



Article

Unravelling the Thucydides' Trap: Inadvertent Escalation or War of Choice?

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Abstract

No other text in the intellectual history of International Relations has become as frequent a victim of confirmation bias and selective presentism as has Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Most recently, misinterpretations of the classical treatise have engendered the popular catchphrase, "the Thucydides' Trap", and thinkers and politicians' resultant drawing of erroneous parallels between the Peloponnesian War and current Sino-US relations. This article seeks to deconstruct the Thucydides' Trap core thematic of inadvertent escalation, and to outline the logic of hegemonic transition as it is actually expounded by Thucydides. Although Thucydides is the first thinker in the West clearly to identify the significance of structure in interstate affairs, his hegemonic transition theory is complex rather than purely systemic. Thucydides thus dedicates most of his work to assessing the strategic decisions made in fervid political debates, evidencing his perception of polity and politics as key elements that dynamically interact with structural conditions to effectuate strategic choice. Consequently, the Peloponnesian War was not an outcome of inadvertent escalation, but of premeditated strategic choices made by adversaries with clashing policy objectives. Therefore, within the structural constraints, it is on *leadership and strategy that Thucydides puts a premium*, and hence prioritizes *prudence* (*Sophrosyne* Σωφροσύνη) as the most consequential virtue of statesmanship. Building on the Thucydidean logic of hegemonic transition, we conclude by presenting six strategic corollaries of contemporary Sino-US relations, remaining attentively cognizant at all times of the limitations of historical analogies, and abiding by *ex antiquis et novissimis optima*.

Introduction

When, in 5th-century BCE Athens, Thucydides, son of Olorus, audaciously declared that his eight-volume *History of the Peloponnesian War*¹ “is compiled rather for an everlasting possession than to be rehearsed for a prize”,² he could have never foreseen that more than two millennia later some of the world’s finest scholars would refer to his work in an effort to conceptualize the strategic interaction between the United States and China. Yet, Thucydides’ coverage of the war between the Spartan-led Peloponnesian League and the Athenian-led Delian League has captivated not only academia, but also the highest echelons of power. Chinese president Xi Jinping and former US president Barack Obama, along with current senior officials from China and the United States, have all referred to Thucydides, either to attest to or refute the “inevitability of conflict” between a ruling power and a rising challenger.³

It would not be an overstatement to assert that Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* has become one of the most cited primary sources in the

- 1 We cite the ancient text based on the usual system for primary sources: Book number, followed by paragraph number. We have used Loeb’s Classical Library Edition to access the ancient text: Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956). Thomas Hobbes’ English translation of the Greek original is used throughout the text when we quote verbatim. Richard Schlatter, *Hobbes’s Thucydides* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1975). For a thorough discussion of the difference that translation makes to Thucydides see Emily Greenwood, “On Translating Thucydides”, in Christine Lee and Neville Morley, eds., *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides* (Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), pp. 91–120. For useful historical companions and supportive background materials that help clarify and advance key points in Thucydides, please consult Arnold W. Gomme, Antony Andrewes and Kenneth Dover, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972–81), Vols. 1–8; Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), Vol. 1; David Cartwright, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).
- 2 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22. The original Greek term is “κτῆμα ἐς αἰῶν” (ktêma es aiei); Kurt A. Raaflaub, “Ktêma es aiei: Thucydides’ Concept of “Learning through History” and Its Realization in His Work”, in Antonis Tsakmakis and Melina Tamiolaki, eds., *Thucydides between History and Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), p. 3.
- 3 Kori Schake is rightfully critical of senior political figures’ misreading of Thucydides. See Kori Schake, “The Summer of Misreading Thucydides”, *The Atlantic*, 18 July, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/the-summer-of-misreading-thucydides/533859/>; Michael Crowley, “Why the White House Is Reading Greek History”, *Politico*, 21 June, 2017, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/21/why-the-white-house-is-reading-greek-history-215287; Xi Jinping, “Speech at the Welcoming Dinner Hosted by Local Governments and Friendly Organizations in the United States”, 22 September, 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpdmgjxgsfwbcxhlhgcl70znxlfh/t1305429.shtml.

history of the International Relations discipline.⁴ Since the early modern epoch, Thucydides has been a teacher to towering figures such as Hobbes, Lincoln, Marshall, and even Lenin.⁵ To paraphrase James Der Derian, “the ghost of Thucydides has never gone away”.⁶ Yet one problem often arises; Thucydides has become an easy victim of confirmation bias—the proclivity to focus discriminately on and recall information in a way that confirms one’s own presumptions.⁷ Thus, modern scholars have often selectively interpreted Thucydides’ work to model pressing strategic puzzles of their era and to expand the political influence of their views.⁸ For instance, America’s Vietnam War fiasco was seen as analogous to the Athenian catastrophe in Sicily. Imperial overextension theory soon arose, and eminent scholars argued that Thucydides’ Book VI, which eloquently describes the debate in Athens leading to that disastrous expedition, constituted the culmination of Thucydides’ work.⁹ By the mid-1970s certain American

