weiwei argues that, while Taiwan was successful in applying the so-called East Asian Economic model in its take-off during the 1970s and 1980s, its adaptation of Western-style democracy has marketized its political system, raised the level of corruption, and have allowed gangs and money to engulf Chinese politics. Weiwei's opinion is shared by Xi Jinping, who conceives the Chinese Communist Party as the heir of the Confucian millenarian tradition (Kai, 2014).

The honor of China and America at stake in the Indo-Pacific

China and America battle to lead the Fourth Industrial Revolution

A discussion of the subject of technological development would be the context in which the Thucydidean theme of honor will be treated. There is a canard according to which Silicon Valley innovates and China imitates (Lee, 2018). Although there is something true to this claim it is nonetheless worthwhile to assess whether China has become an innovative powerhouse over the last decade. China's honor is safeguarded if it achieves leadership

status when it comes to science and technology. Both aspects became paramount during the tenure of Hu Jintao as the leader in China.

After various lustrums of astonishing economic growth founded on the exploitation of cheap manual labor, Beijing realized that it had to transition from “made in China” to “designed and created in China”, from “imitator” to “innovator.” (Appelbaum, et al., 2018). This transition towards—which Alvin Toffler called the Third Wave, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Technotronic Era, Daniel Bell, the Post Industrial Society, Klaus Schwab, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or Yuval Noah Harari, *The Homo Deus*—might truly signal the economic future of China (Toffler, 2006; Brzezinski, 1970; Bell 1976; Schwab 2018; Harari, 2015).

China counts on high-tech, Silicon Valley-like clusters “such as Beijing’s Zhongguancun, Wuhan’s East Lake, and Shanghai’s Zhangjiang as the role models” (Appelbaum, et al., 2018). The crucial question is whether a state-led economic regime with an autocratic fashion of exerting authority could actually propel China’s economy into an innovative world-class powerhouse.

At the dawn of the year 2025, one can risk the assertion that China may be able to compete head-to-head with the United States, at least when it comes to the development of artificial intelligence. For a while, it was conventional wisdom that the United States would lead the world in the development of artificial intelligence, and leading companies in this area, such as Nvidia, were already planning great investments to develop artificial intelligence models. But unbeknownst to many, China was advancing its native model that was as fine as the American but cheaper.

Taiwan, for its part, has become a technological and economic powerhouse that currently supplies most of the semiconductors in the world market. The symbol of Taiwan’s success is probably the skyscraper Taipei 101, a building that the country made to symbolize fulfillment and health (Trigger, 2011). But the TSMC has reached an equal status as a symbol of Taiwanese economic flowering. The current Taiwan monopoly in the making of chips is recounted by Chris Miller in his *Chip Wars*. It can be said that Taiwan’s semiconductor development is partly a product of Silicon Valley’s necessity to outsource the production of part of its production of chips. In his book, Miller shows too why neither the Soviet Union nor Mao’s China could take advantage of the new invention. As Taiwan developed a full-fledged semiconductor industry of the first rank, China was immersed

in the cultural revolution, which impeded it from embracing the digital revolution at the time.

Taiwan, in the meantime did not waste time and went ahead to rely on its monopoly in the production of semiconductors to make a great economic leap. Today, Taiwan's economy is ranked 21st in the world by purchasing power parity (PPP) and 14th in the world by per capita GDP. The problem with Taiwan's superconductor industry is that it is not vertically integrated and depends, for instance, on other companies that provide innovation in the designs of chips.

Traditionally, scholars cite 1979 as the moment when China made an existential decision by turning away from the Maoist model and embracing instead the new pathway put forward by Deng Xiaoping. By the 1980s, It was already the fastest-growing economy in the world, which has continued until recently. 2010 was the axial economic year of China as it marked the moment it replaced Japan as the largest economy in the globe (Bradsher, 2006).

Today, China has made headlines on two economic grounds: the rapidity with which it became the largest exporter of electric cars and the breakthrough in artificial intelligence with the development of DeepSeek. But China's breakthroughs in high-tech encompass, for instance, the aerospace and robotic industries, as well as other Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies (Kuhn, 2011).

In what can be described as a new, great divergence between China and Europe —a countermovement of the one spelled out by Kenneth Pomeranz— the former has overtaken the latter in many of the technological and scientific pursuits of the 21st century, and it's on the verge of conquering the European car market. This is certainly a staggering reversal of events, one unthinkable only a decade ago (Pomeranz, 2000).

