

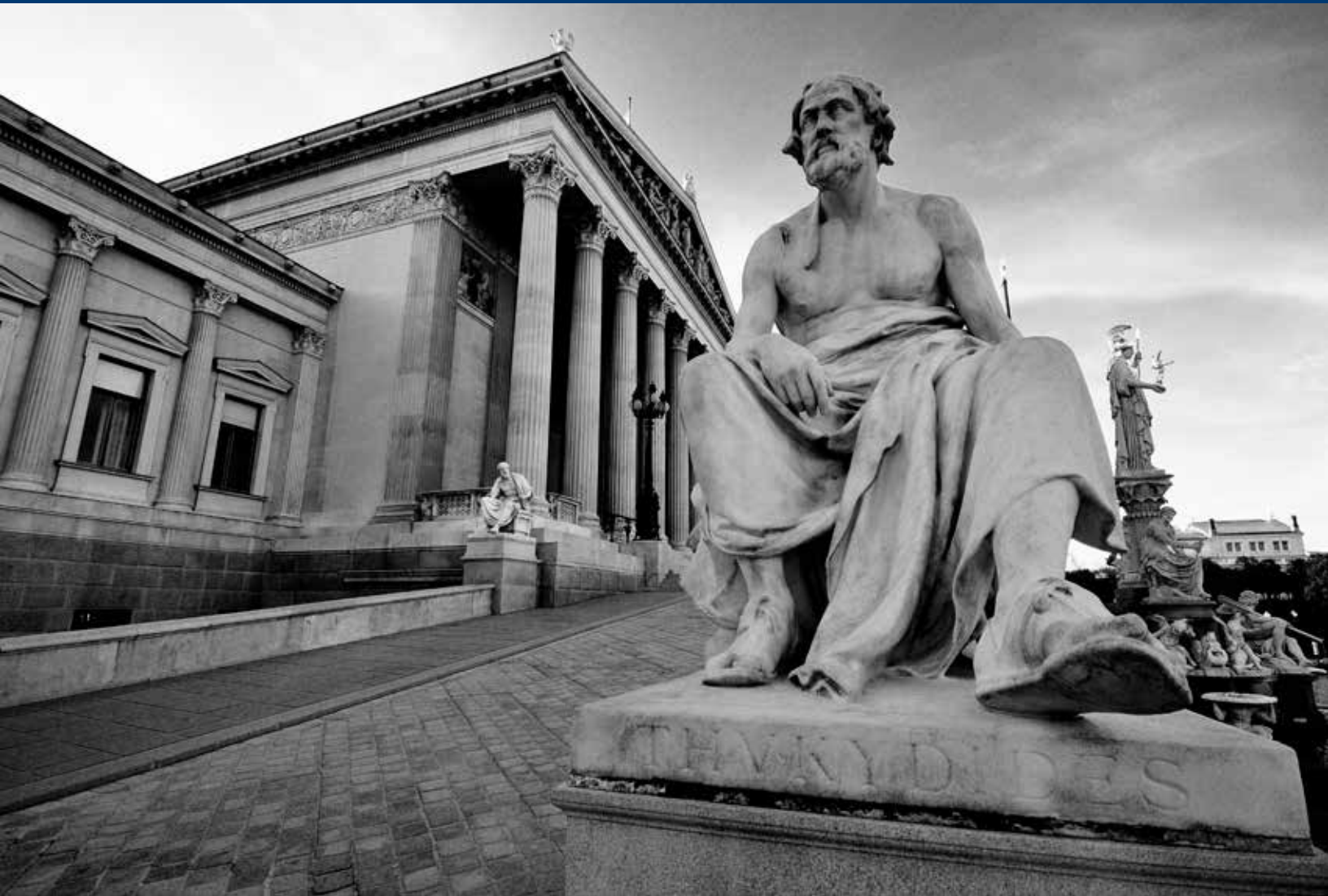


CASE STUDY  
National War College  
National Defense University

# Thucydides' Other "Traps"

## The United States, China, and the Prospect of "Inevitable" War

by Alan Greeley Misenheimer



**National War College**  
National Defense University

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**Cover**

Statue of Greek historian and author Thucydides in front of Austrian parliament building, April 29, 2010, in Vienna, Austria (Courtesy Chris JL)

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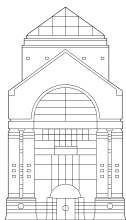


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Case Study*



**NDU  
Press**

National Defense University Press

Washington, D.C.

June 2019



Thucydides, historian of the ancient conflict between Athens and Sparta, counsels the modern strategist, not on the “inevitability” of conflict between great powers today, but on elements of leadership and political dynamic that can bear positively *or* negatively on the national command decisions that lead to war (or not) and shape its outcome.





*That war is an evil is a proposition so familiar to everyone that it would be tedious to develop it. No one is forced to engage in it by ignorance, or kept out of it by fear, if he fancies there is anything to be gained by it.*

—Hermocrates of Syracuse

[Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 4.59.2]

*Unlike other emergent countries, China wants to be China and accepted as such, not as an honorary member of the West. The Chinese will want to share this century as co-equals with the United States.*

—Lee Kuan Yew, September 2011

**Socrates:** *Then a slice of our neighbors' land will be wanted by us for pasture and tillage, and they will want a slice of ours, if, like ourselves, they exceed the limit of necessity, and give themselves up to the unlimited accumulation of wealth?*

**Glaucon:** *Most certainly.*

**Socrates:** *And so we shall go to war, Glaucon. Shall we not?*

**Glaucon:** *That, Socrates, will be inevitable.*

—Plato, *The Republic*, Book II

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Clayton Sharb, a 2016 intern at the Institute for the Study of War, contributed to the research for this case study.

First printing, June 2019

## Contents

Introduction .....	1
From the Aegean to the South (and East) China Sea .....	4
Reactions to the Thucydides Trap .....	7
Power Transition Theory before the Thucydides Trap .....	9
What Does Thucydides <i>Actually</i> Say about the Origins of the War? .....	10
In Search of Causality and Necessity: <i>Aitiai</i> and <i>Prophasis</i> .....	15
Fear, Honor, and Interest, and Thucydides' other "Traps" .....	18
Trap 1: National Character .....	19
Trap 2: Governing System .....	20
Trap 3: Domestic Tranquility .....	21
Trap 4: Economic Power .....	22
Trap 5: Leaders .....	23
Trap 6: Allies and Alliances .....	26
Trap 7: The Role of Tykē (Chance) in Peace and War .....	28
Assessing the "Allison Trap" .....	28
Conclusions: Destined for Difficult Diplomacy, Not for War .....	34

Geography, History, Destiny .....	37
Appendix .....	41
Notes .....	43
About the Author .....	62

