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No, America and China are not “Destined For War.”

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Introduction

War is not a destiny, it is a human choice, failure of politics, economics, diplomacy, and security policy.

International Relations (IR) is the study of great power relations and how they affect the world. Understanding and conduct of contemporary IR based on old assumptions can be as erroneous and risky as concluding the inevitability of war between two 21st Century great powers based on what scholar Graham Allison reminds us of the "Thucydides' Trap" , history of two Greek city states which went to war because they could not accommodate each other's national interests. What is Allison of Harvard's Kennedy School, arguably one of the greatest global institutions of higher learning and powerhouses of ideas, trying to convey by characterizing 21st Century America-China relations by 5th Century BC Greek city states?

History without Lessons: Works of Chanakya, Machiavelli, Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and many more present great ideas on statecraft, governance, art, or science of war of their times. However, how should they be understood and applied by scholarship and leadership of the digital age of artificial intelligence, killer robots, hypersonic weapons of mass destructions? Reflecting on this is vital as technology has transformed human enterprise so fundamentally that old theories can neither fully explain nor be used to resolve most problems of today.

That is why one well known historian of today stresses "Historians study the past not in order to repeat it, but to be liberated from it". But lamenting on the paradoxes of our times, so much information and knowledge and yet such a sad commentary on human wisdom, learning the lessons of the past, he further writes "Today the stock of our knowledge is increasing at breakneck speed, and theoretically we should understand the world better and better. But the very opposite is happening. Our newfound knowledge leads to faster economic, social, and political changes; in an attempt to understand what is happening we accelerate the accumulation of knowledge, which leads only to faster and greater upheavals. Consequently, we are less and less able to make sense of the present or predict the future". He then laments "It is a waste of time to study Hannibal's tactics in the Second Punic War so as to copy them in the Third World War" .

Is humanity then condemned to keep repeating again and again what it keeps vowing “never again? Lesson of history is clear. Preventing US-China competition turning into confrontation and conflict is critical in the study and conduct of modern IR as its implications profoundly affect not just them but the whole world.

Do scholars and practitioners of IR forgotten that, after first hand experiences, which twice in their life time brought untold sorrow to mankind, their post-World Wars predecessors thought of and established the United Nations to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war? Had the UN and its top leadership, entrusted with the responsibilities of transforming human and State behaviour from its traditional individual (national) power-centric interests to its attainment through a harmonized collective regional/global good succeeded would the world be where it is today?

In the context of the world on the verge of “Breakdown and Peril”, can IR scholarship of today conceptualize a new Cooperative and Managed Competitive Plurality to replace the old Hegemonic and Conflictual Polarity as the paradigm of great power relations and hence contribute to a new global order of collective peace/security, prosperity, and dignity? Understanding of history is essential to create a new history. Let us quickly then review the history of the rise of the two great nation-states on two sides of the current global polarity, the United States of America and China, on which the future of war or peace in the world will depend.

America’s Rise: In the march of history, the rise of the United States of America, on the strength of its European intellectual history but different favorable location, large size, rich natural endowment, politics of individual liberty contributing to innovative and advancing technology and attraction, co-option and assimilation of global talent and manpower is one of the most significant mega trends shaping the current world.

Its visionary founding fathers created institutions able to combine local autonomy with central authority, individual liberty contributing to collective prosperity and security giving the US advantage over many other great powers built around narrower fundamentals of national power. Consequently, in the post-World Wars, and even more so in the post-Cold War era, the US emerged as the unchallenged global superpower influential in all fields of human endeavor, intellectual, ideological, economic, technological, and military, like no other one country in world history.

- This US rise is significant in many ways, most notably in its zeal for asserting the superiority of its political, economic, social, and strategic model on the "power of its liberal-democratic example" as far as possible, but with most illiberal use of its national and allied military power when Washington feels necessary.
- The duality in dealing with what America sees as adversary in values (ideology and religion), interests (national and sometimes even personal), combined with national

“exceptionalism” is reinforced by its all-powerful military-industrial complexes and their widespread and enduring hold on domestic political-economy, national and global security, and vision of IR.