The future of China will depend in many ways whether it will truly keep its technological edge (Zhou & Satoh, 2025). At any rate, if China, the United States and Taiwan can conveniently resolve the many issues that separates them, they might be able to shape a dynamic triangle of development the likes of which has never been seen before.

Chinese and American Scenarios

In terms of which of the two great powers might be able to take advantage of Trump's new mercantilist policies, the future hinges upon whether

these policies will negatively affect the financial system and the economic framework dominated by the United States dollar (Powell, 2023).

Whatever might be the case, to replace American commercial, economic, and financial hegemony, China will need to substitute the United States as the naval guarantor of global commerce. As of today, it's still doubtful whether the powers in Beijing are willing or able to take this role in world affairs.

Perhaps the greatest problem China faces is the demographic one. Deng Xiaoping set up the so-called One Child policy in 1980 thinking that the problem of China was Malthusian. Seen from today's perspective it's clear to have taken such a course of action was catastrophic (Zeihan, 2022). Xi Jinping repealed the one-child policy in 2015, but it is still to be seen if it is not too late to avoid a great demographic crisis in the near future.

Taiwan, like China, and many countries in the region, has its own demographic problem. By 2010, Taiwan had the lowest recorded fertility rate, only 0.9 percent. Since 2019 its population has been continuously decreasing. Although this may affect the future of Taiwan's prosperity, the island might be able to better manage this problem than China due to the framework of its open society.

In the case of China, while Graham T. Allison thinks that Beijing still has decades to mitigate this risk, the geopolitician Peter Zeihan argues that China's demographic problem will become unmanageable as early as within 10 years (Zeihan, 2022; Allison, 2022). He argues that China has arguably the fastest drop in population in human history. This means that there's a small percentage of young people consuming goods and services. China's one-child policy implemented between 1979 and 2015 proved to be disastrous.

Some believe that China, as a superpower, has no future (Dikötter, 2022; Chang, 2001). China is the largest importer of energy, minerals, and foodstuffs. Its virtual lack of production of raw materials puts China in a seriously difficult position. It's calculated that China's oil reserves could last only for about four months, and they are located in a geographic position which renders the country vulnerable to military attacks. 80 percent of the oil that winds up in China passes through the Malacca Strait, a situation which puts China at the mercy of an offensive onslaught on the part of the United States. Despite having retaliated with tariffs on its own as an energetic response to the Trump administration imposition of duties, China is keenly aware that the principal market for its exports is the United States.

There is no doubt that China did not come out with flying colors during the covid-19 pandemic crisis. One of the problems that was magnified by it was the real estate one. China has excessive leverage and a great amount of debt in the hands of households and retail investors in a sector whose size is huge: the real estate market (Why China's Bubble is a big deal, 2021).

But a high risk of China's collapse might not be good tidings for Taiwan. Beijing can feel the need to take over a very prosperous country to help itself financially and economically. Beijing might also be tempted to initiate a war in the region by claiming Taiwan as part of its territory through military action. It would not be the first time that a polity attempted to wage war abroad to conceal its responsibility for a domestic crisis.

With Deng Xiao Ping began a period in Chinese politics that might aptly be called a "new mandarinat". According to this state of affairs, the decisions were taken at the top in a kind of colleague fashion. The risk the designers of this model of leadership sought to avoid was repeating the autocratic style of Mao's politics that led China to such unsavory practices as the Cultural Revolution.

From the rule of Deng Xiaoping to Jiao Zemin, this collegial mandarinat worked well, at least when it came to fostering economic prosperity. Although many believed that Xi Jinping was going to respect the mandarinat formula, once in power, he managed to get rid of it and replaced it with a new model of power centralization, with him at the wheel. Xi Jinping's campaign against corruption seems to have largely been a ruse to increase his power while augmenting control over a population that might one day rebel against the powers that be, as has been the case over the long Chinese history (Remnick, 2025).

Sun Tzu and China's long-term strategy

But Chang and Zeihan might be wrong and Kissinger be right if we consider China's long-term plans (Mingfu, 2015). The silence of Xi Jinping during the first tumultuous weeks of the second Trump administration has been commented upon by scholars and journalists as being a judicious and shrewd response in the style advocated by Sun Tzu, the great strategic thinker of the Zhou Dynasty (Sun Tzu, 2008).