## Introduction

The notion of a "Thucydides Trap" that will ensnare China and the United States in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century conflict—much as the rising power of Athens alarmed Sparta and made war "inevitable" between the Aegean superpowers of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE—has received global attention since entering the international relations lexicon 6 years ago. Scholars, journalists, bloggers, and politicians in many countries, notably China, have embraced this beguiling metaphor, coined by Harvard political science professor Graham Allison, as a framework for examining the likelihood of a Sino-American war. As Allison summarizes the concept,

*When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, alarm bells should sound, extreme danger ahead. This is a big insight earned for us by Thucydides. And Thucydides said, famously, it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable. This was the war between Athens and Sparta that basically destroyed classical Greece.<sup>1</sup>*

Allison's active promotion has given Thucydides (ca. 460–ca. 399 BCE), historian of the Peloponnesian War, new cachet as a sage of U.S.-China relations. References in academic journals, politicians' speeches, and political cartoons have become ubiquitous across the Indo-Pacific region. Allison examines this historical metaphor at length in his May 2017 book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*

This case study examines the Thucydides Trap metaphor and the response it has elicited. Hewing closely to what the historian of the Peloponnesian War *actually* says about the causes and inevitability of war, it argues that, while Thucydides' text does not support Allison's normative assertion about the "inevitable" result of an encounter between "rising" and "ruling" powers, the *History of the Peloponnesian War* (hereafter, *History*) does identify elements of leadership and political dynamic that bear directly on whether a clash of interests between two states is resolved through peaceful means or escalates to war. It is precisely because war typically begins with a considered decision by a national command authority to reject other options and mobilize for conflict (and thus always entails an element of *choice*) that insight from Thucydides' *History* remains relevant and beneficial for the contemporary strategist, or citizen, concerned in such decisions.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, this case study concludes that the Thucydides Trap, as conceived and presented by Graham Allison, draws welcome attention both to Thucydides and to the pitfalls of great power competition, but fails as a heuristic device or predictive tool in the analysis of

contemporary events. Allison's metaphor offers, at best, a potentially misleading over-simplification of Thucydides' nuanced and problematic account of the origins of the epochal conflict that defined his age. Moreover, it overlooks actual insights from the *History* that can help political decisionmakers—including, but not limited to, those of the United States and China—either avoid war or, if ignored, pose genuine policy “traps” that can make an avoidable war more likely, and a necessary war more costly.

An old adage defines *war* as God's way of teaching us geography, and experience shows that anxiety over *potential war* can be equally instructive.<sup>3</sup> The 1954 Taiwan Strait Crisis taught American voters the location and strategic significance of the previously little-known island groups of Quemoy and Matsu, a geography lesson that helped persuade them to elect Dwight Eisenhower to a second term. Lingering tensions after the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis made the islands a hot topic in the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates. Kennedy's confident articulation of a nuanced position—supporting nationalist China but refusing to commit U.S. forces to protect tiny islands within range of mainland China's artillery—helped tip the election against Nixon, whose pledge to protect Quemoy and Matsu as a matter of principle was widely judged too bellicose.<sup>4</sup>

The 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis again drew global attention to China's regional relations and territorial claims. In dispatching a U.S. carrier battle group to the region, U.S. Defense Secretary William J. Perry issued a tough public declaration: “Beijing should know . . . that while they are a great military power, the premier—the strongest—military power in the Western Pacific is the United States.”<sup>5</sup> Arduous diplomacy defused the crisis and U.S.-Chinese relations in time resumed a positive footing. In fact, as the likelihood of conflict receded, the massive growth of two-way exchange transformed the U.S.-China bilateral relationship in ways that neither Eisenhower, nor Kennedy or Nixon could have foreseen.

Bilateral trade in goods burgeoned from \$63.5 billion in 1996 to a staggering \$599 billion in 2015. As a result, export-led growth transformed China's domestic economy as the country's middle class grew from 4 percent of the population in 2004 to 54 percent in 2012.<sup>6</sup> With a 15.9 percent share of America's global trade, China surpassed Canada to become the largest U.S. trading partner for the first time in 2016 (which also marked the 5<sup>th</sup> consecutive year in which the U.S. trade deficit with China topped \$300 billion).<sup>7</sup> Over the same 20-year period, China pursued a military buildup and a regional security policy that can be understood in large measure as a sustained effort to alter the power calculus behind Perry's tough message in 1996.

In recent years, Beijing's assertive actions in support of its enormous maritime claims in the South China and East China seas have confronted Washington with urgent new geography lessons. From remote survey stations in the Spratly/Nansha group in the mid-1990s, China

has gradually expanded the scale and permanence of its offshore presence. In December 2013, China began extensive dredging and land reclamation efforts in support of its claims to three island groups in the South China Sea—the Spratly Islands, the Paracel/Xisha Islands, and the submerged Zhongsha Islands, which for China includes both the Macclesfield Bank and the Scarborough Shoal—and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. Regional states, most allied with the United States, have protested China's mounting pressure tactics—including direct naval action—to assert control and restrict international access to disputed small features like Mischief Reef.<sup>8</sup> Years of diplomatic engagement with Beijing by its maritime neighbors, including Brunei, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, have not slowed the Chinese drive to solidify its influence over the entire region.

The July 2016 international tribunal ruling against China's maritime claims in the South China Sea and the subsequent policy lurch toward China and away from the United States by mercurial Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte have generated new uncertainties. The fact that two disputed territories, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (Japan) and the Scarborough Shoal (Philippines), are covered by U.S. bilateral defense treaties adds sensitive red lines to the regional map. Despite the enormous volume of U.S.-China bilateral trade and investment, the palpable expansion of Chinese economic and military power in the South China and the East China seas thus raises inescapable concerns about the potential for escalation and conflict.

President Donald Trump's extended visit to the Indo-Pacific region—including stops in China, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines (for the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN]), and Vietnam (for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation [APEC] economic leaders meeting and CEO Summit)—brought renewed international attention to the Thucydides Trap metaphor at the end of 2017, even as regional concerns over island-building appeared to recede.

During a year in which escalating tensions over North Korea's nuclear program and missile tests dominated the news, China managed to dampen the furor over its island-building program, which now includes 7 outposts in the Spratlys and 20 in the Paracels, by projecting an image of goodwill toward its smaller maritime neighbors. Growing regional travel by Chinese tourists and investments under the rubric of the \$900 billion "One Belt, One Road" initiative proved an effective palliative after escalating tensions through the preceding 3 years. While Chinese investment in far-flung port infrastructure construction and management is gradually altering the daily environment for sea-going traffic across a vast expanse of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Beijing also ended 6 years of stalling talks toward a long-sought ASEAN code

of conduct designed to avoid clashes at sea. The negotiations, which will not address conflicting claims of maritime sovereignty, are set to resume in early 2018.