- The foundation of individual liberty combined with passion for “winning” and open to use force for it in today’s world of technologically empowered individuals and nation-states makes the US a society and global superpower of contrasts. One America is liberal-progressive, tolerant, open, generous, dynamic, united, inspiring, resilient, globalist and confident. Is there any other better example of assimilation of people of all races, religions, cultures, and backgrounds from anywhere in the world into the fabric of its national life than the US? This America is sometime shadowed by the impression of the other America looking fundamentalist, selfish, divided, divisive, vindictive, violent, isolationist, suspicious and belligerent.
- Such internal paradoxes, (socio-economic disparity, gun violence, drug addiction, treatment to minorities (Black lives matter), extreme internal political polarization, and global policeman’s role and never-ending wars create serious political stress and economic distress for itself and others.
- Social media and TV networks, often beaming only bad news as new in front of global audiences make the US call for a united front against authoritarianism and in defence of democracy, HR, rule of law less convincing unlike the cheers it used to receive when evoking those messages in the past . As if echoing that, President Biden stressed in his latest State of the Union Address “Our strength is not just the example of our power, but the power of our example. Let’s remember the world is watching”.

Rise of China: Modern China's socio-economic transformation under the firm guidance of the Communist Party (CPC), now celebrating 100 years of its founding, has been the other most spectacular and consequential mega trend with intellectual, ideological, economic, and strategic implications not just for China but the whole world. China's rise is particularly significant because, some Western scholars were calling the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the fall of the former Soviet Union End of History. As this debate was going on elsewhere Mao's Communist China was transforming with Deng’s "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" leading to where China is today, poised to be the largest economy of the world and determined to reject any external hegemony with Xi Jinping’s Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nations.

Shaking Intellectual Pedestal: Globally, tremendous developments in information technology have skyrocketed popular demands for a more equitable sharing of political power and economic benefits within and across societies. But the winners take all mindsets at the top makes the management of politics and economics more complex everywhere, leading to the current crisis in the global political economy. But new ideas to bridge the governance deficit are in short supply, with growing uncertainties of how the mid-21st Century world manages internal political-economy, long festering energy, environment, food, and finance (2E2F crisis), now manifest in the serious Climate, Covid and Conflicts (3 Cs crises) profoundly affecting global society and IR.

Amidst such crises, talking of the intellectual dilemmas facing the world today, in the Foreword of the book Commonwealth by Jeffery Sachs, Edward O. Wilson, writes "We (mankind) exist in a bizarre combination of stone age emotions, medieval beliefs (and institutions) but Godlike technology. This is how we have lurched into (what we call) the 21st Century". If this is how thinkers in societies regarded as most advanced, from which, one way or the other, all

are impressed and influenced, think, and write, one can imagine the state of societies at the tail end of the spectrum of intellect content in what an Indian scholar-diplomat calls “the tragedy of mimicry”.

Conclusions

In this global state of flux, inability to move beyond the old hegemonic and conflictual polarity as the only paradigm of great power relations will inevitably make “Destined For War”. Should this then mean, 21st Century human mind, with unlimited access to information and knowledge, is unable to learn the lessons of history? Must the world keep repeating again and again what it vows “Never Again”?

Only IR based on a new Cooperative and Managed Competitive Plurality to replace the old Hegemonic and Conflictual Polarity as the paradigm of great power relations can save yet other generations of humanity from the “scourge of war”. To save succeeding generations from it post World War II leaders of that generations, with twice in their own life times, experiencing the untold sorrow war brought to mankind, envisioned the new IR of collective peace/security, prosperity, and dignity, and created the UN to lead the world towards this. But as the UN is failing and the world is yet on the verge of breakdown and peril, if IR scholarship can help conceptualize and the current US and Chinese leadership come together to realize this essential new global order, they could be remembered for the most transformative epoch in IR, even more significant and foresighted than Yalta and Dumbarton Oaks.

21st Century IR scholarship and leadership must come up with transformative thinking and action for preventing US-China competition turning into a devastating conflict. But sadly, the often partially quoted first line “Oh, East is East, And West is West, and never the twain shall meet” of Rudyard Kipling’s Ballad of East and West, even today characterize an important level of our understanding and conduct of IR. But people often miss what Kipling himself goes on in the next lines of his very first stanza, “But, there is neither Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, tho’ they come from the ends of the earth”.

Seeking convergence between Oriental wisdom of Basudhaiba Kutumbhakam or building a “global community of shared future” for the Human Family through “win-win IR” with Western caution of Si Vis Pacem Para Bellum is the real need and demand of 21st Century IR driven by the dynamics of Time and Technology. Only with such a transformative thinking from scholarship and action from leadership we can safely say, War is not a destiny, it is a human choice, failure of politics, economics, diplomacy, and security policies. So, No, America and China are not “Destined For War”.

(As this article deals with thoughts on current affairs, it doesn't follow APA format (7th edition))