

What explains increasing risk of military conflict between the US and the PRC?

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Military fears/opportunities ⇒ geopolitics ⇒ geoeconomics

- Interest in geoeconomics driven in large part by the **return of major power conflict**, including in the military/security domain. In particular:
 - Russia vs Ukraine backed by NATO and, initially, the US.
 - Massive PRC military build up; increasing arms builds by other states in the region; plausible perception of increasing war risks with the US.
- To understand the geoeconomic environment one needs to understand the geopolitical environment.
- To understand geopolitical environment one needs to understand, among other things, the military state of play and its evolution.

What is contemporary major power conflict about?

A common view during the “post-Cold War period” (1991-2017 or so) was that military conflict between major powers was **a thing of the past**. Anachronistic.

- A common view in Europe, but also much of US Int'l Relations (IR) field.
- From this perspective, the return of major power interstate war and arms build ups (including nuclear), is surprising and puzzling.
- And it **should** be surprising and puzzling:
 - Nuclear weapons.
 - Economic interdependence, quite open intl economic system.
- What is going on?

The puzzle of US-China military conflict risk

- Graham Allison and John Mearsheimer say US/China conflict is same old Realist story of a power transition or “tragedy of great power politics.”
- But these arguments don’t work as stated. eg:
 - US and PRC have no territorial disputes, no common border, and are very far away from each other.
 - A major war would risk catastrophic damage to homelands, including in the form of nuclear escalation.
 - Neither can plausibly invade the other.
 - Given nuclear weapons, this is not likely to change, basically regardless of the course of relative economic power or conventional military capabilities.
 - In nuclear world, neither US nor PRC requires allies to assure their own territorial integrity/security. (eg of North Korea in pre- vs post-nuclear weapons worlds.)
- In general, large-scale territorial conquest by major powers is much harder to imagine in a nuclear world (where other big states can get nuclear weapons if sufficiently threatened).

The puzzle of US-China military conflict risk

- What exactly do the US and the PRC have to worry about in the realm of military security, wrt each other?
- Why can't they and other states in the region just **trade happily, or with typical but manageable frictions**, and little concern for actual and potential shifts in relative economic and military capabilities?
- How can there be a "Thucydides' Trap" (Allison) if it has become difficult or impossible to convert economic might into large-scale territorial conquest?

What is contemporary major power conflict about, if not security in the classical sense of territorial integrity?

- Will quickly sketch a longer argument that tries to answer this question.
- Note: Some aspects of Trump 2 may change things. Not sure.
- But even if they do, can view as an explanation for how we got here (since \sim 1991, in particular).

What is contemporary major power conflict about, if not security in the classical sense of territorial integrity?

Major and middle powers sometimes have sharp conflicts of interest in which one or both sides want to change the status quo **for reasons that have basically have nothing to do with their own national security.**

- That is, one or both sides of the conflict are **revisionists** rather than “status quo” states.
- Their desires for revision are **not about security** in the sense of keeping what they have.
- I mean “national security” in the traditional sense of IR theory: Territorial integrity within current borders.

What is contemporary major power conflict about, if not security in the classical sense of territorial integrity?

Common path to military conflict:

Revisionists on matters not about security per se

⇒ **Incentives to arm up**, the better to bargain, coerce, deter better on these conflicts of interest

⇒ **Preventive war risks** related to perceptions of changes in relative power from arming.

- Will argue that this basic schema, **with some details filled in**, fits well China/US and Russia/Ukraine (and multiple others in post-CW period).
- The details:
 1. These days, what **are** these revisionist, non-security based conflicts of interest?
 2. What exactly are the preventive war risks and where are they coming from?

What are these non-security-based conflicts of interest?

These days (or especially in post-Cold War period), two main sources.

1. **Democracies are intrinsically threatening to dictatorships.**

- Democ's have typically preferred to see autoc's transition to democracy, and dictatorships the reverse, other things equal.
- Particularly problematic when the democracy is militarily strong (eg, the US) and so might be tempted to support the opposition in domestic uprising in a dictatorship (eg, "color revolution").

2. **Conflicting nationalist claims on territory.**

- eg: PRC claims on Taiwan vs Taiwan public sentiment. Putin/Russian claims on Ukraine.
- These are partly instrumental for regime/ruler legitimation, but also partly genuine for ruler and mass publics.

A logic of democracy vs autocracy conflict



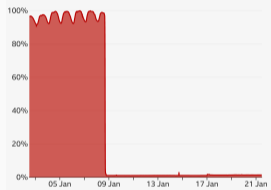
- Autocratic regimes/leaders are almost always deeply insecure and worry a **lot** about domestic rebellion, and coups.
- Even when they are clearly very powerful and have no obvious domestic contenders, strong opposition, or other regime security threats.

A logic of democracy vs autocracy conflict



Internet remains almost entirely offline in Iran

Level of network connectivity in Iran, to 11:30 GMT on 21 Jan



Source: NetBlocks



Is Starlink helping Iranians break internet blackout, and how does it work?

Experts say Starlink is helping Iranians get information out about the protests. But Iran is also trying to jam signals – and questions about the legality of Starlink's actions linger.



