

The Thucydides Trap: A Distorted Compass

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/11/05/the-thucydides-trap-a-distorted-compass/>

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Predicting the future is a very hazardous exercise in the social sciences field. Yet, often, academics, under the pressure of the moment, wander into uncharted waters. Their navigation then depends on their theoretical compass. The discussion about the possibility of a conflict between a leading world power and a rising one, presently the U.S. and China, is not new. At the theoretical level one can easily remember the 20th century Power Cycle Theory[2] or Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. [3] After the turn of the century the most widely known analysis is that of John J. Mearsheimer who, in his lecture *Can China Rise Peacefully?*, [4] examined the issue. Mearsheimer, based on his theory of Offensive Realism and under the condition that all his assumptions hold, has concluded that such a possibility exists.

In all these studies, the main idea is that the new power, the challenger, is going to compete with the old, the ruler. What is therefore needed in order to predict, is to know if, when and how the conditions will be present for a revisionist power in order to challenge the ruling power. The specific discussion has been recently reanimated because of military and political developments at the international and domestic arenas. On the one hand it was China's activities in the South China Sea, its increased defense spending, and the Korean peninsula crisis. On the other, the new U.S. administration's rhetoric and practice.

The discussion was taken even further due to Graham Allison and the very title of his book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, [5] where he develops an argument firstly made in his 2015 essay. As he says, "when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power alarm bells should sound 'extreme danger ahead' — generally bad things happen". As a compass to navigate into the uncharted waters of the future, Allison's suggestion is not much different from those of the theories mentioned above. But Allison, despite existing literature, presents his methodological tool as something very new and at the same time very old; so old that is to be attributed to Thucydides. He names his methodological tool "the Thucydides trap". In his words:

Thucydides's Trap is the dangerous dynamic that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power. That is actually, I think, the best lens for understanding what's happening in relations between a rising China and a ruling United States today.

Eventually, the author says that war between the two is not inevitable. [6] But this is not the point. It is difficult to falsify or to argue against anyone's predictions or, better, projections for the future. The first problem is that the phenomenon of cherry-picking a phrase from Thucydides (or any other classical author), separating it from the rest of the text and its historical context, and building one's own argument, continues. The second problem is that Allison is basing his conclusions on a distorted compass (or "lens", as he terms it), that is, the trap, which he attributes to Thucydides.

The compass is distorted for two reasons. First, because the historic analogy used by Allison is wrong. Second, because there is no such thing in Thucydides' text as a trap determining outcomes. If there is a trap, this is related to wrong decision making.

The Unfortunate Analogy

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The wrong analogy is about Sparta and Athens on the one hand, and U.S. and China, correspondingly, on the other. Allison considers that the dominant power was Sparta and Athens was the rising one. This is unfortunate and confusing. First, as today the leading power is the U.S. and not China, the historic record shows that the dominant power in ancient Greece was not Sparta, but Athens. Second, Sparta, for its own reasons, had abandoned the leadership of the Greeks immediately after the Persian Wars, and Athens had officially become the leader of the Delian League since 478 BCE – almost fifty years before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War (431 BCE). And third, historically, it was Sparta (Allison's 'dominant' power) that declared war to Athens (Allison's 'rising' power). Therefore, practically, if his analogy was right and one had to stick with it, he should watch for and enquire over the contending and revisionist behavior of the U.S. and not that of China. Taking the confusing analogy even further, he should consider the U.S. as the actor with propensity to war, who, as a consequence, would also have the burden of political and ethical responsibility for maintaining peace.

If there is an analogy of the duel between Sparta and Athens, this can be made between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. – two powers that reached great power status after WWII, just as Sparta and Athens after the Persian Wars (479 BCE). In fact, this parallel was often made during the Cold War,[7] comparing Athens (a democratic and mostly a naval power) with the U.S., and Sparta (an oligarchic and land power) with the U.S.S.R. The analogy could hold even today with Russia, a former hegemonic power, which, as Sparta in 431 BCE, is trying to reassert itself in order to balance the power and influence of the U.S. in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world.

