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THUCYDIDES TRAP AS A NEW REALITY OF US-CHINESE RELATIONS

Introduction. History abounds with examples of things that seemed good ideas at the time, but turned out to be disastrous. In 2015, Graham Allison, a political scientist and professor at Harvard University, identified a scenario he called the Thucydides Trap.

Review of recent publications. The following scholars made a great contribution to the study of the concept of “Thucydides’ trap” and to the continuation of the study of the possibility of war between the United States and China: Alison G., Reichman G., Feng Kai, Yunnan Zheng, and others.

Objectives of the paper is to identify the possibility of the United States and China falling into the “trap of Thucydides” and the deployment of military conflict between them.

Result of research. Thucydides’ trap is a political metaphor named after a Greek historian and politician of the 5th century BC – Thucydides. He wrote the most famous report on the Peloponnesian War, in which he described the outbreak of almost 30 years of conflict that shook the Greek city-states. Sparta was the hegemony or dominant power of the Aegean Sea, but Athens grew so fast that Sparta was concerned. They believed that Athens would soon become a real threat to their power, so they attacked preventively. And this is a trap. Athens’ ambitions and Sparta’s fear of losing power dragged both into conflict, even when no one expected it. When Sparta invaded Athens, it forced other Greek city-states to choose a side, and a large-scale Greek war began that lasted for decades.

According to Graham Allison’s article, the Thucydides Trap is one of the biggest misconceptions in history. Nations are straining their growing influence, stronger countries see a threat to their power, and the result is war. Alison G. Harvard research team has identified sixteen cases over the past 500 years that reflect the example of Sparta and Athens: a growing power that threatens dominance. Of these sixteen cases, twelve of them led to war [1].

Based on the current trajectory, war between the United States and China in the coming decades is not just possible, but much more likely than is currently recognized. Moreover, the current underestimation and misunderstanding of the dangers inherent in US-China relations contribute significantly to these dangers. The risk associated with Thucydides’ trap is that the usual way of working – and not just an unexpected, extraordinary event – can lead to large-scale conflicts.

But if anyone’s predictions are to be heard, they are Lee Kuan Yew, China’s leading observer in the world and mentor to Chinese leaders Deng Xiaoping. Before

his death in March, the founder of Singapore set the chances of China’s growth at several times the American rate over the next decade and beyond as “four chances in five”. When Deng Xiaoping initiated China’s rapid market entry in 1978, he announced a policy known as “concealment and inclination” Most of all, China abroad needed stability and access to markets.

According to the IMF, the trade confrontation between the United States and China, which has been going on since 2018, has a negative impact on global economic growth. As a result, the two superpowers have repeatedly imposed fines of tens of billions of dollars. According to Donald Trump, the President of the United States, American companies suffer losses from China’s violation of the rules of fair competition and theft of intellectual property [2: 86].

While the world is busy fighting pandemic, phase of heightened military danger looms over the United States and China. The United States feels that it is losing influence, and China wants to regain its position. The Asia-Pacific region is on the brink of an important decade. Currently, two social models: pro-American and Chinese, are constantly competing with each other. The unstable balance maintained for global economic prosperity provides an opportunity for ongoing conflicts between the two sides. The coronavirus crisis is only exacerbating this trend, but it is not yet the beginning of a global struggle for hegemony. However, in the coming years, the processes in the Asia-Pacific region will affect the nature of international relations far beyond this part of the world. They will also affect Europe. In the current situation, nothing can be reliably predicted. They will also affect Europe. In the current situation, nothing can be predicted with confidence.

