

6-16-2024

The Psychological Risks of War Between the United States and China

Eugen Koh

Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), [Policy History, Theory, and Methods Commons](#), and the [Public Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Koh, Eugen (2024) "The Psychological Risks of War Between the United States and China," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 36: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol36/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu, Lydia.BurrageGoodwin@umb.edu.

The Psychological Risks of War Between the United States and China

Eugen Koh

Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne

Abstract

The relationship between the United States and China has deteriorated over the past two decades and fears of escalating risks of war are regularly reported in global media. This article explores the psychological factors that contribute to the two superpowers shifting from a collaborative relationship to a competitive relationship, seeing each other as enemies, feeling increasingly threatened by each other, failing to consider the heightened sensitivities that arise from their respective traumatic pasts, triggering the collapse of thinking and unleashing of uncontrollable emotionality, escalating accidents to conflict, and escalating conflict to war. It highlights the dangers of ignoring heightened trauma-related sensitivities, or worse, the humiliation of the Other for domestic political gain or strategic advantage. This psychodynamic analysis of the psychological risks of war between the two superpowers considers the dynamics of Thucydides's Trap and ways to avoid succumbing to the dynamics of inevitability. The essence of the psychodynamic approaches to managing these risks is to anticipate the seemingly irrational and inevitable by preparing to counter the regressive forces driven by fear, contain the overwhelming emotionality, and restore the capacity for complex thinking in order to fully understand the nuances of the situation and find creative solutions to a potential impasse.

Eugen Koh is a psychiatrist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, a consultant in art, culture, trauma, and peacebuilding, and a senior fellow at the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Australia.

This article is based on lectures of the same title delivered at The Center for Peace, Hiroshima University, in 2023; the Changing Character of War Centre, University of Oxford, in 2023; and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, in 2024.

After five years of research into the cause of the global financial crisis of 2007–2009, Alan Greenspan, the former chairman of the US Federal Reserve bank, concluded that it was a result of what John Maynard Keynes famously referred to as “animal spirits”—the market was simply driven by fear and greed.¹ The historian Christopher Clark’s highly regarded, detailed analysis of the events and factors that led to the First World War, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, highlighted how personalities and relationships play a major part in the formation of alliances and decisions that ultimately lead to war.² Sleepwalking is, physiologically, a state when our rational mind is asleep but the body operates automatically and is driven by ‘inapparent’ impulses. From a psychodynamic perspective, while some impulses might not be immediately apparent, they are not necessarily unknown and could be known. The role of psychology in propaganda and warfare is well known to those working in the field of national security and international relations. The useful application of psychodynamic thinking in diplomacy, negotiation, the prevention of conflict, and peacebuilding is regrettably much less appreciated.

This article aims to highlight the psychological factors that influence the relationship between the United States and China from a psychodynamic perspective. It will discuss how understanding some of these factors could be useful in dialogue and diplomacy to de-escalate the risk of war and manage critical events to prevent accidents from turning into conflict, and conflict from turning into war.

Psychodynamic Approaches

Psychodynamic thinking considers both the conscious (apparent) and unconscious (not apparent) of individuals, collectives, and systems. Traditionally, the study of thinking and behavior in the conscious realm is the focus of psychology, while attempts to understand the territory that is beyond our awareness, that is the unconscious, is the domain of psychoanalysis. Psychodynamic approaches usually incorporate knowledge from both psychology and psychoanalysis.

In its application to international relations, psychodynamic thinking treats countries as singular entities, each with its unique national psyche, in the way that everyone has a mind of their own. It is, however, not as simple as making inferences extrapolated from our understanding of an individual’s mind. It might be argued that the psychodynamics of collectives, such as nations, are far more complex because countries might not consist of sufficiently homogenous populations to be considered unified entities. Most countries will, however, overcome these differences through the collective agency of their government, which will ultimately determine foreign policies. This article will briefly highlight how a government’s approach to its international relations is influenced by its domestic politics, that is, the dynamics between distinguishable groups and political factions in the country. However, the main focus of this article is the psychodynamics between two countries.

Vamik Volkan, the pioneer of the systematic application of psychodynamic thinking to diplomacy and conflict resolution, preferred to conceptualize the consciousness of countries and factions within them in terms of large group psychology. The psychodynamic approach adopted in this article is influenced by Volkan’s work and I recommend his book *Psychoanalysis, International Relations and Diplomacy* for those who wish to understand such an approach more thoroughly.³

Some argue that conceptualization of a country as a single mind or psyche imposes a reductionistic categorization that fails to account for the rich and complex culture, history, and varied experiences and views of the people. They consider it offensive to speak of the American

mind or the Chinese psyche. Yet the notion of a single consciousness is central to the psychology of nationalism, as Americans consider themselves ‘patriots under one flag,’ and the Chinese government recently proposed laws against ‘hurting the nation’s feelings.’⁴ This article is mindful of nationalism’s complexities and much more can be elaborated through political science and other disciplines. With acceptance of these caveats and other limitations, and without any intention to oversimplify or offend, the psychodynamic approach is proposed here as a contribution that could usefully add to the more traditional approaches that help in understanding international relations and negotiating the complex tensions between two superpowers to avoid the possibility of a catastrophic war.

From Collaboration to Competition, to Creation of the Enemy

The United States and China established a full diplomatic relationship in 1979, seven years after President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, met with Chairman Mao Zedong. China soon embarked on economic reforms under the collective leadership of Deng Xiaoping. The Clinton administration tentatively gave China ‘most favored nation’ status in 1993, with its low tariff and trade privileges. This was reviewed and renewed annually, before it was made permanent in 2001 by the Bush administration; both administrations supported its membership to the World Trade Organization, formalized that same year.⁵

How did such a collaborative relationship turn into strategic competitiveness and escalate to both countries treating the other as the enemy? After a decade of collaboration in the 1990s, driven by what was simply bilateral economic opportunism, the relationship began to sour over the next two decades, as American manufacturing continued to decline while China’s economic growth accelerated through the unprecedented growth of its manufacturing sector, and the balance of trade gradually slid toward China’s favor. The global financial crisis toward the end of that decade wreaked havoc on Western economies (while China was relatively spared), precipitating an even greater trade imbalance, with an accompanying deterioration of the relationship between the two countries.