While China has repeatedly claimed that its dredging and reclamation projects ended in June 2015, reporting by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative indicates that the Chinese continue to reclaim land in the Paracels, including recent work at Tree Island and North Island.<sup>9</sup> Some perceived that the interaction of U.S. and Chinese naval assets in the disputed regions had “settled into a comfortable groove,” but the continuing Chinese buildup of capabilities on its new island outposts—including repair of damage inflicted by Typhoon Sarika in October 2016 at multiple sites and the arrival of fighter jets on Woody Island, the primary Chinese base in the Paracels—perpetuated uncertainty over Chinese intentions and the ominous long-term implications of the Thucydides Trap.<sup>10</sup>

### **From the Aegean to the South (and East) China Sea**

*New York Times* correspondent David Sanger, in a wide-ranging commentary on Chinese President Hu Jintao’s January 2011 visit to the United States, was the first to use the term “Thucydides Trap” in print:

*While no official would dare say so publicly as President Hu Jintao bounced from the White House to meetings with business leaders to factories in Chicago last week, his visit, from both sides’ points of view, was all about managing China’s rise and defusing the fears that it triggers. Both Mr. Hu and President Obama seemed desperate to avoid what Graham Allison of Harvard University has labeled “the Thucydides Trap”—that deadly combination of calculation and emotion that, over the years, can turn healthy rivalry into antagonism or worse.*<sup>11</sup>

Sanger cited vivid examples of the way mutual fear and mistrust limited scope for improving U.S.-China bilateral relations, including the fact that a special Sino-American partnership, the “Group of Two” (G-2)—“a fantasy among some . . . that the world would soon be run by joint action between Beijing and Washington”<sup>12</sup>—had failed to materialize following the 2007 election of Barack Obama. Worse, rising tensions now threatened to spring the Thucydides Trap and spark war. A week later the *Times* hailed the term as a “newly newsworthy” entry in the foreign affairs lexicon.<sup>13</sup> Princeton political theorist Joseph Nye invoked Thucydides in similar terms a few months later in discussing his new book *The Future of Power*.<sup>14</sup>



The onset of large-scale Chinese dredging and artificial island-building in late 2013 made the trap appear all the more credible. In late 2015, U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander Scott Swift expressed concerns that were widely held across the region: "My concern is that after many decades of peace and prosperity, we may be seeing the leading edge of a return of 'might makes it right' to the region." In response, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman expressed China's good intentions and blamed rising tension on others: "Certain countries are exaggerating tensions in the South China Sea region, which is in reality to create confusion and meddle in the South China Sea. China is resolutely opposed to this." A Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman went further: "At the same time, [they are] wantonly expressing remarks to create tensions, in an attempt to sow confusion and muddy the waters." Comments by regional observers on the "Rising Dragon" and the "Wounded Eagle" in the Indo-Pacific region both reflected and seemed to validate the Thucydides Trap metaphor.<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand, China's expanding global economic heft could potentially be seen as a positive manifestation of mutually beneficial trade ties and also as a powerful, perhaps insurmountable, disincentive to war. Indeed, without resorting to the rosy optimism of Norman Angell, it seems worth noting that U.S.-China economic interdependence could hardly be more dissimilar to the nature of relations between ancient Athens and Sparta.<sup>16</sup> The Athenians dominated Aegean commerce and finance, while Sparta's subsistence economy did not even make use of currency. Globalization as a centripetal force drawing mutually dependent states toward a common center would be unimaginable to an ancient Greek. Sparta did not depend on commercial supply chains originating in Athens and, as Karl Eikenberry wryly points out, "Athens did not hold \$1 trillion dollars' worth of Spartan treasury notes."<sup>17</sup> Economic linkage does not preclude conflict, but it is not reasonable to assume, as Allison would have it, that future relations between Washington and Beijing will be shaped by the influence of Fear alone, without regard for Honor or—above all—Interest.

On the other hand, the disdain for international law manifest in China's island-building is widely seen as consonant with confrontational realist politics and the Thucydides Trap.<sup>18</sup> Recognizing the obvious potential for a U.S.-Chinese naval clash through miscalculation if not by design (not unlike the ever-present risk of a similar clash between U.S. and Iranian naval assets in the Gulf since the 1979 Iranian Revolution), many experts seemed to accept the soundness of the Thucydides Trap concept without pausing to consult Thucydides on the matter.

Allison has continued to promote and flesh out the Thucydides Trap concept over the past 6 years. Writing in the *Financial Times* in August 2012, he offered a troubling conclusion:

*The defining question about global order in the decades ahead will be: Can China and the United States escape Thucydides's trap? The historian's metaphor reminds us of the dangers two parties face when a rising power rivals a ruling power—as Athens did in 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and Germany did at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most such challenges have ended in war. Peaceful cases required huge adjustments in the attitudes and actions of the governments and the societies . . . involved.*<sup>19</sup>

Allison notes, furthermore, that peaceful outcomes are uncommon. Based on the Belfer Center's review of the past five centuries, "If we were betting on the basis of history, the answer to the question about Thucydides's trap appears obvious. In 11 of 15 cases since 1500 where a rising power emerged to challenge a ruling power, war occurred." Writing in the *New York Times* in 2013, he linked the challenge directly to the first U.S. visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping: "Can Mr. Obama and Mr. Xi successfully defy those odds?"<sup>20</sup>

Though he offers neither analysis of the decisionmaking mechanism that led to a war decision by either side in those precedent cases, nor a convincing explanation of why the supposedly paradigmatic Belfer list is (a) restricted to the past five centuries and (b) heavily weighted toward European conflicts (ignoring, for example, well-chronicled older wars of China, Japan, and the Middle East), Allison cites two crucial variables—*rise* and *fear*—as the dynamic factors that drove Athens and Sparta to war and are all but certain to do the same with Beijing and Washington in our time:

*Thucydides went to the heart of the matter, focusing on the inexorable, structural stress caused by a rapid shift in the balance of power between two rivals. Note that Thucydides identified two key drivers of this dynamic: the rising power's growing entitlement, sense of importance, and demand for greater say and sway, on the one hand, and the fear, insecurity, and determination to defend the status quo this engenders in the established power, on the other.*<sup>21</sup>

For Allison, the prospect of an epochal *sorpasso*, as China's national power is seen to surpass that of the United States, thus poses a grave danger that could assume multiple forms:

*Thucydides' Trap refers to the natural, inevitable, inescapable discombobulation that accompanies a tectonic shift in the relative power of a rising and ruling state. Under such conditions, unexpected actions by third parties that would otherwise*

*be manageable can provide a spark that leads to results neither major competitor would have chosen.*<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly, Allison calls on “leaders in both China and the U.S. [to] begin talking to each other much more candidly about likely confrontations and flash points, [and] . . . making substantial adjustments to accommodate the irreducible requirements of the other.”<sup>23</sup> Absent such a course correction, his prognosis is grim: “On the current trajectory, war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment.” In fact, “Judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not.”<sup>24</sup>

In the same *Atlantic* essay in September 2015, Allison noted the addition of a sixteenth precedent case to the Belfer Center database, boosting the ratio of “war” to “no war” outcomes from 11/15 to 12/16. He also identified a broad parallel between the great power rivalry in Europe that set the stage for World War I and the contemporary China/U.S. dynamic in the Indo-Pacific region. Allison places heavy emphasis on the remarkable growth of Chinese wealth and influence over recent decades as a threat to American power, asserting that the rise of China poses a regional security challenge “of genuinely Thucydidean proportions.”<sup>25</sup> While acknowledging that a Sino-American war seems improbable at present, he emphasized that the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War I should remind us of “man’s capacity for folly.”<sup>26</sup> Six years of sustained promotion of the Thucydides Trap metaphor culminated in the May 2017 publication of *Destined for War*.

