

GEOPOLITICA

RIVISTA DI POLITICA INTERNAZIONALE

ISSN 2009-9193 - Vol. X - 2021



LA CINA E IL MONDO

Numero a cura di Tiberio Graziani e Zeno Leoni. Con contributi di Rodolfo Bastianelli, Greta Bordin, Daniela Caruso, Côme Carpentier de Gourdon, Gladys Cecilia Hernández Pedraza, Phil Kelly, Gino Lanzara, Emanuel Pietrobon, Renata Pilati, Brahim Ramli, Giuseppe Romeo, Fabrizio Vielmini

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VOL. X - N. 1-2/2021 - 10° Anniversario

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Direttore editoriale: Santo Strati

in collaborazione con Media&Books

ISBN 9788889991787



Testata registrata presso il Tribunale di Roma al n. 395/2011

Direttore responsabile: Tiberio Graziani

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Whether Hockey Sticks or Thucydides Trap in China – United States Relations

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Abstract

Two competing international-relations models, of realism and of classical geopolitics, differ in they are predicting either strife or calm in future China and United States relations. Both follow a similar description – a rising China amidst a declining United States, with possible conflict between the two nations. Yet, the models depart in their outcomes, the first, realism, in inevitable conflict and war, and the second, geopolitics, in uneasy but continued and profitable collaboration. That comparison serves as the focus of this article. In realism, conflict and likely war between the two states will arrive naturally, an inevitable strife reflective of a “Thucydides trap” as posited by this general of the ancient Greece Peloponnesian War. Here, he saw a rising Sparta alarming a dominant Athens, sparking armed warfare in this changing environment. For many today, that image appears to have repeated, the United States threatened by China, and thus, making war a good possibility between the two nations. In geopolitics, this same scenario, instead, will end in compromise and negotiation, a contrasting picture of two parallel-placed hockey sticks, their frames pointed away from each other and not crossing, again depicting a rising China amid a resisting United States. But in this scenario, the US stays ahead of China, with China not contesting the US primacy. The picture reveals a calmer and stabler outcome – a US-China condominium of cooperation and stability, albeit one also of competition and suspicion.

X

X

X X X X X X X X (US declining, then staying ahead of China)
(A joined condominium)

X X X X X X X X (China rising, but still behind the US)

X

X

Favoring the geopolitical stance of an agreed upon condominium, the au-



thor offers evidence for his prediction of this conclusion by enlisting a preference for hockey sticks and peace over the General's realist thesis of power and eventual war. In this strategic platform of two continents and two countries, he suggests geography favors North America and penalizes China, to a level high enough to bringing a conclusion of peace over war.

Introduction

A classical geopolitical definition comes easily and simply – geographical location and position of states, regions, and resources that may impact upon a country's international behavior. Yet, more traits could be added to this portrait: immigration, demography, and topography, climate change and global warming, pivotal locations and distance, sea and land power, choke points, country shapes, and development within regional integration – the list could be much expanded.

In this description, the geopolitical model contributes to the reader's insights In two ways: (1) a plethora of theories, over sixty to the author's count (Kelly, 2016, 83-135), that will show probable consistencies in states' international actions and policies, and (2) a spatial platform for arranging and testing these consistencies.

Realism contrasts by emphasizing power in the foreign affairs among nations, a study of its management by states persons relative to international stability and peace. The model comes in four interconnected parts: first, a dire prediction of anarchy, of serious perturbations that could spur likely warfare. An unsettling "security dilemma" next follows, of one country preparing unilaterally for just its own security, the outcome prompting an unnecessary arms race by neighbors that will augment the threatening anarchy. A collective security will bring a better solution, a plural configuration of protection set on trust and coordination for joining in alliance against rogue and radical countries set on disturbance. Wise policy elites are essential to this drama, they isolating or eliminating threats to peace, and likewise, they establishing moderate and prudent policies for maintaining this stability. Nonetheless, the model suffers a cyclic rise and fall of this desired stability, with often peace a short interlude between war.

These two models, realism and geopolitics, both hold deserved legitimacy for guiding states persons and students toward deeper and more



consistent understandings of foreign-affairs events and policies. This author holds both in awe and in respect – yet, they differ in their definitions, theories, and applications, as shown above and elsewhere (Kelly 2019a). And in the particular topic of this current essay, he prefers the geopolitical over the realist in forming better predictions for the future US-China relationship.

In sum, the Thucydides prediction of war comes more naturally to realism, its assumption of anarchy and rivalries of power, although this model at times could resolve conflict by adroit diplomacy and wise states persons. Nonetheless, this essay's author suggests geopolitics the more accurate prescription in the present China-United States case, once more, geography advantaging the US and not China, and it admitting to stability over strife.