The gradual shift in economic power in the final two decades of the twentieth century accelerated over the first two decades of the twenty-first century. This economic shift saw more decline of manufacturing in the US while China became the factory of the world. The US had been militarily drained by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while China expanded its military significantly and built what is now one of the world’s largest naval fleets. This period was accompanied by the emergence of renewed Chinese nationalism, which had begun under President Jiang Zemin at the time of the Clinton administration, with his concerted, nationwide ‘patriotic education campaign.’ Against this backdrop of shifting economic and military power, a sense of alarm has grown over the past decade with the rise of President Xi Jinping, who consolidated power within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and has been strident in his proclamation of this new Chinese confidence.

There are several more threads to be woven into this narrative from a psychodynamic perspective, especially to explain the more recent escalation from competing to becoming enemies.

One of the fundamental psychoanalytic ideas is that the mind, either individual or collective, will rid itself of unbearable aspects of itself (bad parts) by projecting (externalizing) it onto Others, which then leads to it perceiving them as ‘bad.’ As such projections grow, the perception of ‘badness’ in the Other and the accompanying sense of threat becomes so great that the mind regresses and its ability to distinguish between what is real from that which is imagined begins to diminish.⁶ I will elaborate on regression and the loss of capacity to think later in this article. This is the essence of how enemies are created, as understood from a psychodynamic perspective.

According to this theory, the increase in America's perceiving China as a threat is partly due to the emergence of some negative aspects within themselves that are unbearable and are consequently projected onto Others. Moreover, such projection occurs most easily to external entities that were historically viewed negatively. The US had seen China as inferior a long way back, since the early nineteenth century when it joined the British in selling opium to the Chinese.⁷

In the last two decades, the US has experienced several unbearable collective experiences that 'needed' to be discarded by projection. One of the most unbearable human experiences is humiliation. It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that the relationship began to deteriorate in the years after the terrorist attacks in September 11, 2001, followed by a failed disaster response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the collapse of its proud financial sector during the global financial crisis from 2007 to 2009. It is significant that these three catastrophic events occurred in the context of an earlier and ongoing, but more insidious humiliation, exemplified by the Midwestern American experience of losing their proud and powerful manufacturing industries to China, an intolerable pain fueling movements like Make America Great Again.⁸

Although China has enjoyed unprecedented economic growth that has lifted more than half its population out of poverty over the past four decades, it too had its share of internal problems over that period.⁹ The social upheavals from the Communist Revolution did not end with the Chinese Communist Party taking control in 1949.¹⁰ The enforced change from an agrarian economy to an industrialized one (the Great Leap Forward, 1958 to 1962), with its reduced focus on food production compromised by bad weather, led to one of the worst famines in human history, with an estimated fifteen to fifty-five million people dying of starvation.¹¹ This catastrophic event was followed by the social turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976) with its stated aim to reduce what was termed "the three major differences"—those separating intellectual from manual labor, worker from peasant, and urban from rural.¹² The personal and collective traumatic impact of the Cultural Revolution continues to this day.

From a psychodynamic perspective, the socio-emotional consequences of these massive collective trauma events do not just disappear. Even as the country went through a relentless period of economic boom over the next four decades, a concerted effort has been taken either collectively, or enforced politically, to deny or forget the painful past. The suppressed collective pain will inevitably erupt from time to time; perhaps the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 was unconsciously driven by such an eruption.¹³

The projection of 'badness' will grow to such an extent that any realistic perception of the Other is completely lost. The psychological risk of war is greatest in the early phases of a domestic crisis when projection is the main mechanism for managing unbearable internal stress. As the crisis grows, projection is no longer adequate. In ordinary language, blaming others can only work for so long. The attempt by a government and other social institutions to solve their internal problems by projection is accompanied by an escalation of its sense of threat, as the 'badness' is externalized.¹⁴ If these psychodynamic postulations are correct, the sense of threat between the US and China will be the greatest when one or both countries are experiencing recession or the beginning of an economic collapse and/or the emergence of social unrest.

Collective Trauma Heightens Sensitivity to Future Humiliation

Officially, the domestic events in China mentioned in the previous section, and its civil war between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (1927–1949), are not considered to be part of the traumatic events that have been condensed into what has been popularly referred to as *the century of humiliation*.¹⁵ That historical period began with the Opium

Wars (the first from 1839 to 1842, the second from 1856 to 1860) and the ceding of Hong Kong to the British, promptly followed by an escalation of demand for trade and territorial concessions by ten Western countries and Japan after the brutal suppression of the Boxer Rebellion (in 1899–1901), where more than 100,000 Chinese people were killed.¹⁶ A few years earlier in 1895, China was forced to cede Taiwan to Japan after it lost a war over their contest for influence over Korea. More than twenty million Chinese people, mostly civilians, died from mass atrocities and famine when Japan later invaded China in 1937.¹⁷ This century of national humiliation at the hands of foreigners finally ended with the Japanese surrendering upon their defeat in the Second World War in 1945.

The humiliation experienced by China over a century of foreign domination was utilized in Jiang Zemin's nationwide patriotic education campaign to foster nationalism and certainly influenced the CCP in its foreign policy. From a psychodynamic perspective, while such fostering of collective traumatic pain to fuel nationalism is common, it dangerously heightens a country's sensitivity to future humiliation.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, China reacts very strongly to criticism, especially when it comes from countries that have contributed to its century of humiliation.¹⁹ Such strong reactions are understandable when one considers how painful these criticisms might be when a traumatic wound is prodded, especially by those who inflicted it in the first place.

The internal stoking of historical wounds by a government for whatever aim, dangerously risks a buildup of collective emotional pain that could easily erupt in crises from domestic situations and foreign relations. The suppression of the pain from these wounds is not helpful either, because the pressure from cumulative trauma will only build. Until such historical traumatic wounds can be healed, the pain needs to be managed by a quiet and sensitive acknowledgment of its existence without either stoking or suppressing it.²⁰ This approach is necessary in the management of the psychological risk from such heightened sensitivity to humiliation, not only in a government's consideration of its people but also its relationships with other countries. Attention to these trauma-related sensitivities is a vital component of dialogue and peace processes.²¹

It is standard practice for diplomacy to manage anticipated sensitivities carefully. In the context of the US-China relationship, diplomats have been careful not to highlight the domestic problems of the Other. The media of the two countries have, however, been less restrained and there is virtually no such sensible reservation in the territory of social media. The extent to which widespread circulation of misinformation and conspiracy theories is the work of proxies of their respective governments is up for conjecture. The humiliation of a country's ordinary people will ultimately have a collective impact and as the Chinese government would say, 'hurt the nation's feelings.'²²

There are those who revel in the humiliation of the Other, as the schoolyard bully does, and the psychopath. They create a potentially very dangerous situation. My colleague, the late Stuart Twemlow, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who studied the psychodynamic causes of school shootings in the US for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), found the shooter to be invariably a victim of extended bullying and humiliation, and shootings were usually acts of revenge.²³

The media of both the US and China have used humiliation to gain a sense of moral superiority and triumph. The Chinese media and social media highlighted the social and political upheavals in the US; for instance, the civil unrest during the Black Lives Matter protests across the country.²⁴ They may not have appreciated the depth of the emotional significance of those events to the American national psyche, nor its reach into the country's unhealed fractures that stem from its civil war (1861–1865) fought over the issue of slavery.²⁵ If Chinese media continues to purposely

exploit the situation to cause further humiliation for Americans, it would be treading a very dangerous path as it could awaken a series of past traumatic events and unleash an emotional storm.