## Reactions to the Thucydides Trap

As trade patterns and economic statistics, along with island development in the South and East China seas, have kept the evolving U.S.-China relationship at the forefront of world attention over the past 6 years, Allison’s metaphor has become a fixture in expert commentary and analysis around the world. In Washington, government officials, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey, embraced it at once: “I think that one of my jobs as Chairman, and as an adviser to our senior leaders, is to help avoid a Thucydides trap. We don’t want the fear of a rising China to make war inevitable, so we are going to avoid Thucydides’ trap.”<sup>27</sup> Many American officials have expressed similar sentiments over recent years.

Among dozens of thoughtful commentaries by American observers and analysts, former World Bank Chairman Robert Zoellick has set the highest mark to date for intellectual rigor and diplomatic finesse. His speeches and articles tacitly suggest a parallel between the Thucydides Trap concept and the call by Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2011 for “a new model of great

power relations” as the key to positive U.S.-China relations going forward. He introduced the phrase during a visit to the United States in 2012, and his successor, Xi Jinping, adopted it as his own at the Sunnylands Summit with President Obama in 2013. The Thucydides Trap idea focuses on an adjustment in U.S.-China bilateral relations, and the “new model” catchphrase provides a framework for discussing what that adjustment might entail. Zoellick suggests possible elements the new model might include, stressing above all the necessity of an overarching commitment by both countries to maintaining the broad lines of the international economic order defined by the Washington Consensus. Zoellick, who has been writing about China since the 1996 crisis, weaves historical perspective and, crucially, an appreciation for the importance of understanding China’s own perceptions of the United States and its intentions in light of the repeated pendulum swings in bilateral relations over the past century.

It may not be the case that war foreseen is war forestalled, however. From elite experts in world affairs to casual bloggers, over the past 6 years, hundreds have weighed in—prompted by Allison—with published views, pro or con, on the proposition that China’s rising power will cause “inevitable” war. Ja Ian Chong and Todd H. Hall are prominent among few voices on the American side questioning the validity of the Thucydides Trap, deeming invocation of the pre-World War I German-British power dynamic as “of little use” to understanding U.S.-Chinese relations today. Strains of alarmist xenophobia are far more common, often keyed to a negative interpretation of the “new model” suggested by Hu and Xi as synonymous with American capitulation and effective withdrawal from the Indo-Pacific region. A 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article by two prominent analysts expressed it starkly: “The ‘new type of major power relations’ slogan is a trap for the U.S. and Obama should definitively abandon it when meeting with Xi at APEC this year.”<sup>28</sup> Dingding Chen explains the continuing dilemma from the U.S. standpoint: Accepting China’s new slogan would send the wrong signal to American allies in Asia and potentially weaken the dominant U.S. position in the region, but rejecting it outright would make cooperation with China on a wide range of issues very difficult, if not impossible.<sup>29</sup>

Commentators in the Indian subcontinent, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and elsewhere have weighed in on the Thucydides Trap, nearly all accepting the relevance of the metaphor and expressing varying degrees of hope that the war hazard can be avoided. In Australia, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has made repeated references to the Thucydides Trap in speeches and other public remarks since taking office in 2015. He has also directed public pleas to Xi and to Chinese Premier Li Kequing not to “fall into the Thucydides Trap.”<sup>30</sup>

Allison’s concept made immediate inroads with China, and some see Hu’s “new model” proposal as a direct response to it. Certainly, one of the early U.S. responses by National Security

Advisor Tom Donilon in 2012 was framed with the Thucydides Trap in mind: “[The United States is open to exploring] a new model of relations between an existing power and an emerging one.” Subsequent remarks by Hu were similar: “We should prove that the traditional belief that big powers are bound to enter into conflict is wrong, and [instead] seek new ways of developing relations between major countries in the era of economic globalization.”<sup>31</sup> Such sentiments have been a staple of public remarks by Xi Jinping since he became president in 2012. Under the headline, “Thucydides Trap Not Etched in Stone,” a 2015 article in *China Daily* carried a range of views on the future of China-U.S. relations, including this sophisticated note of caution:

*Although China and the United States are not likely to go to war against each other in the near future, by harping on the Thucydides Trap, some commentators are trying to hijack the Sino-U.S. ties. As such, Chinese scholars should avoid using the term in the context of Sino-U.S. ties. Instead, they should find a concept or theory from China's long history to describe future Sino-U.S. relations while laying emphasis on the new type of major-power relationship.*<sup>32</sup>

## Power Transition Theory before the Thucydides Trap

While Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap concept demands further scrutiny, there is obvious benefit in directing public attention to the uncertainty that unavoidably attends perceptible adjustments in the geopolitical status quo. Indeed, Allison is not the first modern scholar to do so. It bears noting that the formulation of “power transition theory” as a field of international relations is typically attributed to A.F.K. Organski in the 1950s.<sup>33</sup>

The field of power transition theory reflects a classic 20<sup>th</sup>-century approach to political science, with an emphasis on social science metrics and statistical evaluators. Some specialists (for example, Richard Ned Lebow), however, have tended to downplay its significance. As Alek Chance points out, one enduring criticism is the fact that

*Power transition theorists tend to find the majority of their examples in conflicts within modern European history, an era full of the glorification of militarism and an explicitly institutionalized realpolitik. This in turn highlights how many of the conflicts that some attribute to shifts in relative power can be explained in numerous ways. The Second World War, for example, appears on most lists of power transition conflicts, but to envision the competition between Nazi Germany*

*and Great Britain as essentially being a question of differential economic growth is to ignore other obviously significant factors.*<sup>34</sup>

More broadly, measuring the shifting balance of power between rival states (a difficult task at best, although Organski formulated robust statistical methods for the effort) makes sense only in that power transition involves some degree of zero-sum tradeoff. In earlier historical periods, this would have entailed claim to the same patch of productive farmland. In modern times, it would involve a conceptual trade-off of influence in the international system. Chance also raises a logical question about the applicability of power transition theory in this context:

*While the United States has certainly exercised considerable influence in creating the current world order and derives many benefits from it, it falls short of exercising the sort of dominance that is presupposed by power transition theory. The contemporary world order is neither zero-sum in its distribution of goods nor does the most powerful state unilaterally dictate the rules of the road. Moreover, many political scientists have argued that the ability of great powers to impose their preferences will only decline further in the future.*<sup>35</sup>