A caveat before we proceed

Beyond the cases made for these two models, conflict leading to war between China and the United States for other reasons could easily happen at present or in the near future, such war coming from accident, miscalculation, or recklessness. In contrast, this essay's two models count on rationality and probability – for realism, prudent states persons, and for geopolitics, awareness on spatial restraints. Hence, our focus will stay on the logic of theory, a search for consistency in our topic's theme.

An important transition within the present balance-of-power strategic configuration also requires mention, this a realist turn away from the US hegemonic “unipolar moment,” roughly of the years 1990 until 2015, where the United States alone dominated international diplomacy, to a coming bipolarity of the two nations, China and North America, now on a roughly equal par in global authority and wealth. Whether this transition will rest on inevitable warfare or some sort of cooperation reflects this transition in the current structure of international politics. Of course, this change also prompts the assessments of this article, once more, with the author's prediction of condominium.

Analysis: Whether Thucydides trap or condominium of hockey sticks?

To repeat, this author favors the geopolitical model over the realist model in the case of the budding rivalry between China and North America, for

it offers a more appropriate spatial platform for observing the context for these rivalries. Importantly, geographical placement of states, regions, and resources, in our case of China and the United States, proves to be a clearer depiction for this rivalry's outcome than broader measurements of comparative power and its administration.

Presented by the author, and important to this essay, are two further assumptions: (1) United States leaders are aware of their country's geographical advantages over China, not fearing immediate threat of serious strife, and (2) Chinese leaders, too, are cognizant of their disadvantages relative to the United States. Hence, both factors will favor a condominium framed within the hockey-sticks analogy.

Accordingly, an assortment of theories as taken from the geopolitical tool chest will be exhibited as evidence that hockey sticks and condominium will prevail over the Athenian general's competition for depicting the present China-North American relationship. An uneasy peace will reign over inevitable war.

All IR models carry theories, with the geopolitical by far having the most. Below, certain of these by themselves will show specific areas of strategic application for answering the hockey-sticks interpretation. As a conclusion, these will be gathered into three groupings or clusters to describe the geopolitical platform underlying this essay – the Eurasian, the North American, and the blue seas that separate the two continents.

Condominium – a written or unwritten agreement among states to cooperate in trade, security, and other areas of association. The cause for such cooperation – not for power but more pragmatic for enjoying profits in stability and more rational for assessing peace over costs of war.

War between China and the United States simply cannot be imagined. Neither country exhibits a tradition of aggressive warfare, nor has one confronted the other in declared strife (the Korean conflict a possible exception, albeit caused by General MacArthur in striving for Korean unity). An important China-US trade and investment routine already exists, its demise would cause serious financial and political disruptions for both partners.

Checkerboard – a leap-frog pattern among countries, fixed on “my neighbor my enemy, with the neighbor of my neighbor my friend.” With

this, regional unity disappears, replaced with competition, stalemate, and division.

Such a structure appeared in the Peloponnesian War; another resides at present in South American diplomacy (Kelly 2011). On a broader scale, the whole of Eurasia today emits the pattern, with China suffering adjacent and likely hostile states on its peripheries. Fortunate for North America, it lacks checkerboards, awarding it an ability to focus on domestic and foreign actions more immediate to its prosperity.

Shatterbelts – often linked to checkerboards, a configuration of two conflict levels, the local within or between countries, and the strategic of outside states intervening on either side of these immediate disputes. Current examples would include Ukraine, Yemen, and Syria. The danger from this structure comes in its potential for an escalation of conflict beyond the local source, both in territory and in weaponry.

On China's frontiers, shatterbelts arose or now stay both in Southeast Asia and on the Korean peninsula, likely destabilizing the southern Chinese borderlands and establishing a need for protective military forces in those margins. Once more, the United States and the entire Western Hemisphere now lack shatterbelts, the last coming in Cuba but now resolved.

Encirclement – Centrally-located states within continents being surrounded by suspicious and hostile countries, these hindering the encircled state for advancing its influence outwards, and again, necessitating frontier military forces billeted for domestic security.

All nations with the exception of islands have this tendency, but some like China suffer more and the United States less from this debilitating encirclement. As such, China must defend all of its frontiers, depleting its wealth and armed forces. Likewise, the configuration reduces flexibility for extending a national impact beyond these constraints. In contrast, the United States, finding no immediate encirclement that threatens, places most of its military abroad, encircling pivotal areas within and beyond the rimlands of Eurasia. In Asia, US forces billet in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines; the Chinese presence in America is minimal.