While the US might not have had a comparable century of humiliation, it has had several collective traumatic events since its civil war that would render heightened sensitivity. For a country that prides itself on capitalistic enterprise, the Great Depression (1929–1939) and the global financial crisis (2007–2009) would have injured its collective ego. Its pride in military strength was severely dented by the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in December 1941 and the loss of the Vietnam War (1955–1975) remains a deep, traumatic wound in the American psyche.

The US has not explicitly formulated these major events as traumatic. Neither has it explicitly framed its loss of manufacturing in the Midwest and other parts of the country, its social divides, especially along economic and racial lines, its epidemic of opioid addiction, or the rolling turmoil of its financial sectors, as humiliating. It is, however, implied through social-political movements, such as Make America Great Again. The absence of explicitly acknowledging trauma and other humiliation, of course, does not mean that such heightened sensitivities do not exist. While the country debates the extent to which such pain and vulnerability is driving American lives collectively, and its domestic and foreign policies, it is prudent to take such sensitivity into account in diplomatic dealings with the US, especially when it is entering into domestic crises. It is in these early phases of a domestic crisis that projection and its accompanying distortion of perception are at their worst.

Regression and Collapse of Thinking

A failure to consider trauma-related sensitivities will lead one country to carelessly provoke the other country. If such provocation persists or takes place at a time of internal weakness and domestic crises, it could trigger a collapse of its collective psyche.

The collective mind, however, tries to regroup by activating a process of regression. Regression is a psychological concept akin to the notion of a military retreat to regroup at the next level of strength. The mind regresses to a simpler or more basic level of functioning. A collective mind, group, or system can regress in four ways: a collapse of thinking, increased preoccupation and sensitivity about boundary and identity, splitting and fragmentation, and implosion with internal conflict and violence.

The regression of thinking, which might lead to its complete collapse, begins with the loss of complex thinking, that is, an inability to consider the nuances of a situation and negotiate its complexities. When this happens, binary thinking takes over with its simplistic black and white, good and bad, dichotomy. It was in this state that President George W. Bush addressed Congress in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, when he famously declared, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”²⁶ In that situation, there was only “us” or the enemies; there was no possibility of neutrality. At a societal level, the predominance of binary thinking manifests as polarized opinions and positions; along with its extremes at both poles, there is no possibility of a middle ground. In this situation, Chinese Americans are asked to abandon the complexity of ethnicity and national identity and are forced to take sides.

In binary thinking, there is at least room for two distinct, opposite positions and parties might agree to disagree. If the regression in thinking deteriorates further, the mind operates in an even simpler mode. I call this *unitary thinking*, where only one view is valid and allowed to exist, and all other views are wrong. This is the position of the fundamentalist mindset. Dialogue and negotiations become impossible when such thinking predominates. The insistence of other parties

that their view is valid, even if it is not imposed on others, might be perceived as a threat that needs to be countered or eliminated. This was arguably the fundamentalist mindset of ISIS, where it was impossible for any country to negotiate with it.²⁷

I am not suggesting that such a mode of thinking is currently operating in US-China diplomacy. However, binary thinking is common in the US at almost every strata of its society, most prominently among its political elite. Some might suggest that the thinking of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, such as the CCP, approaches unitary thinking because there appears to be no room for debate or dissent and only the party's thinking is permitted. However, does China's more nuanced diplomatic stance in recent times and emphasis on bilaterality and multi-laterality in international relations suggest a renewed capacity for complex thinking?

Psychodynamic approaches predictably consider a mind's mode of functioning as ever changing (dynamic), as it negotiates stress and regresses to regroup to face challenges ahead. Volkan proposes that a large group, which may consist of thousands or millions of people, becomes preoccupied with identity and boundaries when they are under stress and regressing. This increased preoccupation takes the form of nationalism, a heightened focus on 'Othering' and increased concern about territoriality and borders. When there is greater economic stability and relative peace, they return to a more progressive level of functioning and become less concerned about their identity and boundary.

Applying these observations to the US-China relationship, we can expect heightened geopolitical tensions when there is global stress or domestic challenges within their respective countries. It is perhaps not surprising that the relationship between the two countries deteriorated to an alarming level early in the COVID-19 pandemic. While the relationship has regained some stability, we could expect China to become more preoccupied and sensitive about Taiwan and other territorial issues if the level of global stress increases again. Indeed, some would suggest that global stress might have already increased again since the pandemic with the war between Russia and Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and Hamas.²⁸ This stress could escalate dramatically if the Russia-Ukraine War draws in the rest of Europe and NATO or the Middle East situation spreads into a regional war.

If the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars were to draw the US and China into conflict, the devastating global economic impact would precipitate a worldwide regression that would tip the two countries into a full-scale war. I have already discussed how regression causes a collapse of thinking and heightens preoccupation about identity and boundary. The sociologist psychoanalyst Earl Hopper has described how a regressed, traumatized system splits and aggregates.²⁹ From an international relations perspective, this means diminishing multilateralism and increasing alliances. However, I have also consistently observed an overall fragmentation of relationships, with diminished trust and heightened sensitivity to humiliation within a deteriorating, regressed traumatized system. Such a situation predisposes itself to internal conflict and anarchic eruptions of violence within a country.

Studies of group dynamics have highlighted the rise of authoritarian leadership to avoid and manage such anxious situations; strongman leaders offer to rescue their country from the risk of descending into anarchy and paralysis. Some analysts might suggest that we are already facing such a situation in the US with the rise of Donald Trump, and in China, the rise of Xi Jinping.

