

The Comparison Between Power Transition in Ancient Times and the Modern Era

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Abstract. Power Transition is a popular topic in the field of international relationships, and my study is focusing on the difference between hegemonic transition in ancient times and modern era. This is an important topic because it can provide some degree of inspiration to the scholars studying international conflicts in the modern era. Especially now that people are expecting a new wave of conflict for the alternation of hegemony between China and the US. After the Cold War, many scholars started focusing on the reasons that stopped possible military conflicts. However, most of them concentrated on technological and geological perspectives, but ignored factors of international relationship. To illustrate, the study chooses the Punic Wars as my ancient example and Sino-US competition for my modern example to evaluate. This paper analyzes the differences based on technological and international relationship factors by comparing the two cases. The paper argues that the Cold Weapon Era and the existence of small international systems made hegemonic wars easier to initiate and relatively less costly, suggesting that the conditions of the time facilitated the outbreak of such conflicts.

Keywords: Power transition, hegemony shift, hegemonic war.

1. Introduction

Being a popular topic in the field of international relationships, scholars often tried to find patterns with universality from the processes of power transitions. Therefore, many different theories had been proposed in the last century. Such as the power transition theory, Thucydides trap, and the hegemonic stability theory [1-4]. Most of them suggested that there was a high probability of hegemonic war happening in the fight for hegemony. However, the struggles for hegemony after World War 2 did not result in military conflicts, like the most famous example of the Cold War. Therefore, many studies published after the Cold War were dedicated to analyzing the reasons for the Cold War to be generally peaceful [1-2, 5]. These studies mainly focus on the perspectives of nuclear weapon and geographical perspectives [1-2, 5-7].

Thus, the contribution of this thesis is that it evaluates the difference between ancient and modern power transition not only by the factor of nuclear weapons, but also the enlargements of international relationship circles. This investigation believes the view “it is easy for power transitions to lead to hegemonic wars” is not applicable to the modern world. To illustrate, this thesis will use the Punic Wars and the Sino-US competition as the examples for past and present to analyze the reasons for the decrease of chances of hegemonic wars, which is the increase in the cost of hegemonic wars. This analyze is based on the focal points of nuclear weapons and international relationships. Its objective to find how the changes caused by the shift of times affect the traditional power transition process, and to come up with new insights on the modern political state.

2. Introduction on the Related Theories

Firstly, the Thucydides' Trap is an academical term that is put forward by Graham Allison in 2012. It originated from the Peloponnesian War, where Sparta was feared on the power development of Athens [2-3]. This theory states hegemonic war will happen, for the hegemonic country will take preventive actions against the rising country, whilst the rising country will challenge the hegemonic country to achieve its power and international status. Inside the book *Destined for War: Can America*

and China Escape Thucydides' Trap? written by Graham Allison, Allison pointed out that in the 16 hegemonic transition cases that he investigated, twelve of them ended with war [8].

Secondly, in the theories of the past few decades, the power transition theory and hegemonic stability theory, being the key concepts in the international relationship field, match with the unipolar stability theory. They advocate that a new rising power will start hegemonic fights and lead to the break of relative peace in unipolar international order. The power transition theory that was proposed by Organski in 1958 stated that when the rising power is not satisfied with the existing international order, but the hegemonic power is, hegemonic war will happen, and the winner will maintain or reconstruct the international order [4]. The hegemonic stability theory is consummated by Robert Gilpin in 1981 and believes that the international system will remain peaceful and undisturbed when a hegemonic country exists [7, 9].

Lastly, the prospect theory is originally an economical term but is applied to the international field in the thesis *Power Transition and Paradigm Shift in Diplomacy: Why China and the US March towards Strategic Competition*. It thinks that in international systems, avoiding losses is more important than achieving profits [1]. Therefore, the hegemonic power will start preventive wars before the rising power transcend the hegemonic power to prevent the possible losses brought by the rising power.

3. Ancient Case Study: The Punic Wars

Before the conflicts with Rome, Carthage had already started a series of hegemonic disputes with Greece due to the problem of Sicily. The result was that Carthage became the hegemonic power in the western Mediterranean World. Due to its dominant status of navy, Carthage signed a series of unequal treaties with Rome over the harbor and trading affairs.

The trigger for the First Punic War was Messina (a city in the eastern end of Sicily) being occupied by a group of mercenaries, and Carthage sending armies to put down the rebellion and arrange garrison. Since Sicily had a great extent of strategic significance, Rome sent armies to Messina although being aware of the Carthaginian army in Messina. Therefore, the two sides got into military conflicts as expected and started the First Punic War. As shown, the action of Rome sending army to Sicily was a symbol of its dissatisfaction on the possibility of Carthage owning Sicily alone, which aligns with the traditional power transition theory proposed by Organski.