Such objections notwithstanding, the essential vision of power transition theory will sound familiar to readers acquainted with Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap:

*The dominant nation and the challenger are very likely to wage war on one another whenever the challenger overtakes in power the dominant nation. It is this shift that destabilizes the system and begins the slide toward war. The speed with which the challenger overtakes the dominant nation is also important; the faster one country overtakes the other, the greater the risk of war. These are necessary but not sufficient conditions, however, for unless the challenger actually surpasses the dominant nation, war will not break out. Moreover, the challenger may also surpass the dominant nation without fighting it. Wars, therefore, are not inevitable.*<sup>36</sup>

## **What Does Thucydides Actually Say about the Origins of the War?**

Thucydides aspired to create an analytical work that would not only provide an accurate account of the "world war" that shaped his age, but also become an "everlasting possession,"<sup>37</sup>

not because it enchanted with fabulous storytelling, but because of its enduring utility: "If [the *History*] be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content."<sup>38</sup> To the extent that continuing global discussion of the Thucydides Trap contributes to fulfillment of that grand ambition, the historian might be pleased. Thucydides believed that patterns of behavior—both in individuals and in states—visible to him in the Peloponnesian War had long existed and were ingrained in human nature. This explains why, of the many voices raised in response to Allison's Thucydides Trap concept, none has challenged the enlistment of an ancient Greek for vital perspective on the contemporary interaction of two powerful states in vast regions utterly unknown to him. If 5<sup>th</sup>-century Greeks behaved in a way uniquely different from others, and if human societies facing the duress of war did not act in characteristic ways, the *History* would be relegated to the status of an antiquarian curiosity.<sup>39</sup>

Thucydides promises "conclusions" about the war that have "cost [him] some labor" to research and formulate,<sup>40</sup> but he makes his reader work hard to ferret out what they are. Whereas Sun Tzu's *Art of War* (which may have been composed at the same time as the Peloponnesian War) offers the reader a trove of finely crafted nuggets of wisdom to be savored individually and applied directly to 1 of 13 specified aspects of warfare,<sup>41</sup> Thucydides obliges his reader to examine his *History* and distill lessons from the text *in toto*. A few simple examples amply demonstrate the hazard of mining Thucydides for "easter eggs" of political insight:

- A reader of Pericles' celebrated Funeral Oration might discern in Thucydides an uncritical proponent of pure democracy, imperialistic triumphalism, and unconcealed chauvinism.<sup>42</sup>
- A reader of the Melian Dialogue might discern a darkly cynical view of human nature, with force acknowledged as the sole means of bringing order to a chaotic universe devoid of justice.<sup>43</sup>
- A reader of the episode of *stasis* in Corcyra or the ravages of the plague in Athens might perceive a view of human politics as irretrievably fractious and violent, and human beings as violent, immoral, manipulative, untrustworthy, and driven solely by ambition.<sup>44</sup>

But the synthesis of human nature (literally, "the human thing"/κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον),<sup>45</sup> as invoked in all these powerful manifestations of human behavior, each polished with great literary and rhetorical skill, provides a profound insight into human nature that is both radically different from what any one of the three would suggest on its own and, more importantly, surely

closer to the intent of the author. In the final analysis, Thucydides presents human nature as the truest rationale (*prophasis/πρόφασις*) for the Peloponnesian War.<sup>46</sup> He depicts, by turns, not only humanity's noblest aspirations and basest depredations as well as a capacity for nobility and wisdom, but also an appetite for gratuitous brutality without visible limit. If this accurately reflects Thucydides' view of human nature, he is in accord with Aristotle: "For just as man is the best of the animals when completed, when separated from law and adjudication he is the worst."<sup>47</sup> For both Aristotle and Thucydides, one extreme is not found to be more, or less, true than the other. To be human is to embody both tendencies.

Human beings, impelled by their nature, sometimes decide to go to war, but that decision is often made on the basis of faulty information, poor reasoning, or both. The *History* contains more than a dozen accounts of a state's internal deliberation on whether or not to enter a war—six in Book 1 alone.<sup>48</sup> These accounts also offer a range of arguments about what constitutes justice in war.<sup>49</sup> War is, moreover, a *legal* status, not merely a state of ongoing conflict.<sup>50</sup>

The Athenian debate over whether or not to invade Sicily ranks with the initial Spartan debate over whether or not to declare war on Athens as the most consequential of the war. Thucydides highlights many such decisions, noting that—as in this case—errors, lies, gaps in knowledge, and tendentious hidden agendas by foreign allies and/or domestic politicians frequently undermine rational judgment and lead to disaster.<sup>51</sup> Nicias pleads with the Athenians to refrain from "grasping at another empire before we have secured the one we have already,"<sup>52</sup> but decades of near-constant war have brought them wealth and power, and stopping, even pausing, now seems unthinkable. Alcibiades voices the popular consensus on this point: "We cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop; we have reached a position in which we must not be content with retaining what we have but must scheme to extend it for, if we cease to rule others, we shall be in danger of being ruled ourselves."<sup>53</sup> He "inflames and stirs" the Athenians to invade Sicily, just as he will later stimulate the Spartans to fortify Decelea and thereby assure the eventual defeat of Athens.<sup>54</sup>

A scholarly case can be (and often is) made that Thucydides is pessimistic or, as Hans Morgenthau and Leo Strauss perceived, the prototypical Realist. But the sophistication of the story as told by a historian who subordinates facts to ideas (as Jacqueline de Romilly says)—including through the choice of which incidents to emphasize, deemphasize, or omit altogether—is such that a countervailing scholarly case can be (and often is) made in opposition to all such assertions.<sup>55</sup>

Allison's Thucydides Trap, keyed directly to a single line in isolation, is thus at best the first step on a considerably longer path. The student of politics and/or war who wants to get at



genuine lessons in Thucydides is obliged to embark with comfortable shoes suitable for an extended journey over uneven terrain, and those adventurous enough to persevere through the jolting cessation of the narrative at the end of Book 8 are likely to emerge with widely varying perceptions of lessons learned along the way. Whether this reflects the utility or the futility of reading Thucydides, it is—far more than war between Athens and Sparta—inevitable.

The *History* reveals many factors that influence the war decisions in both Athens and Sparta, some direct, some indirect. Each has a greater or lesser effect on the outcome, and each can be either positive or negative, but war occurs through decisions made by both sides. It is not triggered in an automatic or mechanical way, as a certain alignment of meteorological variables can lead unavoidably to rain and no other possible outcome. Any one of these factors, alone or in combination with one or more other elements, can have a profound effect on the final outcome and perhaps even prove decisive. War can thus be triggered, or avoided, due to the influence of any of these factors—seven of which are discussed below as Thucydides' "other traps."