SpaceX founder and Tesla CEO Elon Musk speaks via video link at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain (File Photo: Oussama Hachimi)

- Over last 25 years, we've seen technological change – **internet, cell phones** – that can greatly facilitate opposition coordination
 - ⇒ has complicated autocrats' regime security problem and required them to innovate and spend.

A logic of democracy vs autocracy conflict



For example:

- The CCP's remarkable surveillance state. Increasingly a big export product.
- “Official nationalism” (B. Anderson): Autocrats claim legitimacy, justification to rule as embodiment and defender of The Nation and national greatness.
 - To oppose the autocrat is to be a tool of foreign powers, working against the Nation.
 - We see leaders increasingly invoking Nist legacies and missions eg in Russia, China, Turkey, Egypt, Myanmar, Hungary, Egypt, . . .

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Further: After end of Cold War, US and EU policies contribute to autocratic leaders sense of external risk and threat from “unipolar” US power.

1. US and friends' **military interventions** plausibly or clearly aimed at regime change.
 - Kosovo 1999; Afghanistan 2001; Iraq 1991, 2003; Libya 2011. Venezuela now.
 - And lower-level military operations directed at or harmful to disfavored autocrats elsewhere.
2. Campaigns of **democracy promotion** via NGOs, IGOs, bilateral and multilateral aid projects.
3. **Arab Spring** uprisings. Not caused by US/EU but often supported in various degrees ex post (Tunisia, Egypt, Syria).
4. “**Color revolutions**,” successful and failed.
 - Serbia 2000, Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004, 2014, Kyrgyzstan 2005, Belarus 2006, Moldova 2009, Russia 2011, China 2011 (minor), Armenia 2018.
 - Autocrats believe US/EU have a major hand in these.

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- Autocrats correctly inferred that US would be perfectly happy if they were overthrown.
 - They believe, with evidence, that US and friends may actively help/support domestic opposition if a rebellion gets going.
 - Even favored, friendly autocrats get worried. Erdoğan in Turkey, MBS in Saudi Arabia.
- From perspective of an autocrat disfavored by US et al, **US and allies and partners were the revisionists.**
 - Revisionist about their regime type, not their territory.
- This is partly a matter of post-Cold War US/EU policies, but partly just intrinsic.
- ⇒ the return of major power conflict and geoeconomics is partly a consequence of a developing autocratic reaction to tech changes and US/EU democratic expansionism/pressures in the post-Cold War period.

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- This may be changing.
- Trump and the Republican Party are moving US towards an authoritarian regime.
- This could reduce sense of threat to autocracies while increasing threat to democracies.
- My own guess is that although they are delighted, Xi and Putin will NOT be completely reassured or confident:
 - See eg Venezuela and Iran.
 - And can you count on US not to swing back at some point?
- In any event, I think the analysis helps to explain **how we got here**, and does better than Realist and other contenders on that score.

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- This underlying revisionist preference by US/EU creates a commitment problem:
 - **US/EU can't credibly commit not to support a domestic uprising against an autocrat,** up to and including some forms of military support.
- Libya/Gaddafi was an object lesson.
- Iran now.

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- For smaller, weaker autocracies like North Korea or Iran, **a lesson in the value of arming up with nuclear weapons.**
- What about for major powers?

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For Russia and China \Rightarrow policies intended to address autocratic regime insecurity in this changing technological and political context.

- Putin:
 - Campaigns of mis/disinformation, promotion of extremist positions/groups, and electoral influence attempts in democracies perceived as threats.
 - Emphasis on official (Russian ethnic) nationalism, embrace of “All-Russian” or “Pan-Russian” concept.
 - Focus on military build up, high tech weaponry, Russia as great power.
- Starting with Hu Jintao and even more with Xi Jinping:
 - Broad and deep crackdown on expression, association. The “Great Firewall” and huge expansion of state surveillance and control of individuals. Efforts to project control of expression beyond borders.
 - XJP’s “Chinese Dream” speech after becoming General Secretary, 2012:
 - “achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times.” Stress on “century of humiliation.”
 - Major military build up: “Reviewing the past, all Party members must bear in mind that backwardness left us vulnerable to attack, . . .”

What are these non-security-based conflicts of interest?

To recap, I've been arguing that these days, two main sources.

1. Democracies are intrinsically threatening to dictatorships, because it is common knowledge that they would typically prefer to see dictatorships transition to democracy, and dictatorships would prefer that democracies become dictatorships, other things equal.
 - o This is particularly problematic when the democracy is militarily strong – eg, the US – and so might be tempted to support the opposition in domestic uprising (eg, “color revolution”) in a dictatorship.
 - Post-Cold War, the US gov't (till Trump 2) just prefers that other countries be democracies, other things equal. With Trump 2, still a threat, but more random and not just directed at (some) autocracies.
 - From the dictatorships' perspective, **the US, the EU, and others are the dangerous revisionists.**
2. **Conflicting nationalist claims on territory.**
 - o eg: **PRC claims on Taiwan vs Taiwan public sentiment. Putin/Russian claims on Ukraine.**