Nevertheless, Carthage did not start preventive wars, which would have happened according to the prospect theory. Personally, the author thought it was because the Carthaginians, who were extremely knowledgeable in economy and navigation, did not consider Rome as a threat due to Rome's feature of agricultural country. It was difficult for Rome to become an obstacle in the trading net of Carthage, so there was not really a reason to "prevent losses".

Dramatically, the prospect theory was still confirmed afterwards in the Third Punic War. During the Second Punic War, Carthage lost most of the elite soldiers in the Battle of Zama. Consequently, although Carthage was still an advance country due to its excellent agricultural management in northern Africa, the military power of Carthage relied on mercenary and was not on the same level with Rome. At last, Rome decided to destroy Carthage after some triggering events because it wanted to prevent crisis like the Second Punic War. This conformed to the prospect theory, in which the rising power started a hegemonic war after overcoming the hegemonic power to extend and stabilize profit earned. On the other side, the Third Punic War could also be viewed as a preventive war with the goal of eliminating possible threats completely. Both are reasonable explanations based on the prospect theory.

Then, based on the case of the Punic Wars, there is a short summary that can be made on the power shift in ancient times, which is: the wars were easier to happen, and hegemony was easier to be established. The first reason is technological issues. There were not any large-scale weapons that could affect a whole region in the Cold Weapon Era, and biological weapons such as spreading

pandemics were not developed and was way too uncontrollable. Therefore, the impact of wars was limited in a certain region, and there was no weapon to absolutely destroy the enemy.

The second reason was regional limitations. The international order or system in the ancient times were often nailed in a certain area due to geographical issues. For example, it was impossible for the Han Dynasty and Rome to struggle for hegemony simply because they were too far away from each other. It was perfectly fine for them to establish their own orders respectively without affecting the other hegemonic country. From another perspective, this meant that the countries involved in a certain international system must be close to each other, and so the logistics during war will be easier to maintain.

The third reason was the lack of potential competitors, this was corresponding with small proportion of ancient international relationships. Due to geographical limitations, there were way fewer countries in an international system in the ancient times compared with modern days. Wherefore the number of potential competitors and the cost of eliminating them were all smaller, and the amount of unstable factors and risk in hegemonic wars all decreased.

The above three points had great connections in between. They all showed that the cost of starting hegemonic wars in ancient times was smaller and easier. For instance, during the First Punic War, the senate sent counsellors over to Sicily rashly after a Comitia Centuriata.

4. Modern Factors: Nuclear Weapons and International Relationships

The invention of nuclear weapons was undoubtedly epoch-making, it provides the countries that did not reach the standard of hegemonic powers an ability to conduct deterrence. Therefore, the possibility of war will significantly reduce when both sides have nuclear weapons according to the nuclear deterrence theory. China and the US are both countries that contain numbers of nuclear weapons enough to destroy the opposite country. Thus, the consequences and casualties would be immeasurable once a nuclear war start. Furthermore, the risk and cost of a nuclear war is to an unacceptable high extent, but the possible profit that it brings might not be higher than using nuclear weapons for deterrence. As a result, unless there are technical issues or the two countries decide to meet one's death together, it is not likely for a nuclear war to start despite today's worldwide tensions and conflicts [10-14].

As the Age of Exploration started, the independent international systems of each continent expanded and integrated into a huge international order that crossed the oceans. Hence, as the whole world is connected nowadays, the political structure and situation is more complex and complicated. The potential competitors that every country had to face exist not only in nearby countries anymore but increased significantly. Under these kinds of condition, there are many other countries that have nuclear weapons and the ability to change the war, such as Russia. With that being so, both China and the US need to consider the threats of these potential competitors.

Nonetheless, the cost is high no matter preventing or eliminating potential competitors. If starting a war ignoring them, there will be a high possibility of creating a favorable situation for other countries. This situation leads to more questions: which means that China and the US absolutely need to avoid hasty conflicts and think carefully? Could the high-cost result in expected profits for these two countries? Is the possible risk endurable? Lastly, could the two countries gain the beneficiary of the whole incident? In addition, due to the existence of allies between different nations, starting a regional war may lead to a world war, just like World War One.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, hegemonic war in ancient times had a higher possibility of happening compared with modern era due to the factors of the lack of mass destruction weapons, the limitation on the region, and the lack of potential competitors. Whereas hegemonic war in nowadays is less likely to occur because of the existence of nuclear weapons and the enlargement of international system. The result

of this investigation is that the Cold Weapon Era and small international systems made hegemonic wars easier to start and had a relatively small cost. Despite that, as time changed, the invention of nuclear weapons and the enlarge of international systems highly intensify the cost and risk of starting hegemonic wars. Which therefore reduced its probability of happening.

This study is meaningful both theoretically and realistically because it probes into the gap of traditional power transition theory and hegemonic stability theory and provides a new point of view on the Sino-US competition. For the future studies, they can focus more on the modern cases and examples since there must be new progresses in the Sino-US competition. New point of views, factors, and perspectives will all be value to the relevant topics.

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