Consider, the Peloponnesian War begins with Sparta's declaration of war on Athens in 432 BCE, a move which formally abrogates the Thirty Years' Peace signed between the two in 445. Sparta's allies, the Thebans, initiate the actual fighting in 431. Thucydides says early in the *History* that he will set forth the causes of this war, so that in future "no one may ever have to ask" why such a terrible war occurred in this place at this time.<sup>56</sup> He devotes more of his text to this very specific question than to any single topic, apart from the Sicilian Expedition. Yet the explanation he provides is so dense and difficult to untangle that future generations have, in fact, *never ceased asking* about the causes of the war and *arguing* about the exact meaning of Thucydides' proffered explanation.<sup>57</sup>

One enormous sticking point is our lack of knowledge about Athenian policy toward the city of Megara, a major element in the cascading web of regional disputes that led up to the outbreak of war. Both the Spartans and the Athenians attached great importance to it:

[Sparta] *made very clear to the Athenians that war might be prevented if they revoked the Megara decree, excluding the Megarians from the use of Athenian harbors and of the market of Athens. But Athens was not inclined either to revoke the decree, or to entertain their other proposals.*<sup>58</sup>

Yet we know virtually nothing about the actual provisions of the decree, or why Pericles adamantly upheld it even under the imminent threat of war.

In his magisterial volume *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, G.E.M. de Ste. Croix focuses intently on the, unfortunately, paltry source matter—from Aristophanes, Plutarch, and Thucydides—on the vitally important Megarian Decree(s). Ste. Croix posits three, and perhaps four provisions, in the months leading up to the war, and chides previous generations of scholars for their careless assumptions on the matter. His theory that the Decrees were more religious than economic in nature has not won wide acceptance.<sup>59</sup> Cornford's view that the Decrees imposed rigid economic sanctions and were causing starvation in the city of Megara remains more widely held, but his argument draws attention to the huge gaps in our knowledge of essential aspects of the flurry of diplomacy that led up to the declaration of war on both sides.

It is striking that the underlying cause of the war was a matter of controversy in Athens following of the final Spartan victory in 404, and Thucydides notes, rather defensively, that his well-supported conclusions about the war “will not be disturbed either by the verses of a poet displaying the exaggeration of his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truth's expense.”<sup>60</sup> These remarks are generally interpreted as a Thucydidean swipe at his famed predecessor, Herodotus,<sup>61</sup> and also a rebuff to the comic poet Aristophanes.<sup>62</sup>

Ultimately, however, the “truth” about the origins of the Peloponnesian War remains obscure. Here is the vital summary passage from the *History*, including the sentence (in bold) seized on by Allison as the foundation of the Thucydides Trap concept:

[4] *All this came upon them with the late war, which was begun by the Athenians and Peloponnesians by the dissolution of the thirty years' truce made after the conquest of Euboea.* [5] *To the question why they broke the treaty, I answer by placing first an account of their grounds of complaint and points of difference, that no one may ever have to ask the immediate cause which plunged the Hellenes into a war of such magnitude.* [6] *The real cause I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. **The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable.** Still it is well to give the grounds alleged by either side which led to the dissolution of the treaty and the breaking out of the war.*<sup>63</sup>

This identification on the “real cause” of the war is by no means as crystal clear as it might first appear. Power (δυναμικ) in Athens and Fear (φοβος) in Sparta are unmistakably identified as factors in the war equation, but the mechanism of interaction between them and the broader nature of causality remain obscure. In fact, the key passage does not point to a specific event

but to an undifferentiated "nexus of circumstances"<sup>64</sup> which, in Thucydides' opinion, contain the seeds of war.

With 1.23.6, Thucydides becomes the first ancient historian to cite underlying *factors*, (*aitiai*/αἰτίαι) rather than action by the gods and/or unexplained human action, as causes of human conflict. As Seth N. Jaffe observes, this analytical passage has led many international relations theorists to claim Thucydides, prematurely, as "the archetypal realist, the first proponent of power politics." While the *History* assuredly has much to say on the outbreak of war, once his references to power, fear, necessity, and causation are supplemented and contextualized within the unfolding episodes of Book 1, it becomes apparent that they cannot be read as an assertion of efficient causation in a modern, scientific sense. In short, Thucydides' seemingly straightforward assertion about the "causes" of war is "a road-sign, not a destination."<sup>65</sup>

### In Search of Causality and Necessity: *Aitiai* and *Prophasis*

First, Thucydides' terminology complicates the picture, particularly the introduction of the elements of "grounds of complaint" and "points of difference," which together comprise the war's "immediate cause." His distinction between what Richard Crawley refers to as the "real cause"—(*alethestate prophasis*/ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις), more precisely rendered as "truest rationale"—and the "grounds alleged publicly" (*aitiai es to phaneron legomenai*/αἰτίαι ἐς τὸ φανερόν λεγόμεναι) seems clearer but has in fact been subjected to widely varying interpretation.

The fact that the "truest rationale" is also cited as "least spoken of" (ἀφανεστάτην δὲ λόγῳ) often leads new students of Thucydides to regard the *prophasis* and the *aitiai es to phaneron* as, respectively, *concealed* and *acknowledged* factors.<sup>66</sup> This perception suggests, in turn, that the latter have been falsely contrived—perhaps by leaders in one or both cities—in a conspiratorial attempt to hide the *genuine* causes of the war. Such a reading is not supported by a closer examination of the text, however. Rather, Thucydides is drawing a distinction between a long-term *prophasis* (deep-seated mistrust, incipient hostility, and rising fear generated through an extended period of troubled bilateral relations) and more immediate *aitiai* (current irritants in the regional political and military situation). As Giovanni Parmeggiani argues, Thucydides identifies these two kinds of causes because there are two kinds of problems to solve. The first is a problem of historical contingency: How did this war actually arise at this precise time? The second is philosophical: Was this war accidental or necessary?<sup>67</sup>

The separation between *prophasis* and *aitiai* is thus not a distinction between primary and secondary considerations, nor between false and true ones. Both are part of what Tim Rood calls an aetiological system, revealing in a dispositive way the state of political thinking on both

sides.<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, both are relevant as well as essential to the all-important final outcome, that is, the separate decisions in Sparta and in Athens to adopt a policy of war; however, each is relevant in a different way. The *prophasis* takes precedence as being “truest” (*alethestate*) because it accounts for the predisposition with which decisionmakers in both cities will respond to the *aitiai*—in this case the Corcyra/Epidamnus dispute (1.24) and the Potidaea crisis (1.56).

Without underlying fear as the *prophasis*, the *aitiai* might have been resolved through peaceful means, or at least not been seen as grounds for all-out military conflict. The converse is not true, however. Without these specific *aitiai*, there would have been no Peloponnesian War in the summer of 431, but the latent *prophasis*, unless altered (for example, through a sustained period of positive bilateral interaction), would remain to trigger escalation and war in response to some later incident, should one arise. The *prophasis* thus opens the way for the compelling force of necessity (*ananke*/ανάγκη) to enter the picture. “Inevitable” is still too strong a term for the subtle interplay of human attitudes Thucydides describes, however.