Containment – placing militaries in positions of leverage in order to halt territorial expansion of aggressive counties. One instance of this

comes in Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, where a threat of such expansion, once declared, would be resisted immediately and automatically from member states.

North American security depends on its unrestricted ability to place its armed forces along the rimlands of Eurasia, there to balance to its favor, and thus to contain, rival countries of the continent. The United States gains from its distance and isolation from China, and joined by neighboring states, it is able to contain any land or seaward expansion by China, or at least to make such expansion more difficult.

Of course, China's impact in Asia and elsewhere in Eurasia is expanding. But the point being made is that its impact faces certain limitations of containment, where such containment does not hamper America.

Balancing continental interiors from rimlands – A “divide and conquer” tactic, historically practiced by England toward the European countries from a distant and protected outside.

The United States continues to perform this role against China, its leverage in Asia enhanced by rimland allies for accomplishing this ability. Two US carrier battle fleets add to this balancing in the seas bordering China.

“Borders cause wars” – a statistically-relevant thesis, the more frontiers a country possesses, the more wars it likely will suffer.

The author found this feature in South America (Kelly and Boardman 1976), with China susceptible also to this danger, again, distracting China's focus away from commercial and security gains in foreign lands and towards protecting its own sovereignty. Similar to encirclement and containment, the potential for border strife would cool Chinese stimulants for aggression.

To repeat, the United States benefits from its “island” environment, with just two borders and with weaker and friendlier neighbors. Its hemisphere lacks similar rimlands where China could place its militaries, if indeed, it could stretch its power over the broad Pacific.

Access to resources – States require natural and energy resources from abroad, most countries unable to satisfy all of their needs domestically.

While a relatively resources-rich country, China's immense population and its consequent thirst for industrial and technological development to satisfy its people and interests must depend on gaining such wealth elsewhere. Evidence for Chinese recognition of this need is shown in its expansive "Belt and Road Initiative," an investment since 1913 in 70 countries and international organizations for both attracting resources and pivoting for trade, political, and security advantages. Such access could be blocked by the containment of encirclement in land and sea realms, augmented again by the United States and its allies.

In contrast, the United States is rewarded by an enhanced access to whichever resources it might covet, in a strong merchant maritime, in significant international investment and financing regimes, and in consistent trade with trusted partners and companies.

Integration – For purposes of trade, development, industrialization, and attraction of technologies, states will agree to eliminate restrictions to commerce and communications and to form policies and agencies to facilitate such promotion.

Once more, China's Belt and Road approach is meant to enhance its leadership within Asia and beyond, joining with countries as distant as Africa and the Middle East within this cooperation. A challenge in trade and resources against North America and European countries, still, the initiative would require stability, consistency, and peace to bring about its purposes. Again, this would reflect, not a prelude for aggression, but a necessity for condominium involving both rivals and allies in forwarding the profits of integration.

Demography – This a population feature within geopolitics, it shows such factors as numbers of peoples in excess of national sustainability and of their levels of development within a search for resources, with considerations of climate, rainfall, and soil fertility for food production, aging and health of the citizenry, and so forth.

A reasonable conclusion could be, for China, a serious population surplus, with new demands by a rising middle class, limited opportunities spurring additional demands by rural persons, an aging population with

low numbers of young workers, incompetent, depleted, and corrupt local governments, and other impediments of demography. All of these would encourage Chinese policies for a stable development based upon cooperation and integration, and certainly not of foreign military adventures.

In contrast, the United States does not suffer from over-population, its environment advantaged by needed immigration, legal and otherwise. Its citizens are better educated and more healthy, and its governing is more competent.

Seapower vs. land power – In military terms, a preference or ability among nations for either authority on oceans or on land. In some instances, a hybrid is seen in both abilities, sea and land.

A land power, China lags behind the United States in sea power. The United States clearly emits a dominant global naval advantage with positioning six carrier battle fleets for encircling Eurasia along Pacific, Atlantic, and Mediterranean rims (Kelly, 2019b). Augmenting its superiority, the US likewise carries a significant army authority, a hybrid distinction.

If the United States continues its seapower advantage, China's global impact would stay limited, both in access to exerting power into foreign waters and in supporting trade throughout Eurasia.

Maritime choke points – straits and other restricted seaward areas that lend an advantage of leverage.

The United States resides distantly from any choke points, American or Asian, that could restrict its power, an advantage not enjoyed by the Chinese, who would face hinderances from the Korean and Taiwanese passageways, and more distantly, from the Strait of Malacca near Singapore into the Indian Ocean.