Perhaps, in addition to overlooking the historical facts and context, Allison was trapped himself by the translation of Thucydides' text that he used, and the understanding of the words *μεγάλους γιγνομένους*, meaning "becoming great" (1.23.6), as "rise". He quotes: "it was the *rise* of Athens and the *fear* that this instilled in Sparta that made the war *inevitable*". These two words were translated by Thomas Hobbes as "the growth of the power of Athens" and, better, by Steven Lattimore (in an American English translation) as the "increasing greatness of Athens".

What does "becoming great" or "increasing greatness" mean in the historical context? It means that Athens had reached that stage of power that, if it increased more, the Hellenic independent city states were risking their freedom. This is the argument the Corinthians, Sparta's allies, are using in the debates within the Peloponnesian alliance in order to convince the reluctant Spartans to go to war. To put it simply, what they were telling them was: it is now or never.

The Spartans were indifferent to hegemony. What they cared about was their freedom and, to a limited extent, their mostly Peloponnesian allies. This is the account given by Thucydides, explaining the decision made by the Spartans to get out of Lacedaemon[8] and fight a war at the then international level:

All these are the actions of the Hellenes against each other and the barbarian that occurred during the fifty years between the retreat of Xerxes and the beginning of the present war: during them the Athenians made their hegemony firmer and advanced their power to a great height. The Lacedaemonians, although aware, opposed it only for a little while, but remained inactive during most of the time, as they were always slow to go to war unless they were in necessity, and at that time they were also hampered by wars at home; until the Athenians' power grew considerably and started harming their alliance. They then felt that they could not postpone it, but that the time had come to undertake with all their heart to destroy the (hostile) power, if they could, by starting the present war (1.118.2).

And this is also the reason why during the war the Spartans were presenting themselves to the other Hellenic cities as those who will liberate them from the Athenian yoke. Therefore, the analogy between Athens-Sparta and U.S.-China made by Allison is wrong. China is not Athens and the U.S. is not Sparta. If one wants to find historic analogies of hegemonic contenders in Ancient Greece, they should consult the history of the 4th century BCE: first, the rise of Thebes against Sparta, and, then, the rise of Macedonia against Thebes and Athens.

China is a rising and revisionist power, trying to position itself in the international system. But then, if one searched for a theoretical basis to examine and analyze the ruling/rising power contest and the possible risks of war, there is no need to use Thucydides. The extensive literature on Power Cycle Theory or on Offensive Realism are there for that

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matter.

The Distorted Compass

The distorted compass is the so-called Thucydides Trap. If one wanted to speak of a trap, this is *not* the one described by Allison. The real trap that Thucydides warns of is different. At first, one has to bear in mind that ancient Greek thinking is multi-causal – not uni-causal such as the dominant thinking of Western modernity. In the text of Thucydides there are at least two theories of war, which are combined with a third. The first is the one discussed here, power competition at the systemic level, presented in Book 1.23.6. The second is hegemonic expansion or classical imperialism, which is stated in 6.6.1. And, the third, which is combined with the previous two, is wrong decision making (4.59.2).

Let us focus on the first. In 1.23.6, Thucydides says that it was first the Athenians' increasing power, which then provoked the fear of Spartans, who, as a result, "were forced" to go to war. The same rationale is clearly repeated in 1.88. Thucydides stresses again the fact that the Spartans decided ("voted") to go to war because "they had to", as "they feared" that the Athenians, who "controlled most of Greece", "would increase their power even more". And the same in 1.118.2, quoted above. It results from the above that in the particular historic moment the decision was not made by fear, but by necessity. Fear would not have existed if the increase of power was not there. Thus, the war between any powers is not inevitable, for as long as they do not feel compelled to go to war.