Without catalyzing *aitiai*, the underlying *prophasis* might have persisted for years without triggering actual war. Indeed, Sparta’s mistrust and fear of Athens had, by 431, already been in place for decades. Fear of Athenian intentions prompted the Spartans to abruptly dismiss the Athenian troops sent to provide humanitarian aid and security assistance following the earthquake in Sparta in 465. The rapid expansion of Athenian imperial authority was already well advanced by 454, when the Athenians transferred the treasury of the Delian League from Delos to Athens, ending all pretense that the Greek “alliance” against Persia was anything other than an Athenian empire. The accumulated inflammable material was thus in place for many years before the exact alignment of *aitiai* and *prophasis* finally triggered the “necessity” of war.<sup>69</sup> While it is logical for Thucydides to look back on the outbreak of war as “inevitable”—since it has, in fact, already occurred—the alignment of factors he describes hardly constitutes a model for predicting the outbreak of a future war.

Nonetheless, clarification of the distinction between *aitiai* and *prophasis* reveals underlying unity and coherence in the seemingly uneven and discursive structure of Book 1:

- The ancient history of the Greek states provided in the *Archaeology* (1.2–1.23), far from being merely a conventional imitation of Herodotus or Homer, is structured to explain and substantiate the *prophasis*, which is a subtle, psychological factor that ordinary people would find difficult to recognize or comprehend (unlike the events he identifies as *aitiai es to phaneron*, which would be obvious and known to all).<sup>70</sup>
- Similarly, the *Pentecontaetia* (1.89–1.117)—at first glance a mere digression into the rough and tumble of Spartan-Athenian political and military interaction over the half

century preceding the war—is essential to an understanding of the *aitiai* that led directly and, in a narrow sense, *inevitably*, to the onset of the Peloponnesian War.

Parmeggiani stresses that the complex interaction of *prophasis* and *aitiai* would be discernable only to a master of history and politics whose insight is founded upon knowledge of human nature, understanding of the nature of power and—indispensably—meticulous study of both the long-term political evolution of both Athens and Sparta and the details of their recent interaction.<sup>71</sup> This thoroughgoing analysis, which provides the basis for Thucydides' assertion that the Peloponnesian War was *necessary* at the time and in the way it occurred, has virtually nothing in common with the superficial, mechanistic, and casually generalized assertion that Athens and Sparta *inevitably* went to war because that is what usually happens when a rising power comes to be perceived as a threat to a ruling power.

Bearing in mind the fact that many Athenians wanted to come to terms with Sparta at the outset of the war,<sup>72</sup> it is hard to make the case from Thucydides' *History* that war is ever inevitable. Indeed, the only firm, citable examples in human experience consist of wars that *did* happen. Perhaps innumerable more potential wars were averted, but such negative events are invisible. Yet in Thucydides *every* war decision shows some citizens who favor coming to terms with the enemy rather than going to war. It is perhaps natural to justify past wars (particularly those deemed successful) *ex post facto*, but hard to argue that any was inevitable.

Perhaps even more important to current discussion of a Thucydides Trap between the United States and China is the equally true converse: in the absence of *prophasis*, no variation of *aitiai* need result in war. Some prognosticators of war in the Indo-Pacific region have manifestly fallen into this trap, citing the existence of the island disputes—*aitiai* all—as rendering war inevitable. While great political theorists are free to parse international relations as they deem fit, no such line of analysis is supported by Thucydides' marshaling of facts and analysis from the Peloponnesian War.

In fact, Thucydides regarded confusion, distortion, and deception in the debate over whether or not to enter a war to be commonplace, both because common people could not easily grasp some of the subtle, underlying forces at play and because elite participants in the debate often had hidden agendas and intentionally did not reveal their true motives. Contemporary Americans need look no further than our own national debate in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq to confirm that this human proclivity is alive and well. Some American decisionmakers were taken in, as were the Athenians, by reports from would-be allies that proved “as attractive as it was untrue.”<sup>73</sup>

## Fear, Honor, and Interest, and Thucydides' other "Traps"

Thucydides simply does *not* say that war between the Athenians and the Spartans is "inevitable" in the clear and unambiguous sense conveyed by the translated passage that Allison quotes from Book 1 of the *History*. Moreover, there is no indication that the historian intends his problematic and manifestly incomplete analysis of the cause(s) of their war to stand as a normative model that explains *all* great power wars.

In fact, what the historian does say about war leads in the opposite direction, toward a narrow and idiosyncratic explanation for the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century (as today), war was both a legal state and a condition of actual, ongoing engagement between hostile forces. Crucially, war then (as now) typically began with a political decision prior to the deployment of forces.

Any exploration of causality must thus take into account the three great factors that Thucydides identifies as the drivers of state decisionmaking in peace and war: Fear (*phobos*/φοβος), Honor (*doxa*/δοξα), and Interest (*kerdos*/κερδος).<sup>74</sup> Former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster noted the continuing relevance of these factors in a 2013 published work that has drawn renewed attention in recent months: "War is human. People fight today for the same fundamental reasons the Greek historian Thucydides identified nearly 2,500 years ago: Fear, Honor and Interest."<sup>75</sup> Weaker parties (allies) can manipulate stronger ones using these basic motives, whereas the strong have options of their own.<sup>76</sup>

These three elements, either singly or in some combination, shape all political decision-making.<sup>77</sup> The interplay of the three unfailingly leads every state to see its own position as just, and those who oppose it as unjust, irrespective of whether a state embarks on a course of war. This is arguably Thucydides' single most galvanizing insight into human nature. In another literary touch, Thucydides juxtaposes these underlying influences with the more visible but less significant factors often cited in decisions of whether to go to war: military capacity, quality of leadership, and depth of patriotism.<sup>78</sup> His model of political action reveals a dynamic relationship among human nature, state politics, and war. Thucydides' explanation of the origins of the Peloponnesian War is thus keyed, not to the compulsion of rise and fear, but rather to the complex interplay of Fear, Honor, and Interest in *both* Athens and Sparta. Leon Whyte aptly applies this framework to contemporary geopolitics: "If the United States and China fight a war, it will occur because of the same fear and honor that led the Spartans to start the Peloponnesian War, or the Athenians to continue it."<sup>79</sup>

While it is not his aim to provide a conceptual model as such, Thucydides, over the course of the *History*, identifies a number of secondary factors that tend to influence the interplay of Fear, Honor, and Interest in national decisionmaking. Each of these can, in itself, pose another trap—leading to unnecessary war—or, with sound judgment (and/or luck) offer a means of escape from such a conflict. Subsequent sections briefly highlight seven of these: national character, governing system, domestic tranquility, economic power, leaders, allies and alliances, and the role of *Tyké* (chance) in peace and war.