The psychological risk of war increases significantly when the fate of the superpowers' relationship lies in the hands of two powerful leaders. When the checks and balances that are usually in place are swept aside by the strongmen, the system becomes dysfunctional, as fragmentation and internal conflict grow within their respective governments. With the collapse

of thinking, decisions are driven only by unbridled emotionality. Any wish by one country to intentionally provoke another country to cause a collapse of thinking in the Other, is very dangerous indeed because it will unleash an emotional storm that engulfs all, and a catastrophic world war becomes inevitable.

Unleashing of Uncontainable Emotionality

The mind, both individual and collective, seeks to protect itself by wrapping up or encapsulating the traumatic experience and suppressing it to forget what happened. It also detaches the emotions associated with that experience by compartmentalizing and suppressing them separately from any memory of what happened. When the mind is triggered to remember the traumatic event, there is a strong risk that the associated suppressed and compartmentalized emotion is released. If the mind could reconnect reactivated emotions to the original traumatic experience in a measured way and make sense of why it is feeling that way, the emotionality is contained and the situation is manageable. If the mind cannot, the individual will be left anxious, overwhelmed, and bewildered. The collective mind is less able to reconnect this reactivated emotionality to what happened and is even less capable of making sense of it as one. Often, the emotions accumulated from a long history of trauma are unleashed in an uncontainable form, leading to riots and even revolutions.

The potency of pent-up collective psychic pain, most evident in the violence of riots driven by explosive eruptions of emotions and mob mentality, has been well documented since Gustave Le Bon published his book, *Psychologie des foules (Psychology of crowds)* in 1895.³⁰ I am unaware, however, if there have been any studies of how such emotionality manifests in the closed corridors of power and affects their decision-making. One might glean, from the US Congress's *Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, the sense of chaos and turmoil in the Trump administration during the storming of the United States Capitol buildings.³¹ We would prefer to believe that those in charge of the fate of countries, if not the whole world, will handle crisis in the consultative, thoughtful, and emotionally contained manner in which the Kennedy administration's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 is dramatically depicted in the film *Thirteen Days*.³² Such a scenario would not have been possible if the administration had been embroiled by overwhelming emotionality.

I would be surprised if there is documentation, or dramatization, of the government of the People's Republic of China in chaos; the public display of disharmony is rarely visible in a regime whose ordinary operation is distinctively opaque. It is also characteristic of Chinese culture that emotional matters and potentially shameful situations are kept strictly private.

In assessing the degree of emotionality, it is important to take into account differences between emotional expressions of Eastern and Western cultures. In East Asian cultures, strong emotions are usually found in silence. Failure to take this into consideration might have caused the West to underestimate the profound humiliation and anger felt by China when China was blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic. China's relatively mild public, angry response underplayed how profoundly outraged and hurt they were. In general terms, the Chinese tendency to withdraw into silence when humiliated may have added to the thinking that China had something to hide and must therefore be guilty. There is a very great risk of miscalculation if the West expects China to respond in ways that they would. Indeed, the Chinese would only respond with the strong display of emotionality expected in the West when they are in the grip of uncontainable rage, by which time, it might be too late for diplomacy.

How Things Get out of Control Very Quickly

Emotions unleashed by the reactivation of dormant trauma associated with one event, can very quickly get out of control as the memory of one incident triggers another, like the explosion of one barrel of gunpowder igniting another, and another. The stress and strain of an escalating emotional outburst causes a collective mind or a system to regress further, with further loss of the capacity to think clearly and to manage a nuanced diplomatic response to a worsening crisis.

The speed of such escalation, from an incident to conflict and full-scale war that rapidly draws in allies, can be frighteningly fast as illustrated by the First World War. The match was lit with the Sarajevo assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria on June 28, 1914, and by August 4, 1914, Britain, France, and Russia were at war with the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany. The Ottoman Empire joined in two months later in November, and a few months later Bulgaria, Italy, and Greece became involved in what was recognized by early 1915 as a world war. In less than a year, the war had engulfed the world with battles throughout Europe, the Middle East, the Pacific, and Asia.

A potential example of how such an escalating crisis, driven by rapidly growing emotionality triggered by a series of related traumatic events, might lead to a war between the US and China, is the seemingly ‘minor’ conflict between China and Japan over an ostensibly insignificant group of inhabitable rocky islands.

While these contested islands, called the Senkaku Islands according to Japan, or the Diaoyu Islands according to China, possess limited worth in themselves, they represent the unresolved aspects of the First (1894–1895) and Second (1937–1945) Sino-Japanese Wars. A seemingly minor conflict over these islands could trigger a disproportionate response from China, driven by the emotionality of their traumatic experience from these wars. As previously discussed, China not only suffered millions of civilian deaths during the Japanese occupation over those eight years (1937–1945), but many died in circumstances that constituted war crimes, such the extensive use of biological warfare and massacres of civilians by the tens of thousands, including the infamous incident known as the Rape of Nanking.³³ It began on December 13, 1937 and continued for six weeks, with the rape and slaughter of women and children, killing as many as 300,000 in some estimates.³⁴ The painful emotions from this incident alone are still palpable in China today with not infrequent reference to what happened in the media.³⁵ Such unresolved tension predisposes a minor conflict with Japan to quickly escalate into a war. The US has a treaty with Japan that promises to come to Japan’s aid if it is attacked.

A conflict with Japan will also trigger another set of traumatic experiences for China. The loss of the First Sino-Japanese War forced China to cede Taiwan to Japan. Reminders of the ceding of Taiwan could also trigger another set of humiliating traumatic experiences related to the Opium Wars, which resulted in China being forced to cede Hong Kong. The painful reactivation of memory about this period, the beginning of the century of humiliation, would bring to life the deep resentment and grievance, if not hatred, of the West that has been fermenting over many years.

The Symbolic and Emotional Significance of Taiwan to China

The significance of an event or a territory to a country is what it means to its people and is usually tied to a particular shared historical emotional experience. If that shared experience can be symbolized, or put into words or a narrative, it is said to be embedded in its culture and history. Often the symbol formed means much more than the immediate event or a thing itself. Taiwan, therefore, could mean a lot more to the Chinese people than its geostrategic position in the South

China Sea and the critical importance of its semiconductor industries. While the search for the symbolic meaning of Taiwan to China might need to go back several hundred years in both of their histories, it might be argued that emotionality related to the most recent events is closest to the surface, and this is where we should begin.

The present-day Taiwan as a self-governing territory separate from mainland China was established by Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Kuomintang government of the Republic of China, who fled to the island upon defeat by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. The civil war had begun in 1927 and hostilities paused when both the KMT and CCP fought against the occupying Japanese from 1937 to 1945. The emotional pain associated with the civil war appears to have been covered over by the trauma of Japanese occupation and the subsequent devastating suffering during the Great Famine and Cultural Revolution.

