

The US, China and the Real Thucydides Trap

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ILIAS KOUSKOUVELIS, JUL 16 2017

During the last decade there has been a lot of discussion among international relations experts and foreign policy analysts on whether the rise of China as a major international player could lead to a confrontation with the United States. Most recently, with China's activities in the South China Sea, the Korean peninsula crisis, and the new U.S. administration, this discussion was reanimated. The debate was also fueled by Graham Allison and his question, that is, whether the U.S. and China may avoid what he called the "Thucydides trap", and not go to war. Further, it was reported that Allison briefed President Donald Trump's National Security Council on what Thucydides and his work could teach them about U.S.-China relations. The same author says that war between the two is not inevitable. The answer is correct, not just because a person of his academic authority says so, but simply because the content of the so-called "trap", attributed to Thucydides, is not right. The real trap, the one Thucydides warns for more than 2.400 years now, is different than that described by Allison.

The phenomenon of international politics students turning to ancient thinkers, such as Thucydides, in order to find answers in strategic matters, is not new. What authors often do is pick a phrase from Thucydides, separate it from the rest of the text, and build an argument, which projects rather their ideas than those of the classical author. This is precisely the case with the so-called "Thucydides trap". Obviously, the work of Thucydides belongs to everyone; and everybody may use it and build upon it. Yet, a few things need to be respected, if the "trap" to go to war is linked with the name of Thucydides, and, most important, if it is linked with the possibility of a war between two major and, in this case, nuclear actors.

At first, one needs to bear in mind that ancient Greek thinking is multi-causal and not uni-causal, as the thinking of Western modernity. Therefore, maintaining initially that just the fear of a competitor's growing power could lead to war, may be seen as cherry picking; and, afterwards, saying that "Thucydides does not really mean inevitable" may appear as inconsistency.

In the sentence of 1.23.6, Thucydides says that it was first the growth of the Athenian power, which then provoked the fear of Spartans, who, as a result, "were forced" to go to war. The same rationale is repeated in 1.88. Thucydides stresses again the fact that the Spartans decided ("voted") to go to war because "they had to" at that moment, as "they feared" that the Athenians, who controlled most of Greece, "would increase their power even more". It results from the above that in the particular historic moment the decision was not made by fear, but by necessity. Therefore, 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 the Thucydides decision making schema resulting out of 1.75.3, where he maintains that what motivates people or states to decide on war and peace are necessity, plus, in the order of importance within his entire text, interest, fear, and honor.

Hence, the relevant question becomes: who is feeling the necessity, who is judging whether there is necessity to go to war? The answer is given in the next paragraph (1.76.2), with an almost identical phrase, where he introduces the human factor: decisions of war and peace are a matter of human nature (plus, again, interest, fear, and honor). For Thucydides, there is no fate. Men hold their fate in their hands. Men are going to fall into the "irrationality" (2.61.1) of war because of a decision. Humans calculate:

nobody is driven to war out of ignorance of its consequences and nobody is deterred by fear, if he believes he will

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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).

War, if Thucydides is asked, may be avoided. All is needed is that men, leaders and people, avoid in their decision making those human attitudes which may lead them to the real trap the great ancient thinker has warned us about. And, this is what Allison should have advised members in President Trumps' National Security Council.

About the author:

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