- 4 For the influence of Thucydides in the modern IR academy, the literature is vast, but for a good synopsis see: Edward Keene, “The Reception of Thucydides in the History of International Relations”, in Christine Lee and Neville Morley, eds., *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides* (Malden MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015); Robert Gilpin, “The Theory of Hegemonic War”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1988), pp. 591–613; Lowell S. Gustafson, *Thucydides’ Theory of International Relations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2000).
- 5 See Laurie M. Johnson, *Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Interpretation of Realism* (Illinois: Northern University Press, 1993); Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: the Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012); Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: the Limits of Political Realism* (University of California Press, 1998). As Crane puts it, “even George Marshall explicitly pointed out the resemblance between the emerging Cold War and the tensions between Athens and Sparta”. Thucydides’ thought has not only influenced American conservative thinkers from Strauss to Kagan, but also cosmopolitan communists, even Lenin himself. See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001); Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964).
- 6 James der Derian, “A Reinterpretation of Realism”, in James der Derian, ed., *International Theory* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 382.
- 7 Scott Plous, *The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), p. 233.
- 8 Andrew R. Novo and Jay M. Parker, *Restoring Thucydides: Testing Familiar Lessons and Deriving New Ones* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2020), pp. 172, 17; Keene, “The Reception of Thucydides in the History of International Relations”, pp. 17–9.
- 9 Stanfield Turner, “Address to the Chicago Council”, Chicago Council Navy League of the United States, Chicago, 9 March, 1973, p. 3, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01554R003500280001-7.pdf>; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the history of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 221.

theorists, convinced that Soviet influence had become cataclysmic, appealed to Thucydides in raising alarm that the United States was on track to losing the Cold War, since Sparta, an oligarchic power akin to the Soviet Union, had defeated Athens, a democracy similar to the United States.¹⁰ In the post-Cold War era, some even cited Thucydides during the congressional debate that preceded the Gulf War, using yet again the facile analogy of Athens' Sicilian expedition. Later still, others invoked Thucydides to object to the War in Afghanistan.¹¹

Thucydides, although easily and excessively quoted, is not thoroughly read.¹² Consequently a selective examination of Thucydides—by theorists aiming to win the political “applause of the moment”¹³—not only distorts the didactic insights present in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, but may also lead to what cognitive scientists frame as an “availability cascade”, which is “a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation by which an expressed perception triggers a chain reaction that gives the perception increasing plausibility through its rising availability in public discourse”.¹⁴ In other words, repeat something often enough and it will become true. Such a danger resides in Graham Allison's recent popularization of the so-called “Thucydides' Trap”—an oversimplistic structural explanation of the causes of the war between Athens and Sparta.¹⁵ Allison uses this facile analogy to evaluate the ominous securitization between China and the United States which, according to him, makes a war all the more possible due to

- 10 As American diplomat Alan Misenheimer has put it, “Scholars have discerned Thucydidean paradigms in dozens of large and small wars throughout history, including the Vietnam War, Cold War, World Wars I and II, the American Civil War, and even a mid-19th century conflict between rival kingdoms in Fiji.” Alan G. Misenheimer, “Thucydides, Benghazi and Honor”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 70, 3rd Quarter, 2013, p. 67. Also see Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Viking Press, 2003), pp. XXV–XXVII; J. E. Lendon, *Song of Wrath: The Peloponnesian War Begins* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. 25. For a general overview of how Thucydides has influenced the foreign policy opinions of American conservatives see the excellent work of John Bloxham, *Ancient Greece and American Conservatism: Classical Influence on the Modern Right* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), Chapter 5.
- 11 George Bornstein, “Reading Thucydides in America Today”, *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 123, No. 4 (Fall 2015), pp. 661, 667.
- 12 Clausewitz also suffers from being quoted too much but read too little.
- 13 Thucydides 1.22.
- 14 Timur Kuran and Cass Sunstein, “Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation”, *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1999), p. 199.
- 15 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). In the words of a critic of the “Thucydides' Trap”, perhaps a more appropriate term would be the “Allison trap”. Alan G. Misenheimer, *Thucydides' Other “Traps”: the United States, China and the Prospect of the “Inevitable” War* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), p. 28.

what he calls “loss of control”, “inadvertent escalation”, and “sleepwalking into conflict”.¹⁶

To be sure, Allison is an influential thinker of the post-World War II (WWII) generation, and has made pivotal contributions to the theory of International Relations.¹⁷ Yet his effort to draw contemporary analogies through the selective referencing of a few lines of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, a classic Greek text written in one of the most complex dialects of ancient Greek,¹⁸ misses Thucydides’ “essential richness in favour of false rigour”.¹⁹ What results is the concept known as “the Thucydides’ Trap” whereby, Allison argues, on account of the structure of the interstate system, when one great power threatens to displace another, war is usually the result of inadvertent escalation. This assertion, however, distorts Thucydides’ own logic, which not only examines the structure of the interstate system, but also looks to sub-systemic human factors, such as leadership and political agency, as shapers of strategic behaviour.²⁰ The overly