There is no agreement on the approximate number that were killed during the civil war, with estimates ranging from 1.8 to 3.5 million, with many atrocities carried out by both sides.³⁶ The greater part of the suffering of the Chinese people from this period has been buried. Modern day, democratic Taiwan was created out of this civil war and remains the most visible reminder of that fratricide that most Chinese would prefer to forget. They do not wish to remember a time when their families, communities, and country were torn apart as people took sides and betrayal cost lives. For the CCP, Taiwan could be a reminder of unfinished business from their conflict with the KMT; perhaps in the mind of some, the civil war has not yet ended.

Sometimes the significance of an event or a thing cannot be put into words, or in psychodynamic terms, is not symbolizable. We might speak of such a phenomenon, not as having symbolic significance, but having a more general and undifferentiated, emotional significance. Often an individual or a collective might not know the full emotional significance of an event or experience to themselves. For instance, I have been struck by the response from several Chinese scholars and observers to a hypothetical scenario: if Taiwan declares independence, crossing the red line that the CCP has repeatedly asserted they will not tolerate and the US comes to its aid, but the CCP does not respond as it said it would, what will happen? The common response to this scenario was, "the people will be very angry." This suggests a belief among Chinese people, and not only the CCP, that the Celestial Kingdom will once again be complete and harmonized when Taiwan is reunited with the motherland. Such a belief in the profound importance of reunification may also be somehow tied to a deep but unacknowledged wish and need to heal from the unresolved pain and fractures of the civil war and more.

The loss of Taiwan, through its declaration of independence from China with support from the West, would therefore be intolerable. Perhaps, even more significantly, such a loss would trigger an unleashing of the suppressed pain and rage from the century of humiliation. A cascading series of past trauma, with its associated emotionality, would be reactivated, starting with the unresolved aspects of the First Sino-Japanese War, when China was forced to cede Taiwan to Japan, which reminds China of an earlier humiliation when it had to cede Hong Kong to the British following its loss in the Opium Wars. Memories of the Second Sino-Japanese War, which became part of the Second World War in the Pacific, is not far from the forefront of many Chinese minds. Painful traumatic memories will quickly become reactivated and the Rape of Nanking, which has become symbolic of the many atrocities carried out by the Japanese, will once again arouse hatred.

Instead of these convoluted associations, it could be suggested that a US intervention in Taiwan could simply bring to life the long list of China's grievances toward that country alone.³⁷

The emotional significance of Taiwan might extend farther back in history.³⁸ For the Han Chinese, who make up most of the population of China, the century of humiliation was not only a

result of bullying by Western powers, but they were also sold out by the abject failure of the foreign Qing-Manchu dynasty. When the Manchurians (Manchus) defeated the last Han Chinese dynasty in 1662, the surviving remnant of the Ming dynasty, led by General Zheng Chenggong, retreated to Taiwan.

Taiwan has been a part of China's realm of influence since much earlier times. Delegations from the Chinese imperial courts have regularly visited the indigenous-inhabited island from the time of the Three Kingdoms (AD 230). It was, however, the steady migration of Han Chinese that followed the settlement by General Zheng that led to the formation of what is known as modern Taiwan today.³⁹

The fact that the formation of what Taiwan is today was twice ushered in by retreating Chinese generals, might not be as significant as the fact that those events were associated with two catastrophic eras of China's history: the end of the last Han Chinese dynasty and the Chinese Civil War. From a psychodynamic perspective, Taiwan is not simply a place, but a symbol of the great fractures from those events. Perhaps more important is Taiwan's emotional association with the great suffering of China. It has also become, in the imagination of the Chinese people, a panacea for pain and humiliation from the past 350 years—a belief that all will be well when Taiwan returns to the motherland. It would be a terrible mistake to dismiss the emotional significance of Taiwan to China, even if it largely rested on a phantasy.⁴⁰ In psychodynamic thinking, what is imagined is often a much more powerful driver of human behavior than what is real. Perhaps, that is why China has repeatedly stated that 'Taiwan is not negotiable.'

The Problem of Distrust

In his book *The Avoidable War – The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China*, Kevin Rudd, previously the prime minister of Australia and currently the country's ambassador to the United States, devoted a whole chapter to "The Problem of Distrust." It offers a frank analysis of the historical origins of this problem between the two countries and its continuing impact:

The View from Beijing – Americans typically believe that their country's approach to China has been driven by high ideals in defense of democracy, free trade, and the integrity of the global rules-based order but the Chinese view is that American strategy is nothing more than the prosecution of its core national interests. To pretend otherwise, in China's view is political hypocrisy. Moreover, as seen from Beijing, American strategy is rarely if ever cognizant – let alone respectful – of China's national aspirations. In China's perspective, this is reflected in 150 years of US commercial efforts to penetrate China's vast domestic market – from the age of opium to the age of Apple. It sees it in the history of American national security strategy. First, handing over Chinese territory to appease Japan after World War I, then, using the protracted Japanese occupation of China during World War II to keep the bulk of Japanese Imperial forces bogged down for the duration of the Pacific War instead of prioritizing a liberation of the Chinese mainland. And finally, leveraging Beijing against Moscow as part of an ultimately successful strategy to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War.⁴¹

From the perspective of the Chinese people, "No young person could ever graduate from the Chinese school system without being exposed to the sign said to have been erected in the

international concession in Shanghai in the 1920s proclaiming, ‘No dogs or Chinese allowed.’ Few in China grew up without at least a passing familiarity with America’s history of anti-Chinese sentiments.”⁴²

According to Jon Bateman, “American economic sanctions against China, such as the current restrictions of export of technology, especially semiconductors, feeds these sentiments.”⁴³ Rudd continues,

The View from Washington – As of June 2021, 76 percent of Americans had an unfavorable opinion of China, according to polling by Pew Research. However, most of this ire is directed at the Chinese state, with only 15 percent expressing confidence in Xi Jinping to “do the right thing regarding world affairs.” [...] Most Americans have a positive view of Chinese civilization, including the depth of history and culture [...] It is much harder, however, for Americans to understand what the Chinese Communist Party actually wants as opposed to the common, understandable desires of the Chinese people.