Distance – Seen in both protection-in-distance and in distance-weakens theses.

China, again, is handicapped in either instance. Lacking sea-power strength, China cannot intrude in American waters and in distant rimlands, an advantage possessed by the North Americans in both cases, their ability to approach China unhindered. The essence of US strategic

defense is based upon its “forward presence” or “offshore balancing,” encircling Eurasia with its hybrid forces on rimland bases and meant to align with allies to constrain opponents.

In sum, American security rests on imposing a favorable power balance among the forces of Eurasia, assuring that the Grand Continent stays divided in its stalemated checkerboard. Further, the Yankee possesses allies in pivotal places (Western Europe, the Mediterranean, and East Asia), and once more, its strong naval presence protects the Americas.

A “fortress America” defense, of securing America against a united, hostile, and superior navy of Eurasia, is not feasible. Such a fortress lacks credibility; the US is condemned to find its security in assuring a friendly balance over a divided and thus stalemated Eurasia.

Favorable geographical placement - Certain regions carry economic and security advantages over other regions.

The primary theme of this essay prompts a conclusion that the North American geographical placement awards a clear advantage over the spatial environments of the Chinese. This reflects the author’s portrayal of a North American global heartland (Kelly, 2017).

Halford Mackinder’s heartland thesis and of its placement in Eurasia is pertinent to this discussion. His original account came in four parts (Mackinder, 1904) – (1) A central continental region, in isolation and thus protected afar from threatening maritime states. (2) The center having unity and (3) ample enough resources for constructing a strong industrial base. (4) An inevitable territorial expansion from its continental core to seacoasts, where once a dominate navy is build, a global “empire would be insight.” Eurasia, with either a German, Russian, or Chinese heartland ownership, was clearly the place for this continental pivot. Mackinder’s thesis has proven to be the primary theory attached to the geo-strategic traditions within classical geopolitics, one also applauded by this essay’s author.

A heartland’s reach can extend regionally and strategically – for Eurasia, its occupier eventually should rule over the whole continent, a result never achieved by any state to the present day. Were this continental and global dominance ever to occur, that pivot would surely endanger North

America – via a trilogy of Eurasian heartland unity, hostility to America, and naval strength.

Kelly's revisions saw these arguments: (1) A heartland's pivotal advantage of central location is not always feasible because strong and hostile neighbors could intercede and stymie the predicted territorial expansion. Hence, a territorial reach from that central pivot is not always inevitable. (2) Mackinder's "empire" should be replaced by "hegemony," the latter term denoting country or alliance "leadership" and not a territorial occupation of the former, this correction a more appropriate label for current foreign affairs. (3) Rimlands and sea/land power were weakly factored into the earlier heartland equation, yet both have proven vital to Eurasian military encirclement by America and should be emphasized as well.

With these changes considered, North America should be recognized as a viable global heartland, one in leverage and power superior to Mackinder's original Eurasian heartland image: (1) North America faces no immediate threat to its continental core, unlike China's encirclement by suspicious neighbors and alliances. (2) America's resources and ready access to further resources are more than sufficient to deserve such a pivotal status. (3) Its regional local is united, and (4) it easily has expanded in territorial reach to several North American coastlands, soon establishing a hegemony by a globally dominant navy, and later, by a successful balancing against or aligning with the four Eurasian Great Powers, China, Russia, Japan, and Germany.

The United States, in its past century, still holds this global hegemony, and accordingly, it should rate as the primary heartland on Earth and hold a more protected and powerful leverage than is the case for China. Further, China does not define as a heartland, its place is marginal to a continental core. Attaining this status by occupying more of Eurasia would be difficult for China.

North America's heartland has more than succeeded in fulfilling Mackinder's heartland stipulations. Eurasia's alternative has faltered in expanding authority over its realm, and one may observe that, these factors alone should allow for substantial security for the Americans. In this strategic drama, (1) the United States is not only protected from Eurasian encirclement, (2) it has, itself, effectively encircled Eurasia, helping to



resist the continent's heartland expansion into the oceans.

The dominance of US sea power, so vital to this geopolitical portrait, now sets six carrier battle fleets in rimland waters marginal to the continent, enforcing a complete Eurasian encirclement (Kelly 2018). Unlike the original heartland, the expansion from core to seashores for the North Americans proved easily successful, exhibiting a “push-pull dynamic” – a sea power push outwards from the American core to a pull toward a distant continent and defense against any aggressive Eurasian nations – this connected duality represents the essence of this article's primary conclusion.