- 16 For a critique along these grounds see, among others, Jonathan Kirshner, “Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right”, *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2018), pp. 1–24; Jonathan Kirshner, “Offensive Realism, Thucydides Traps, and the Tragedy of Unforced Errors: Classical Realism and US–China Relations”, *China International Strategy Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2019), pp. 51–63; Andrew R. Novo and Jay M. Parker, *Restoring Thucydides*; Alan G. Misenheimer, *Thucydides’ Other “Traps.”*
- 17 Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).
- 18 In fact, the Greek prose in Thucydides is much more complex than the Homeric language, which preceded Thucydides by about four centuries and poses great challenges for translators. For a discussion of the complexity of Thucydidean language see Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London: Duckworth Company Limited, 1972), pp. 54–5.
- 19 Novo and Parker, *Restoring Thucydides*, p. 174.
- 20 As Athanassios Platias and Constantinos Koliopoulos have put it, while the structure is indeed present in Thucydides, the Athenian historiographer also addresses the impact of polity and, most importantly, leadership. In modern International Relations jargon, Thucydides addresses all three levels of analysis. Yet, scholars tend to isolate extracts from Thucydides that focus on the level of analysis that mostly support their arguments. Athanassios Platias and Constantinos Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on Strategy: Grand Strategies in the Peloponnesian War and their Relevance Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). For a similar argument see Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism and Socialism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Gideon Rose argues that this Thucydidean approach is the foundation of Neoclassical Realism. Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy”, *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1998), pp. 144–72. See also Ilias Kouskouvelis, *Thucydides on Choice and Decision Making: Why War is not Inevitable* (New York, N.Y.: Lexington Books, 2019); Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Inevitability and War”, in Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller, eds., *The Next Great War: The Roots of World War I and the Risks of a China-US Conflict* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), pp. 182–5. For an excellent typology of Realist schools see: Liu Feng and Zhang Ruizhuang, “The Typologies of Realism”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2006), pp. 109–34.

systemic concept of “the Thucydides’ Trap”, with its erroneous focus on structural determinism and inadvertent escalation, has created an “availability cascade”, and hence become a fixation in the way laymen think about Sino-US relations.²¹ It is important, therefore, to frame the Thucydidean logic of hegemonic transition factually, and to facilitate an informed contemporary strategic debate that may help to inspire creative diplomatic action at a time of intensifying Sino-US securitization.²²

This article proceeds as follows: first, it addresses serious misrepresentations of Thucydides’ classical treatise in Allison’s argumentation about inadvertent escalation and hegemonic transition. At times “lost in translation”, the “Thucydides’ Trap” thus misrepresents important nuances of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In other instances, the concept is “lost in history”, and fails to evaluate the dynamics of the Greek interstate system during the Penticontaetia.²³ It moreover misses the informed lessons that Thucydides himself draws in relation to the nature of Athenian power—a second image non-structural variable. Secondly, our analysis draws as closely as possible from Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* to present authoritatively the Thucydidean logic of hegemonic transition. Thucydides has been widely identified as the first “power transition theorist”,²⁴ yet structural variables constitute only a subset of his theory. Hence, Thucydides is not a systemic but a complex realist, and has accordingly been rightfully framed as the founder of Classical Realism.²⁵ Finally, we present six strategic corollaries offering clear-cut policy advice to contemporary Sino-US relations. We aim to provide strategic advice based

21 Michael Crowley, “Why the White House Is Reading Greek History”, *Politico*, 21 June, 2017, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/21/why-the-white-house-is-reading-greek-history-215287.

22 One of the first scholars to notice the problem of a selective interpretation of Thucydides in IR theory is Laurie M. Johnson Bagby. Although the overall critique is sound, Bagby, however, ends up making a subjective constructivist interpretation of Thucydidean morality, arguing that, for Thucydides, morality was categorical and hence that realism is what statesmen make of it, or even an epiphenomenon to ideological beliefs. We disagree with that interpretation. Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, “The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations”, *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1994), pp. 131–53.

23 Penticontaetia refers to the 50-year period between the end of the Persian wars and the outbreak of the major Peloponnesian War. Thucydides 1.89 – 1.117. For a comprehensive analysis see Tim Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 205–25; Lisa Kallett, “The Pentecontaetia”, in Ryan K. Balot, Sara Forsdyke and Edith Foster, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 63–80.

24 See Gilpin, “The Theory of Hegemonic War”.

25 Michael Doyle, “Thucydidean Realism”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1990), pp. 223–37.

upon a factual investigation of Thucydides' highly didactic history and his unmatched strategic insight.²⁶ An attentive and felicitous reading of Thucydides demonstrates that preventing a war of hegemonic transition in the 21st century depends at least as much on *self-restraint* and *strategic prudence* as it does on *deterrence*—outcomes evidently determined by the strategic agency. Consequently, conflict is not a foregone conclusion, as arguments about “sleepwalking” into war may otherwise imply.