Rudd suggests that the absolute secrecy of the CCP fosters the tendency among American officials “to assume the worst and prepare accordingly.”⁴⁴

There is no shortage of conspiracy theories about China’s hostile intentions. In psychodynamic thinking, those theories that flourish, from Huawei to TikTok, only needed a small element of truth and thick opacity to feed the wild imaginations of those who are already fearful. The state of turmoil and insecurity of the post-pandemic world has prepared a fertile ground for paranoia and distrust to grow, and so too will the psychological risks of war. China’s assertive claim of the whole South China Sea, of course, provides realistic material that fuels any prevailing paranoia.⁴⁵ Its regular incursion into Taiwan’s airspace and frequently reported contest with the Philippines over the disputed Spratly Islands confirms a negative perception of China in the mind of many Americans.

Distrust is also one of the core effects of traumatization, when one’s fundamental trust that the world is safe and the Other can be trusted, is shaken. Even one’s trust in oneself is questioned. The prevailing distrust between the two countries will escalate in a crisis that relates to a past trauma, such as a crisis over Taiwan that triggers China’s traumatic experience of the Sino-Japanese Wars and the humiliation of the Opium Wars.

Psychology of Inevitability

When situations become too frightening, we resort to denial as a mechanism of defense, which might manifest as ‘there isn’t a problem’ or ‘it will sort itself out.’ Those who do not deny there is a problem, but are too overwhelmed by it to act, could convince themselves of something along the lines of, ‘there is nothing that can be done and therefore, nothing to do, and therefore, do nothing.’ Simply put, it is inevitable and therefore there is no need to do anything, absolving one of any guilt and shame from doing nothing. In Eastern culture, this way of thinking is ‘fate’ and passive acceptance is the only way forward.

The fatalistic acceptance that war between the two great superpowers is inevitable is widespread among those who subscribe to the idea of Thucydides’s Trap. Graham Allison, Professor of Government at Harvard University and previously the assistant secretary of defense in the Clinton administration, highlighted what the ancient Greek historian Thucydides observed in his treatise, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. He concluded that it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made the war inevitable. Allison came to the same

conclusion after finding that war occurred in twelve out of the sixteen situations over the past five hundred years when a rising power threatened to displace a ruling power.⁴⁶

Writing in 2022, Rudd, however, suggested that war between the two superpowers is not inevitable but more ‘probable,’ even as he noted, “many of the elements of Thucydides’s Trap are already present in the US-China relationship today.”⁴⁷ Refusing to accept the psychology of inevitability, he instead highlighted, “Allison’s analysis of sixteen historical engagements between rising and established powers over the last five hundred years concluded that *one-quarter of them did not result in war.*”⁴⁸ He urged, “We can either allow the primordial dimensions of Thucydidean logic to simply take their natural course, culminating in crisis, conflict, or even war. Or we can identify potential strategic off-ramps, or at least guardrails, which may help preserve the peace.”⁴⁹

Some of the drivers of the Thucydidean Trap can be understood in terms of how normal competitiveness is overtaken by a growing sense of threat, with a diminishing ability to distinguish what is real from what is imagined, as unbearable internal problems are projected onto the Other. The failure to address the internal domestic problems will create dangerous destructive forces within each respective country. If these internal forces are accentuated by external regressive forces generated by traumatic world events, such as the global financial crisis or pandemic, a perfect storm starts to form, greatly escalating the risk of war. To add to this highly fragile situation, a poorly considered response to an accidental crisis by one country, puncturing a historical traumatic abscess, will unleash resentment, grievances, and hatred that has built up over generations.

The stress from an escalating perception of threat will precipitate regression in the officials and leaders, as well as in ways governments operate, with a rapidly diminishing capacity to think and manage a crisis. Further missteps, especially those that humiliate the Other, would trigger memory of previous traumatic humiliations, putting into motion cascading explosions, and blowing off the lids of barrels of pent-up emotions that have been brewing for generations. The release of such overwhelming and uncontained emotions collapses any remaining diminished capacity to think and contain an emerging conflict. It is hoped that such a dire situation could be saved by whatever goodwill is left between the two countries. Failing that, only their goodwill with a mediating third Other could save us all.

Managing the Psychological Risks of War

There are, however, several steps where psychodynamic-informed and assisted interventions could manage the situation described above, counter the dynamics of the Thucydidean Trap, and prevent the world from sleepwalking into a catastrophic war. First we need to wake up to psychological factors that could lead to the two countries to war. I will briefly outline some of these interventions.

Understanding the Situation

Psychodynamic approaches to any situation begin with an appreciation that a great deal more is going on, in individuals and collectives, than it appears. While this might be stating the obvious, often we are forced to face the obvious challenges happening in front of us, when we do not have the time or space to understand the more powerful drivers of the situation operating in the unconscious.

Even though this article has discussed the psychodynamics driving some of the psychological risks of conflict between the US and China, including those that might drive a Thucydidean entrapment, there is much more that needs to be understood.

This article has not addressed the psychological risks associated with alliances and protective treaties, and the tendencies for governments to operate within these relationships under the influence of ‘groupthink’ and the rapid spread of a contagion in the realms of the unconscious.⁵⁰ It has not discussed the risks of collapsing executive decision-making and chains of command in the face of overwhelming, collective emotionality. One must consider the risks that emerge from a situation where the hatred of the Other (either anti-American or anti-Chinese) among the people becomes so great that either the government is forced to act accordingly, or the possibility of rogue operatives within governments act out the wishes of the people. A better understanding of these psychodynamics will enable us to anticipate and manage these situations.

De-escalating the Present Tension

If both superpowers agree they do not want war, then there is an urgent need for their governments, politicians, media and other security related institutions, including think tanks of each respective country, to refrain from blaming the other for their internal problems. The dangers of purposely exploiting trauma-related sensitivities to humiliate the Other and claim a moral high ground and sense of triumph, cannot be overstated. The humiliation of the Other for strategic gain could backfire spectacularly, if the reaction of the Other activates an emotional storm that spins out of control. Politicians that peddle fear for personal gain should be reminded that there comes a point where fear is overtaken by denial.

While it is understandable how profit-making media benefit from focusing on fear, as its readership predictably increases when there is a sense of danger, it is necessary to remember that too much fear drives down consumer confidence, economic activities, and advertising. The suggestion that the media is one of the main drivers of conflict and war should not be surprising given how responsive leading politicians are to the 24/7 news cycle. While the dynamics between the media and leadership might be too obvious to require elaboration, some further work on how to address this problem from a psychodynamic perspective would be useful to expose the dangers of this relationship with respect to the psychological risk of war.

Meanwhile, any effort at all levels of society and governments that can promote a sensitive appreciation of each country’s respective traumatic history, will help to counter the prevailing fear and encourage a more realistic, if not sympathetic, understanding of the Other.

