

THE TACITUS TRAP

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Chinese attempts to displace American economic and strategic hegemony in the international system were not going to be without friction. This competition opened up the prospect of what Graham Allison described as the Thucydides Trap — the possibility of deepening tension as one great power seeks to replace another. This tension has now been immeasurably deepened. The Trump administration has been seeking to redefine the terms of the economic relationship with [China](#). And the [COVID-19](#) crisis has turned the world public opinion against China in ways that were unimaginable a few months ago. China is being widely held responsible for a cover-up and a delay in the global response to the virus. Country after country is rethinking its economic relationship with China.

But when the dynamics of the Thucydides Trap were being analysed, few had imagined that this competition would break out when both the Chinese and the American political systems would be facing deep internal challenges. This opens up the possibility of overlaying what is known as the Tacitus Trap over the Thucydides Trap. The Chinese coined the term, “Tacitus Trap,” in homage to the great Roman historian, Tacitus. This trap describes a condition where a government has lost credibility to the point where it is deemed to be lying, even if it speaks the truth. President Xi Jinping himself used this term as a call to arms to the Chinese government to maintain its credibility. What tactics the Chinese government will adopt to achieve this end is an open question. But even the Chinese coiners of the term could not have imagined that the Tacitus Trap might not just be a challenge facing China. It could become the defining political condition of our time. Authoritarian governments would face a credibility crisis because of their propensity to control information. Many democratic governments face a different credibility crisis: Hyper-partisanship would simply make truth or lies a function of which side was saying it, making sober collective action difficult. The existence of a possible Tacitus Trap exacerbates the risks of the Thucydides Trap.

A great power competition is riskier when the political systems of the great powers display greater pathologies than strength. The Chinese and American political systems are by no means equivalent. But their weaknesses seem to be gaining the upper hand. In the US, healthy political competition has been replaced by hyper-partisanship: At the federal level, many of the checks and balances on executive power have been denuded; American federalism which was a shock absorber is now also a potential source of conflict; class conflict is at the deepest it has been for decades. With President Donald Trump there is looming uncertainty over just how much the institutional frame of American politics might get tested. But one surest sign of an internal pathology is when a power gives up the very ideas that gave it deep internal and external legitimacy. America made horrendous mistakes in the conduct of its international affairs. But it was able to absorb the moral costs of those mistakes because of the ideological allure of its model — grounded in openness. The American system has a capacity for renewal. But it will be a long haul.

The Chinese regime will face a deeper legitimacy crisis of its own. A legitimacy crisis does not mean a weakening hold on power. It can have the opposite effect — an aggressive and coercive hunkering down of elites. But the signs of a crisis are apparent: The increasing use of coercion, surveillance and repression and the even more insistent control of information orders. The Chinese government might get high marks for its lockdown strategy. But the stigma that it covered up the facts and inflicted needless damage on China and the world will gnaw at its political system. China's relatively quiet confidence that it would gain global ascendancy in the

world system has been replaced over the last few years by a bellicose diplomatic aggressiveness. This is not a sure-footed regime confident of its capabilities and growing external legitimacy.

This internal disarray in both superpowers heightens external risks. Domestic political compulsions to take a more aggressive external posture towards the world are heightened. There is little doubt now that the “China Question” will now be one central theme of the American election, and partly understandably so. But the China question will, in some senses, displace, the thornier questions over economic and social policies of both parties. It will be the trope through which internal contradictions are papered over. And in that context, the incentive of both parties will be to outbid each other in the hard line they propose.

China is in an even more difficult situation. There is no question that the world will increasingly call China to account for its actions during this crisis. The intention may not necessarily be to censure China. It can be driven by the desire to ensure that there are sufficient levels of transparency and international cooperation to both combat the virus, and to minimise the risks of such events being repeated. But the Chinese regime will not find it easy to accommodate the international community, without in some senses, risking opening up a domestic can of worms. Such openness and transparency would now be inconsistent with the principles by which the regime now secures its internal legitimacy. It will also be hard to do, without a serious loss of face, in the context of the China question now becoming the central axis of American politics. The autonomous dynamic of nationalism in one country can risk reinforcing it in the other.

The challenges of dealing with the [pandemic](#) or existing interdependencies may yet impose a degree of sobriety on both superpowers. But the demands on internal legitimation are increasingly pointing in a direction where both countries will not find it easy to dial back from ratcheting up tensions, in ways that might make delicate diplomacy more difficult.

We are at a transformative moment where almost all the rules of the international order are potentially up for renegotiation, from trade to cybersecurity, from the environment to pandemic risks. The massive economic shock of the COVID crisis is going to occasion deep restructuring of the domestic economies. But for these challenges to occur when the political systems of both superpowers are becoming exaggerated caricatures of themselves does not bode well. We might not just be in G-Zero world, with the two major powers abdicating their international responsibilities; we might be in G-minus-two world, where the internal credibility crises of the governments of the major powers work simultaneously to the detriment of the international system.

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