

Shifting the Great Powers*

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Summary: Great Power competition between China and the US affects more than just the world's two great powers. Everyone is a stakeholder in geopolitical rivalry. The prognosis, however, is not optimistic for lesser nations' being anything but passive observers, not least following Thucydides's observation on Great Powers doing what they will and the rest of us suffering what we must. Nonetheless, both equilibrium reasoning and empirical evidence suggest that the positions of the Great Powers can be shifted through the influence of other states, i.e., that Great Powers' behaviours are elastic with respect to Third Nations' agency.

On 05 Apr 2023 a high-profile open letter from US business executive Maurice Greenberg called Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping to repair relations between the US and China. The letter, co-signed by US foreign policy and economic experts, appeared in the Wall Street Journal and was widely reproduced on social media.

Such a call was timely in light of the sharply deteriorating relations between the two Great Powers. There is enormous concern over the US and China's hardening opposing stances on Taiwan, trade, technology, strategic alliances and spheres of influence, and a range of other important issues.

Some observers asked if Greenberg's letter should have been published in China as well, perhaps additionally signed by Chinese thought leaders. The unspoken inference was not entirely constructive. Instead it was a swipe at how while these discussions are possible in the US, surely they would not be free to take place in China.

Yes, such political conversation might be fairer and more open in some places than others. But the more important question is not what China's thought leaders might have done: It is what all the world's other nations think and want to say.

Eighty percent of the world's population live in neither of the Great Powers, but in Third Nations. US-China tensions affect not just the well-being of the two Great Powers. Everyone on this planet is a stakeholder in geopolitical rivalry.

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Today's US-China tensions have disrupted trade, investment, and people-to-people exchange. The upending of long-standing rules of engagement have made the global economy poorer and less stable. Greenberg and co-signers are right to try and stage an intervention. But that intervention needs its weight magnified and its franchise extended, by including not just Chinese interlocutors but the rest of the world.

1 Third Nation Agency and Great Power Elasticity

Nations acquire sustained enduring soft power through gaining trust, attractiveness, and legitimacy. This cannot be achieved through the crude exercise of military strength. Instead, sustained soft power derives not directly from one's actions but is awarded by others.

Seeking trust, attractiveness, and legitimacy shifts the centre of gravity of decision-making from those who would deploy power, the supply side of world order, towards those who experience its consequences, the demand side. The same is true for any world order that comprises spheres of influence, is based on the "consent of the governed", or ensures "mutually beneficial, win-win outcomes". Whatever world order emerges, the Third Nations on the demand side are pivotal.

But it is not just right that the focal point of international politics should shift away from Great Powers and towards Third Nations. It is also what works.

Observers of international affairs routinely turn for insight to the ancient Greek historian Thucydides. After all, Thucydides had proposed the idea that nations that are incumbent powers and those that are rising powers will, with high probability, resort to violence to advance their self-interests. Equally memorably, Thucydides had also suggested that Great Powers do what they will, the rest of us suffer what we must. To this day Realism carries variants of this idea. But, despite this conventional wisdom, history is full of examples of the opposite, i.e., of Third Nation agency and Great Power elasticity, when Third Nations have insisted, and Great Powers have given way.

Consider three examples.

First, the largest world grouping after the United Nations is the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Established in 1961, NAM was a follow-up to the Bandung Conference, which emerged in response to Western Powers arrogantly putting together policies for Asia without consulting Asian nations themselves. Asian nations were, at that time, also concerned about US-China tensions (as now) and seeking platforms for improved relations with the large nations around them (again, as now). NAM, at inception, comprised just 55 percent of the world's population and two-thirds of UN membership. Its global presence was large but not overwhelming; today, the collection of Third Nations is far bigger. Yet, NAM achieved significant success in shifting the global consensus on opposition to racism and apartheid, anti-colonialism, and disarmament.

Second, on disarmament in particular, Third Nation organizers of the Ottawa Treaty managed, by 2022, to get over 160 states to accede to banning anti-personnel mines.

Significant among those not signing the treaty were China, Russia, and the US. Later in 2022, however, even without signing the Treaty, President Biden overturned the policies of the Trump administration and committed to destroy existing US landmines.

Finally, a less happy example from Thucydides's own time: the infamous Thucydides Trap of course had Sparta and Athens clash in the Peloponnesian War, resulting in Athens's defeat. Shortly after, however, in response to unbenevolent Spartan hegemony, the city-states Thebes and Corinth ("the rest of us") waged military uprising against their former ally Sparta. The great general Epaminondas led Thebes to a resounding victory at the Battle of Leuctra, crushing Spartan military dominance barely three decades after the Peloponnesian War, leaving the once-victorious hegemon isolated and permanently weakened. (Thebes, in turn, would be burnt to the ground a mere four decades later by Alexander the Great.)

2 Staging an Intervention

The world does not have to undergo modern-day equivalents to these Wars. If the Great Powers are unable to see through their disagreements, it is up to Third Nations to stage an intervention to pull them back from the disaster.

This is not to discount the importance and potential still of Great Power leadership. In 1972 Nixon's trip to China immeasurably transformed for the better the world's international relations. It did so from the most unlikely beginnings. Nixon had re-packaged McCarthyism to emerge with solid anti-Communist credentials. China had killed millions of its people in the Cultural Revolution through purges, violence, chaos, and starvation, and sought to export revolution across Southeast Asia. Despite this distance between them, Nixon reached out to Mao, writing "we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates, and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation."

Nixon and Mao's coming together was an act of extraordinary political bravery and leadership. In the 1970s, the US stood head and shoulders above all others in economic prowess; today America could be a far richer place if it allowed China continued manufacturing prowess, in both iPhones and planet-saving green energy capacity. In the 1970s, China was a dangerous place promoting internal turmoil and external threats of revolution; today China does none of those things. With conditions now so much better than then, it would be the greatest tragedy and irony if the two Great Powers do not reverse their direction of heightening rivalry.

More than ever, we could again use leadership like that of Nixon and Mao. But if that is not forthcoming, Third Nations will just have to step up, exercise agency, and stage a Great Power intervention.