For American security, “fortress America” and “island safety” strategies cannot succeed – these visualized on a solely US Western Hemisphere defense, with (1) isolation and distance from Eurasia not sufficient to be relied upon, (2) a dependency on not always solidly friendly American neighbors, and (3) US armed bases limited to such isolated places as Hawaii, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and Greenland for a broader hemispheric protection. All of these security factors should not sustain a reliable American defense against a united, hostile, and superior marine of Eurasia.

To repeat for emphasis, the United States, for its best security, is likely condemned to continue its present armed and diplomatic encirclement of the whole Eurasian continent, including China – for American safety. Fortunately, the geopolitical platform there of fragmentation encourages this possibility, and American sea power, wealth, and dominance within its own hemisphere enhances a proactive ability to remain affixed to Eurasian waters, and thus, to be free from external aggressions and available to Eurasian encirclement.

Monroe's doctrine, excluding Eurasia from America, extends to a logical basis for US security concerns, a pivotal geopolitical tradition whose origin derives from this vulnerable geographical placement. Because America could be exposed to encirclement, a distant but possible reality, keeping a united, hostile, and aggressive Eurasian navy distant and at bay represents a common-sense strategy. No other approach could bring such defense.

Accordingly, as long as US naval superiority persists over the other Great Powers, and more pointedly toward China in the Pacific, the West-

ern Hemisphere will continue free from external intrusion. The “forward partnering” strategy will enhance this logic, balancing the Eurasian checkerboard to continue stalemate and disunity among the larger states and to keep the US security focus toward and within that distant continent.

The Latin American republics can further this protection themselves by resisting Eurasian bases and interests within their own realms and stabilizing their political and economic systems to show less attractiveness to the Eurasians for such bases and interests. In geopolitical terms relative to the Doctrine, Middle America rates as a North American sphere of influence within the easy control of the northern republic. In contrast, South America, as an independent and non-strategic geopolitical region (Kelly 1997, 161-166), should stay isolated and distant to the northern strategic affairs so important to our northern hemisphere discussion.

Within these geopolitical strictures, one could easily conclude that, fortunately, the United States does enjoy a solid security in America from this potential but unlikely scenario of a Eurasian, and specifically, a Chinese threat, to American hegemony and independence. Geography, indeed, has been good to the Americas, rendering it a protection from foreign foes that should be lasting, as least from an international perspective.

Two more likely dangers confront the Yankee, to this author, these greater threats by some distance over the Chinese. The first, in its domestic and foreign affairs, the United States now faces a polarized politics and citizenry, causing a retarded social and economic structure and a stalemated government unable to erect necessary progressive reforms and to prevent a series of costly foreign involvements turned to “nation building.” Such deficiencies could restrict its marine in Eurasian waters, weaken its resolve at home to enforcing the Monroe Doctrine, and make its decreasing power and wealth an attractive Eurasian target for heightened challenges.

Additionally, climate change and global warming, both geopolitical concepts, will offer similar challenges to national and international stability that also could expand the Eurasian threat facing North America (Kelly and Claridge 2017). It might easily be admitted that Earth hosts



too many peoples, the more marginal suffering diminished resources to survive and cool lands to inhabit – all a clear prediction for mass migrations of destitute peoples northward, for the northerners resisting these visitors with walls and violence, and for almost universal disruptions into chaos that surely must follow. Global warming already resides dangerously within North America, and its harms will weaken US resolve and confidence.

Conclusion

In sum, three regional clusters of theories of geopolitical origin draw to a close this picture of a potential but unlikely conflict and war of North America against China: (1) An encircling of China by the United States and suspicious and resisting neighbors, stalemating Chinese ambitions for reaching outwards to satisfy its domestic needs and to extend its foreign influence.

This confinement couples with demographic challenges of an abundant populace and with more difficult access to necessary resources from abroad. (2) The wide blue oceans between the two northern continents providing security for the Yankee, with his sea power advantage over the Chinese, and allowing isolation and distance to protect the American homeland. (3) The natural wealth and unity of the Americas adding to this security, with an absence of local threats and a globally-dominate navy that reaches to Eurasian rimlands to afford a favorable balancing from afar to enhance that safety.

To conclude, geography within this geopolitical platform of the two northern continents has spawned a variety of traditions and later theories as taken from a geopolitical tool chest that give a clear picture of inevitable stability and of peace with competition and challenge between Earth's two leading powers. Hockey sticks, and not Thucydides' war, appear the best image to describing the present tie between China and the United States.

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