Some argue that the great beneficiary of Trump's policy of imposing higher tariffs on practically every country in the world would be China. The

argument goes that China has understood better than the United States the developments of contemporary markets in the world. Beijing may be able to inundate the world with its cheap electric cars and other items after the unsustainable high Trump's tariffs are no longer in effect.

By the same token, China holds an enormous amount of American debt and might decide one day to get rid of American treasury bonds, which could hurt American economic soundness (Kondo et al., 2024). China has been garnering diplomatic ground with its membership in influential powerhouse groupings such as the Group of 15 and the BRICS.

In its immediate neighborhood, China has consolidated its strategy with the Belt and Road Initiative. As Richard C. Bush has argued, a successful China might not be such a satisfying situation for Taiwan, for it incentivizes the Politburo in Beijing to try to influence Taipei politics by military or economic means (Bush, 2013).

Those who bet on China's success argue that it will keep intact its most important strategic alliance with Russia despite the United States rapprochement with Moscow (McFaul and Medeiros, 2025). China's new geopolitical alliances and its proven capacities for technological and scientific innovation will likely render it a force to be reckoned with in the near future as Xi Jinping builds what John Keane and Baogang He called a Galaxy Empire (Keane and He, 2025).

Conclusion

Thucydides' triad of fear, honor, and interest can help understand the strategic dilemmas of China and the United States concerning Taiwan. The island has represented a focus of tension between China and the United States ever since Chiang Kai-shek left mainland China to establish his basis of operation in Taiwan. While the People's Republic of China regards Taiwan as part of its territory, the United States foreign policy concerning Taiwan has oscillated between offering Beijing guarantees that it will respect the One-China policy and stating that it will defend Taiwan's security if China puts it at risk.

For several reasons, the year 2025 is particularly dangerous for the stability of the region when it comes to securing Taiwan's political and economic independence. Events such as the war in Ukraine and the arrival of Donald Trump to the American presidency with his tariff wars might increase the risks of conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

By the same token, Beijing has kept up its political and rhetorical aggressions against Taipei since the arrival of William Lai at the Presidency of Taiwan, who has been taking a more assertive stand against the Chinese regime (Lin, Culver, and Hart, 2025). Beijing's military exercises in areas adjacent to Taiwan as well as its cognitive wars aimed at convincing the Taiwanese youth that Taiwan is truly part of mainland China have increased rather than decreased over the last months.

However, how China's weaknesses and strengths would play out in the immediate term could decide the outcome even as the United States is redefining its role in the world, the Indo-Pacific, and the Taiwan Strait.

List of references

- Allison, Graham (2022). *Destined for War: Can America and China escape Thucydides Trap*. Mariner Books.
- Appelbaum, R. P., Cong, C., Han, X., Parker, R., y Denis, S. (2018). "Introduction: from the World's Factory to the World's Innovator" in *Innovation in China*. Polity.
- Bauer, R. (2025). Why does China remain so alluring to some in Taiwan. Global Taiwan Institute, March, 5.
- Bell, D. (1976). *The Coming of Post Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. Basic Books. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131727609336501>
- Bell, D. A. (2010). *China's New Confucianism, Politics and everyday life in a changing Society*. Princeton University Press.
- Blackwill, R. D., y Zelicow, P. (2021). *The United States, China, and Taiwán: a Strategy to prevent War*. Council in Foreign Relations.
- Bradsher, K. (2006). Hong Kong Set to Be No. 1 in 2006 Offerings, Surpassing London and New York. *The New York Times*. October, 20.
- Brzezinski, Z. (1970). *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era*. The Viking Press.
- Bush, R. C. (2013). *Uncharted Strait: The Future of China-Taiwan Relations*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Cancian, M. C., Cancian, M. y Heginbotham, E. (2023). *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Davidson, H. (2025). Taiwan holds its breath Trump turns on Ukraine and upends US foreign policy. *The Guardian*, February, 21.
- Davidson, H. (2025). Taiwan's President labels China a 'foreign hostile force' and ramps up security measures citing 'infiltration'. *The Guardian*, March, 14.
- Dikötter, F. (2022). *China after Mao: The Rise of a Superpower*. Bloomsbury.
- Chang, G. G. (2001) *The Coming collapse of China*. Random House.
- Dugin, A. (2025). *The Trump Revolution*. Arktos.
- Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. Random House.
- He, K., y Li, M. (2020). Understanding the Dynamic of the Indo-Pacific US-China strategic competition, regional actors and beyond. *International Affairs* 96 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz242>