Conflicting nationalisms and nationalist claims

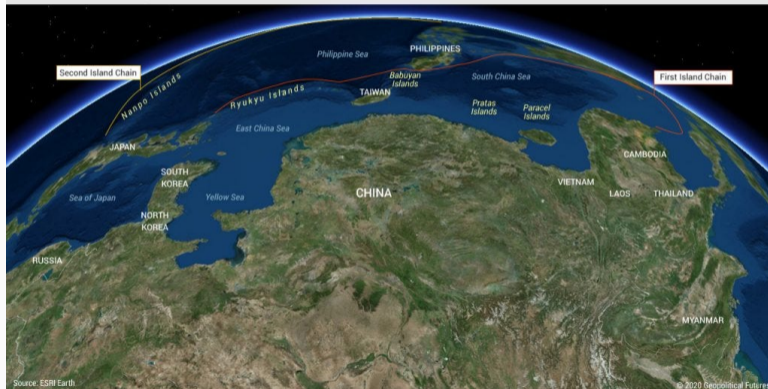
- Putin's and Xi's nationalism is **not just instrumental**. Also sincere and in accord with views of millions of Russians and Chinese. In particular regarding:
 - **Taiwan**. eg, 1982 PRC constitution says "Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the PRC. It is the sacred duty of all the Chinese people, including our fellow Chinese in Taiwan, to achieve the great reunification of the motherland."
 - Xi pretty clearly sees reunification as a crowning, historic achievement that he would like to own.
 - **Ukraine**. Putin's June 2021 essay "On the historical unity of the Russians and Ukrainians" no doubt reflects his and millions of other Russians' sincere (Russian nationalist) views.
 - Note: Putin's interest in Ukraine is revisionist. Not just a pure status-quo-power, security-seeking reaction to NATO expansion and NATO military threat to RF.
- Selling an idea of great power status to domestic public is an autocratic regime security strategy. But also represents genuine desire and nationalist convictions.

Could you actually get a PRC-US war out of all this?

- Recall: revisionist preferences → arming up → preventive war risks.
- Case of PRC vs Taiwan, backed by US.
- The conflict of interests on the PRC side:
 - PRC nationalist claims on Taiwan are well known. Seen as critical for long-run legitimacy/success of CCP regime.
 - XJP also threatened by prosperous, democratic, Han country as alternative model (note Hong Kong).
 - Control of TWN would reduce threat from having democratic states in a position to threaten your trade/sea access in event of domestic uprising/conflict.

PRC vs Taiwan, backed by US: The conflict of interests

China's Perspective



PRC vs Taiwan, backed by US: The conflict of interests

TWN/US/allies and partners in the region:

- TWN population has shifted to large, durable majority against incorporation in PRC.
- US admin's prefer TWN to stay democratic and politically and economically independent.
 - This is a straight policy preference independent of “domino” of other more strictly US-national-security implications of PRC conquest of TWN. (up to Trump 2 anyway)
- But also: Loss of TWN would increase PRC ability to exert mil/econ pressure on US allies and partners in the region who are important for US economic well-being.
 - Esp. Japan. Ryukyu Island chain is highly vulnerable.
 - This argument (need preserve political and econ indep of A/P in region) is central in Biden 2022 NDS and equally in Trump 2026 NDS.

PRC vs TWN/US: A commitment problem account

- intense, revisionist preferences \Rightarrow both sides arming up.
 - PRC to (ideally) become so clearly strong that they could “win without fighting.”
 - TWN, US, Japan, Australia, . . . in hopes of deterrence.
- Why not make a deal to avoid a very costly conflict?
 - PRC can't credibly commit to respect a deal that tried to guarantee pol/econ autonomy of TWN in exchange for formal sovereignty. See eg Hong Kong.
 - \Rightarrow it's effectively all (Taiwan) or nothing.

Lastly: How actually get a war out of all this?

- Of course, arming up/racing does not necessarily lead to war!
 - Could lead to stable deterrence.
 - Or, Trump might decide he thinks Taiwan de facto independence not worth it to him.
- On Feb 22, 2022, Putin jumped through what he thought was a “window of opportunity” (before UKR armed up more, esp with longer-range missiles).
- Something like this could happen in TWN case, but not necessarily.
- An under appreciated danger is that current military facts make for large **first-strike incentives** in the western Pacific region.
 - Andrew Lim and Fearon, “The Delicate Conventional Balance of Terror,” *Foreign Affairs* May/June 2025.

Summary

- US and PRC have powerful common interests in trade and investment with each other and large economies in the region.
- But PRC sees US presence in region as
 1. posing major possible barrier to seizing TWN, which they want for nationalist and regime-security reasons;
 2. critical support for democratic regimes/neighbors who are threatening as bad examples and possible coercion/influence if there is (eg) another Tiananmen etc in China;
- In turn, US fears PRC military threat to sea lanes and trade with major economies in the region.
- Take aways for geoeconomics? Idk, but ...
 - Perhaps interesting for economists that underlying the conflict/war risk are conflicting preferences related to nationalism and regime security, regime type.
 - I'd argue similarly for US/NATO/UKR/Russia, US/Iran, US/RoK/DPRK.