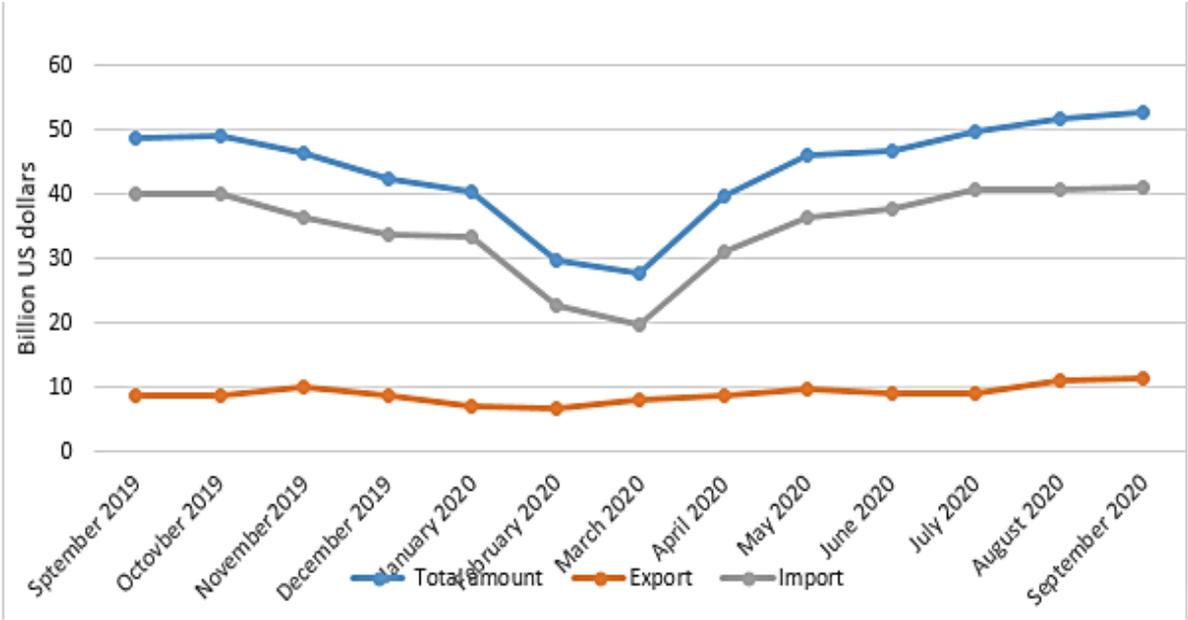


Fig.1 Total monthly indicators of US trade in goods (exports and imports) with China from September 2019 to September 2020
Source: built by the author based on [4]

However, the economic problems caused by the coronavirus can still limit the size of the United States and accelerate the reduction of its impact. But the fact that Chinese President Xi Jinping will emerge “victorious” from the crisis is by no means guaranteed [3: 416]. The trade conflict between the United States and China is increasingly affecting China’s economy. According to the Chinese customs office, in August 2020, Chinese exporters sold a total of 214.8 billion US dollars in foreign markets, which is 1 percent less than in August 2018. More detailed general monthly trade indicators between the United States and China (2019-2020) can be seen in Fig. 1.

In the United States, there is a heated debate over how best to meet China's ambitions, although experts have been debating for many years. The idea of striking military targets in China is very problematic due to the high risk of escalation. The same applies to the idea of countering possible Chinese aggression through a naval blockade. Recently, more and more supporters of the idea of creating a defensive line on the “first chain of islands” (from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines to Borneo). However, it is still unclear how these discussions will affect the development of the armed forces in the coming decades.

Conclusion. At present, trade relations between the United States and China remain quite unstable. Most important issues remain unresolved, and the signing of a full agreement is postponed indefinitely, as the second round of talks has not yet begun. The re-election of the Trump administration in the next presidential election could be facilitated by a friendly agreement with China. The task is to prepare an agreement that can fully satisfy each other in a very short period of time, which is extremely difficult in modern conditions. A ceasefire is needed in Beijing, but a risky move is to sign an agreement with the administration, which could lose power in the near future, and the Chinese side is forced to behave restrainedly and not make loud statements. The United States and China are expected to sign an agreement in the near future, given the catastrophic confrontation between the two countries and the threat they pose [5].

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