Overcoming Impasse

There are many possible reasons why dialogue and negotiation might stall. Psychodynamic insights into why an impasse might be occurring could help both parties to address it to enable dialogue and negotiation to proceed again. One of the more common reasons for impasse is that both parties are stuck in entrenched regression with compromised capacities for complex thinking, excessive preoccupation with identity and boundary, and splitting and fragmentation occurring within their respective group.

Impasse is also likely when the sense of distrust reaches the point where fear is the overwhelming emotion. At this point, the capacity for realistic evaluation of a situation is usually severely affected. Hubris, a common reaction to humiliation, past, present, or anticipated, would not permit any compromise. There is often, instead, a wish to triumph in the game of upmanship. Perhaps, more commonly, both sides are stuck in their defensive positions.

A recognition of the prevailing dynamic at the time of an impasse might enable those mediating the process to disentangle the situation. Sometimes, a deeper psychodynamic analysis of the possible unconscious drivers of the situation is necessary.

Avoiding a Crisis

Crisis does not happen in a vacuum. It usually occurs as the end point of cumulative misunderstanding and missteps. It is often pointed out in psychoanalytic discourse that there is no such thing as an accident. A forensic retrospective analysis could usually identify a series of human errors occurring under the influence of forces that are not easily apparent, but powerful, nonetheless.

Dialogue between the two countries during peacetime that seeks to establish a mutual, deeper appreciation of each other's motivations and differences in cultural and communication styles, will help to avoid the accumulation of misunderstandings and missteps that set the scene for crisis to occur. Such a dialogue will not only help to reduce the risk of a crisis occurring, but also aid its de-escalation should it happen.

Psychodynamic observations and analysis of the interactions between two countries, such as those discussed in this article thus far, could identify some of the subtle misunderstandings and missteps that might not be apparent to those involved.

Managing a Crisis

The stress and strain of a situation, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, could lead to a rapid collective loss of capacity to think clearly and contain emotions. If that crisis had occurred in the context of an even more unstable time domestically, such as an insurrection or recession, or globally, such as a pandemic or global financial crisis, the stress and strain on the leaders as individuals, and governments as a collective, would be so great that it would cause a collapse in thinking, heighten a sense of threat to its boundary or border, and cause overwhelming emotionality, fragmentation, and fear of annihilation.

In this dire situation, both countries need to rely on whatever goodwill they can muster in their relationship, or through their respective proxies, or mediation through a mutually agreed upon third party. Anticipatory conflict resolution mechanisms, including reliable channels of communication that could withstand such a potential collapse of thinking and manage the emotional storms, need to be set up well before a crisis erupts. These channels between the two countries would ideally include psychodynamic-informed officials working with the support of psychodynamic trained professionals familiar with conflict negotiations and international relations.

Conclusion

This article has provided a psychodynamic analysis of the psychological risks of war between the US and China. The essence of the psychodynamic approaches to managing these risks is to anticipate the seemingly irrational and inevitable by preparing to do the following: counter the regressive forces driven by fear, contain the overwhelming emotionality, and restore the capacity for complex thinking in order to fully understand the nuances of the situation and find creative solutions to potential impasse.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge suggestions from members of the International Psychodynamic Study Group on the Prevention of War between the United States and China (IPSG) and assistance from Siena Koh in the preparation of this article.

Notes

¹ Alan Greenspan, *The Map and the Territory: Risk, Human Nature, and the Future of Forecasting* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).

² Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Harper Perennial, 2014).

³ Vamik D. Volkan, *Psychoanalysis, International Relations, and Diplomacy: A Sourcebook on Large-Group Psychology* (London: Karnac Books, 2014).

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983); “China’s Draft Law Banning Speech and Behaviours That ‘Harm the Feelings’ of the Country Sparks Backlash,” Australian Broadcasting Corporation, September 8, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-08/china-bans-items-that-harm-national-spirit/102829672>.

⁵ Bill Clinton’s statement announcing China’s most-favored nation status in 1993 showed that this move was not without reservation. “Statement by the President on Most Favored Nation Status for China,” May 28, 1993, <https://china.usc.edu/statement-president-clinton-most-favored-nation-status-china-1993>. Its annual renewal and it being made permanent by the Bush administration in 2001 were driven by economic opportunism.

⁶ An example of such failure to distinguish real from imagined threat was the decision by a US-led coalition to invade Iraq in 2003 due to the perceived threat that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, although none were found. Robert Kelly, “Twenty Years Ago in Iraq, Ignoring the Expert Weapons Inspectors Proved to Be a Fatal Mistake,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 9, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2023/twenty-years-ago-iraq-ignoring-expert-weapons-inspectors-proved-be-fatal-mistake>.

⁷ The refusal of China to accept the terms of trade imposed by Britain (with indirect American involvement), including the sale of opium to the local Chinese, led to two wars, the first Opium War (1839–42) and the second Opium War (1856–60). Upon defeat, China was forced to accept unequal treaties, which included the ceding of Hong Kong to Britain.

⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “MAGA movement (United States political movement),” updated March 1, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/MAGA-movement>; Karen Tumulty, “How Donald Trump Came Up with ‘Make America Great Again,’” *Washington Post*, January 18, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-donald-trump-came-up-with-make-america-great-again/2017/01/17/fb6acf5e-dbf7-11e6-ad42-f3375f271c9c_story.html.

⁹ China has sustained an average growth rate of nine percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) since the 1980s and lifted more than 800 million of its population out of poverty. Jikun Huang, Qi Zhang, and Scott Rozelle, “Economic Growth, the Nature of Growth and Poverty Reduction in Rural China,” *China Economic Journal* 1, no. 1 (February 2008): 107–22.

¹⁰ Yu Xie and Chunni Zhang, “The Long-Term Impact of the Communist Revolution on Social Stratification in Contemporary China,” *PNAS* 116, no. 39 (2019): 19392–97, <http://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1904283116>.

¹¹ Vaclav Smil, “China’s Great Famine: 40 Years Later,” *BMJ* 319, no. 7225 (December 1999): 1619–21.

¹² Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “China,” “Social Changes,” updated May 2, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/China/Social-changes>.

¹³ Tiananmen Square is the central square of Beijing in the foreground of the Forbidden City, the symbolic heart of imperial power of China, and has been the site of protests against governments. In the spring of 1989, for almost three months, thousands of students gathered demanding greater democratic freedom. The CCP accused Western countries of fomenting the protest and finally sent in the military to squash it on June 4, 1989, causing deaths, at the very least in the hundreds

¹⁴ When attempts to solve internal problems by projection fail, a country will usually be stuck in the quagmire of a domestic crisis and concerns about the Other become insignificant, at least by comparison.