- Holmes, J. R., y Yoshihara, T. (2007). *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan*. Routledge.
- Hu, S. (2018). *Foreign Policies toward Taiwan*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315162140>
- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon and Schuster.
- Kai, J. (2014). The Chinese Communist Party's Confucian Revival Xi Jinping's emphasis on Confucius has a modern-day political purpose. *The Diplomat*, September, 30.
- Kaplan, R. D. (2014). *The Asian Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*. Random House.
- Kaplan, R. D. (2022). *The Adriatic: A Concert of Civilization at the End of the Modern Age*. Random House.
- Kaplan, R. D. (2011). *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. Random House
- Keane, J. y He, B. (2025). *China's Galaxy Empire: Wealth, Power, War, and Peace in the new Chinese Century*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197629116.001.0001>
- Kissinger, H. (2011). *On China*. Penguin Books.
- Kondo, M., y Ouyang, I. (2024). China Sells Record Sum of US Debt Signs of Diversificación. *Bloomberg*, May 15.
- Kuhn, R. L. (2011). The Driving Relevance of Hu Jintao's 'Scientific Perspective on Development' in *How China's Leaders Think*, Singapore, John Wiley & Sons.
- Lan, D. (2025). Will There Be an Indo-Pacific Strategy 3.0?. *China-US Focus*. April, 10.
- Lee, K. (2018). *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley and the New world order*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Lin, B., Culver, J., y Hart, B. (2025). The Risk of War in the Taiwan Strait is high and getting higher: Beijing's Worry About the Future Could Spur a Deadly Miscalculation Soon. *Foreign Affairs*, May 15.
- Liao, P., y Der-Wei Wang, D. (2006). *Taiwan under Japanese Colonial Rule, 1895-1945: History, Culture, Memory*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/liao13798>
- Mahan, A. T. (1890) 2016. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660–1783*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- McFaul, M., y Medeiros, E. S. (2025). China and Russia Will Not Be Split. *Foreign Affairs*, April, 4.
- Miliang, Z. (2012). *China-Taiwan Relations in a Global Context*. Routledge.
- Miller, C. (2022). *Chip War: The Fight for the World's More Critical Technology*. Scribner.
- Mingfu, L. (2015). *The China Dream: Great Powers Thinking & Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era*. Beijing Mediatime Books.
- O'Rourke, R. (2024). Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress. Washington DC. Congressional Research Service). August, 16.
- Pomeranz, K. (2000). *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400823499>
- Powell, W. (2023). A Monetary Evolution - Digital Currency, Circuits of Capital Accumulation and Supply Chain Finance in *China Trust and Digital Supply Chains Dynamic of a Zero Trust World*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003184614>
- Rahn, W. (2024). China's nuclear weapons a growing concern for US. *Deutsche Welle*. August, 29.
- Remnick, D. (2025, abril 06). At the Smithsonian, Donald Trump Takes Aim at History. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/04/14/at-the-smithsonian-donald-trump-takes-aim-at-history>

- Rosydin, M. (2017). China's strategic culture and the challenge of security management in the South China Sea dispute. *East Asia*. 34 (2): 1-13). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-017-9270-5>
- Rudd, K. (2024). *On Xi Jinping: How Xi's Marxist Nationalism is shaping China and the World*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197766033.001.0001>
- Abidde, S. O., & Liu, T. T.-T. (Eds.). (2025). *US foreign policy toward Taiwan: Ambiguity and commitment in international relations*. Springer.
- Schwab, K. (2018). *Shaping the Future of the Fourth Industrial Revolution: A Guide to Building a Better World*. Random House.
- Thucydides. (2009). *The Peloponnesian War*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00266021>
- Toffler, A. (2006). *Revolutionary Wealth: How it will be created and how it will change our lives*. Knopf. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2006.00818.x>
- Trigger, S. (2011). *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tzu, S. (2008). *The Art of War*. Penguin.
- World Population Review. (2025). *Countries that Recognize Taiwan 2025*. World Population Review: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-that-recognize-taiwan>
- Zeihan, P. (2022). *The End of the World is just the Beginning: Mapping the Collapse of Globalization*. Harper Collins.
- Zhou, C., y Satoh, R. (2025). Humanoid robots. Can China repeat its EV success in humanoid robots. *Nikkei Asia*. April, 2.