This way of thinking is in harmony with Thucydides' decision making schema resulting out of 1.75.3, where he maintains that what motivates people or states to decide on power, war and peace are necessity, plus, in the order of qualitative importance within his entire text, interest, fear, and honor. More in detail, Thucydides puts the Athenians to argue that hegemony was offered by the other Greeks out of (systemic) necessity, because the Spartans, even though the Persian (systemic) threat was there, have abandoned it and left the Hellenic cities without leadership (1.75.2).

Hence, the relevant question becomes: who is feeling the necessity, who is judging whether there is necessity to assume leadership or go to war? The answer is given in the next paragraph (1.76.2), with an almost identical phrase. It is here that Thucydides introduces one more variable, the human factor: decisions of power, of war and peace are a matter of human nature, plus, again, interest, fear, and honor.

For Thucydides, as for his preceding Sophists and Hippocratics or his contemporary Euripides, there is no fate! Men hold their fate in their hands! Men are going to fall into the "irrationality" of going to war despite their choices (2.61.1), because of a decision. Humans calculate and cannot be stopped by fear:

nobody is driven to war out of ignorance of its consequences and nobody is deterred by fear, if he believes he will gain more. (War) erupts when one considers that the expected gains are to be greater than the risks, and the other is determined to face the risks rather than tolerate any direct damage to its interests (4.59.2).

Yet, men (may) miscalculate. Why? Well, here are his words that leaders and people should bear in mind if they want to avoid war, one that today risks being a nuclear war. This is definitely the real and ultimate Thucydides trap,

because of boldness caused by the necessity of poverty, (or) because of greed caused by the hubris or the confidence of power, or because of passions that each time more irresistibly possess them in the various circumstances, people take risks. In any case, desire and hope – the one precedes and the other follows, the first is planning the threat, the second submits the idea that luck is going to help – they are the most damaging and, while invisible, they are more powerful from the visible calamities. Together with these, luck does not contribute less to driving people to arrogance; because sometimes luck appears unexpectedly and pushes some to risk with inferior means, and cities (to risk) the greatest goods, such as their freedom or their power, as each person and all together are overestimating their forces. It is simply impossible and very foolish to believe that human nature, when it wishes strongly to do something, can be prevented either by the power of law or by some other fear (3.45.4-7).

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Conclusion

War, if Thucydides is asked, may be avoided. As men can do little about differential power changes, the only trap they can deal with is wrong decision making. Therefore, if there is a possibility to escape war, this is that men, leaders and people, avoid in their decision making those human attitudes which form the real trap the great ancient thinker has warned us about. As for the future of Sino-American relations, nobody knows. What we know, however, as Donald Kagan pointed out, is that the Peloponnesian War “was caused by men who made bad decisions in difficult circumstances. Neither the circumstances nor the decisions were inevitable”[9] As for those who seek authority in Thucydides’ writings, they should proceed with the utmost caution as they may find themselves trapped into abusing Thucydides.[10] Otherwise, they “should stop reading” him.[11]

**This is an extended version of The U.S., China, and the Real “Thucydides’ Trap”*

Notes

[1] Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. General references throughout are made to book, chapter, and verse. All translations in this text are the author’s.

[2] Modelski, G. *Long Cycles in World Politics*. (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1988); Wallerstein, I. *The Capitalist World-Economy*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[3] Kennedy, P. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. (New York, Random House, 1987).

[4] Mearsheimer, J. J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Updated Edition. (New York, W.W. Norton, 2014) pp. 360-401.

[5] Allison, G. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?*. (New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

[6] Allison, *Destined for War*, Introduction.

[7] Aron, R. *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*. (London, Transaction Publishers, 2003/1966).

[8] Spartans did not maintain troops outside Lacedaemon, their territory. Moreover, even in their region, the Peloponnese, their rule was never complete, as it was always contested by the Argives.

[9] Kagan, D. *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*. (London, Cornell University, 1969).

[10] Johnson Bagby, L. M. ‘The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations’, *International Organization*, 48 (1994) pp. 131-153.

[11] Welch, D. A. ‘Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides’, *Review of International Studies*, 29 (2003) pp. 301-319.

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