¹⁵ The notion of ‘national humiliation’ was adopted after the treatment of China in the Treaty of Versailles (1919), which was widely perceived as unfair, with its continuation of Western countries’ dominance. The phrase ‘century

of humiliation' took hold during Japanese occupation (1937–45). It has since been widely adopted in political rhetoric as well as popular culture. Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ The Boxer Protocol (signed on September 7, 1901) is one of several unequal treaties forced upon China; it was demanded by the Eight-Nation Alliance (Britain, France, the United States, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Japan), as well as Belgium, Spain, and the Netherlands following the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion.

¹⁷ Of this generally-accepted estimate of twenty million Chinese deaths during the Second Sino-Japanese War / Second World War, approximately three million were military deaths, eight million were civilians killed by the military, and nine million died from famine and disease. R. J. Rummel, *China's Bloody Century: Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

¹⁸ Volkan refers to this phenomenon as 'chosen trauma'—a traumatic event utilised for a national political purpose.

¹⁹ China's strong repudiation of criticisms is a key feature of what has been referred to as wolf warrior diplomacy. Shaoyu Yuan, "Tracing China's Diplomatic Transition to Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and Its Implications," *Humanities and Social Communications* 10 (2023): Article 837, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02367-6>.

²⁰ Eugen Koh, "The Healing of Historical Collective Trauma," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 15, no. 1 (2021): 115–33, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.15.1.1776>.

²¹ Eugen Koh, "The Impact of Trauma on Peace Processes," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 33, no. 1 (2021): Article 4, <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol33/iss1/4>.

²² "China's Draft Law."

²³ The author worked with the late Stuart Twemlow for several years to establish anti-bullying and violence programs in Australia. His findings and work can be found in Stuart Twemlow and Frank Sacco, *Preventing Bullying and School Violence* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2012).

²⁴ The civil unrest of the Black Lives Matter protests across the US in 2020 was widely publicized to suggest its decline and propagated a message of Chinese ascendancy. See also Oana Burcu and Weixiang Wang, "The View from Beijing on Black Lives Matter: Why Do Black Lives Matter for Beijing?," *Journal of Chinese Affairs* 52, no. 3 (2023): 413–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026231178560>.

²⁵ The potency of the civil unrest related to the Black Lives Matter protests illustrates well how a present-day event can be a lightning rod that reactivates and unleashes the pain of unresolved historical trauma; in this case, that of the American Civil War (1861–65), in which some 620,000 men died in battle, which is more than the combined total of all of the wars the United States has fought, and a million more were wounded. This collective trauma is magnified by the legacy of slavery and its continuing impact on the whole society.

²⁶ George W. Bush, "Text of Address to Joint Session of Congress on September 21, 2001," *The Guardian*, September 21, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/21/september11.usa13>.

²⁷ ISIS, which stands for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, was an extreme fundamentalist organization that controlled about a third of those two countries and reigned with terror from 2014 to 2018. Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London: HarperCollins, 2015).

²⁸ The war between Ukraine and Russia began with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and was confined to the Donbas in Eastern Ukraine. Invasion by Russia on February 24, 2022 led to a full-scale war that is continuing. Hamas is an Islamist Palestinian group that took control of the Gaza Strip in 2006; on October 7, 2023, it attacked southern Israel, killing more than a thousand civilians and provoking a relentless response from Israel that by early June 2024, had demolished most of Gaza and killed more than 36,000 civilians.

²⁹ Earl Hopper, *Traumatic Experience in the Unconscious Life of Groups* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003).

³⁰ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002) (English translation of the original work *Psychologie des foules*, published 1895).

³¹ *Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, GovInfo, December 2022, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-J6-REPORT/context>.

³² The Cuban Missile Crisis, between October 16 and 28, 1962, was a confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union. It was the closest the Cold War came to a nuclear conflict, when the latter deployed nuclear missiles in Cuba in response to the US installation of nuclear weapons in Italy and Turkey. The film *Thirteen Days* was based on Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

³³ Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932–1945, and the American Cover-up* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

³⁴ The rapes and massacres in Nanjing on December 13, 1937 were reported in the international media and were not contested, but China's claims around the scale of what happened continues to be challenged by Japanese revisionists

who insist it was only several hundred and at the most a few thousand (not in the hundreds of thousands). The phrase ‘Rape of Nanking’ was coined and popularized by Iris Chang in her book *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). The politics of this popularization of this incident is discussed in some detail in Takashi Yoshida, *The Making of the ‘Rape of Nanking’: History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁵ “Interview: Japanese Scholars Say Truth of Nanjing Massacre Undeniable,” Xinhua News, December 13, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/13/c_136822288.htm.

³⁶ Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century*, 1st paperback ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

³⁷ The long list of grievances could begin with the US enforcing unequal trade treaties to allow their sale of opium, the demand of humiliating concessions following the Boxer Rebellion, the betrayal of Chinese contributions to the First World War, the giving of its territories to Japan in the Treaty of Versailles, and deliberately not coming to its aid in when Japan invaded until Pearl Harbor was attacked.

³⁸ In psychodynamic thinking, symbolic meanings can be known; the emotional significance of an event or experience is often difficult to define and is more extensive in its reach.

³⁹ Until that point, Taiwan was a small trading outpost of the Japanese in the late fifteenth century, then a Portuguese settlement was established in the sixteenth century, followed by small Dutch and Spanish settlements among a larger indigenous population.

⁴⁰ Psychoanalysis distinguishes *fantasy*, a conscious act, from *phantasy*, an unconscious process. In this case, the collective consciousness of the Chinese psyche unconsciously believes that Taiwan is the panacea for their pain and humiliation without needing a rationale for why all will be well when it returns to its motherland.

⁴¹ Kevin Rudd, *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict Between the US and Xi Jinping’s China* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2022), 59–60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴³ Jon Bateman, “The Fevered Anti-China Attitude in Washington is Going to Backfire,” Politico, December 15, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/12/15/china-tech-decoupling-sanctions-00071723>.

⁴⁴ Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 67–68.

⁴⁵ Huiyun Feng and Kai He, eds., *US–China Competition and the South China Sea Disputes* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁶ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (Brunswick, Victoria: Scribe Publications, 2017).

⁴⁷ Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁰ Contagion commonly refers to the unconscious sharing of an idea, often seen in suicides within a group, especially among adolescents.