### Trap 1: National Character

For Thucydides, the stark contrast between Athenian and Spartan culture—not only regarding political arrangements, but also in the fundamental values and norms that shape each society—reflects an aspect of collective human nature that looms large in questions of peace and war. The question of democracy vs. oligarchy—which is a better governing system?—is a subsidiary problem. While Pericles makes a resounding defense of Athens' national character as superior, what Thucydides stresses above all is that Athenians and Spartans are driven by profoundly different values and personal motivations. The Corinthians' pre-war speech before the assembled Spartans and allies underscores these differences.<sup>80</sup> This was, however, seldom an obstacle to responsible decisionmaking by Athenian and Spartan leaders because each knew the other well. Instances in which one side *misreads* the other are few.

Athenians, Spartans, Corinthians, Thebans, Plataeans, and Corcyraeans are each driven by a unique and idiosyncratic combination of policy considerations under the three rubrics of Fear, Honor, and Interest. The Athenians want to keep their growing empire and the revenue it yields, which has become essential for ongoing reconstruction of the city, as well as pay citizens for participation in the councils and assemblies that constitute the democracy. The Corinthians want to retain their paramount influence in the northeast Peloponnese and humble their troublesome former colony, Corcyra.<sup>81</sup> The Corcyraeans want to escape Corinthian hegemony and maximize their own independence, even if this means accepting subject-ally status under the Athenians. The Spartans want nothing so much as quiet enjoyment of their domestic tranquility, reflecting an ingrained conservatism for which their Corinthian allies chide them bitterly. It would be as wrong to ascribe identical motivations to all four as it would be to ascribe identical foreign policy goals to the United States and China today. While U.S. support for a rules-based post-World War II global trading system and Chinese insistence on (re-)gaining (traditional and inherently merited) great power status after a "century of humiliation" may or may not be incompatible goals, but they are certainly not identical goals. Yet the Thucydides Trap concept

requires that each be seen as motivated solely by calculations of relative power keyed to power transition theory as a variant of the traditional security dilemma.

A degree of shared attention to the Thucydides Trap does not indicate that American and Chinese leaders have attained a similar level of mutual comprehension. On the contrary, mirrored mistrust and misperception are routinely evident in statements one side directs at the other. The continuing debate within China over the country's recovery of international stature following a "century of humiliation," little noted in the United States, illustrates the point. That debate is linked, in turn, to the tradeoff between keeping a low profile and striving for achievement.

In the early 1990s, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping invoked a foreign policy strategy of *taoguangyanghui* (keeping a low profile, or KLP). Under this approach, China concentrated on domestic development while avoiding extensive engagement outside its borders. Key phrases of the KLP policy included "undertaking no leadership" and "raising no banner," both calculated to avoid zero-sum rivalry with the United States that might impede China's internal economic boom.

In October 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the shift to a foreign policy strategy of *fenfayouwei* (striving for achievement, or SFA). Some Chinese scholars and officials still question whether SFA is likely to yield a better international environment for China, but Xi's policies—including island development, frequent foreign travel, and the "One Belt, One Road" initiative—indicate that SFA is the prevailing view of China's leadership today. While KLP left American dominance of the international system unchallenged, SFA implies increased Chinese involvement in global affairs. Whether U.S. leaders comprehend this change as hegemonic and threatening or incremental and historically logical could have a huge impact on bilateral relations in coming years.<sup>82</sup>

A much-discussed *Xinhua* article in April 2015 turned the KLP/SFA question on its head, arguing that the United States under President Obama had itself shifted toward a policy of KLP due to a continuing preoccupation with domestic economic issues.<sup>83</sup> How China assesses the intentions and capacity of the Trump administration will, in turn, influence Xi's decisions about China's own transition from KLP to SFA.

## **Trap 2: Governing System**

Thucydides subscribes to the notion that human nature dictates characteristic patterns of behavior, especially under the threat of war, but he also discerns in the behavior of Athens and Sparta (and to a lesser degree in other major participants in the Peloponnesian War) distinctive



cultural tendencies that are at tension with the universal patterns of humanity. This adds an additional dynamic to national decisionmaking. The mode of national decisionmaking adopted by each side reflects this distinction and, in turn, influences each side's policy choices. The respective characters (*tropoi*/τρόποι) of Athens and Sparta color their foreign policies and influence how the dynamic interaction between the two cities, influenced by the distinctive necessities that press upon each, ultimately leads to the collapse of the Hellenic status quo.<sup>84</sup>

As Jeremy Mynott emphasizes, the structure of governance influences "the role of rhetoric and argument, which may take on a different kind of importance in a predominantly oral culture; the forms of public pressure and support that can be exerted through established institutions in the different kinds of polity; and the relative importance of individuals, social classes, ruling groups and international relationships in reaching decisions."<sup>85</sup> It is not just that a rising power is colliding with a status quo power; the matter hinges on the exact character of both and the contrast between them. The necessity of war, insofar as it determines the outcome, arises from the particular interaction of these two radically different societies and their equally divergent approaches to national security, rather than from any universal paradigm of great power transition. For the United States and China, similarly, it will be important to understand each other's modes of national decisionmaking and the sort of public expressions associated with the normal processes of government.

### Trap 3: Domestic Tranquility

As both Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes recognized, one of Thucydides' most powerful insights is his recognition of the corrosive impact of *stasis*—factional infighting, often between (pro-Spartan) oligarchs and (pro-Athenian) masses—on sociopolitical stability. It afflicts nearly every *polis* in Greece, including Athens, often with a significant effect on the war, and Thucydides notes that this was a problem for Greeks in earlier ages as well.<sup>86</sup> In this respect, he makes the point that a tendency toward internecine conflict seems to be an enduring feature of human nature, as the most cultured and up-to-date Greeks in his own time seem no less prone to it than their ancient forebears. His vivid portrayal of the moral collapse resulting from *stasis* is a major component of his broad insight—revealed incrementally over the course of the *History*—of the interplay between human nature, the human condition, and war:

*In peace and prosperity states and individuals have better sentiments, because they do not find themselves suddenly confronted with imperious necessities; but*

*war takes away the easy supply of daily wants and so proves a rough master that brings most men's characters to a level with their fortunes.*<sup>87</sup>

Public acceptance of the rationale for conflict matters in this context. From the time of the First Crusade, Western nations have found it necessary to adduce a “just” basis for conflict. While the outbreak of conflict typically elicits an initial outpouring of fervid support for “our” forces (and our leader), the rationale adduced for the war—especially whether most citizens deem it a convincing argument for the justness of “our” cause—plays a role in the staying power of our war effort. President Woodrow Wilson during World War I and Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman during World War II invested enormous effort in honing the message and delivering it to the American people, in part because they recognized that the scope of the conflict—a negative factor amplified by the distance from home—obliged them to do so. This will pose challenges for U.S. leaders in any future conflict in the Indo-Pacific region and in power maneuvering through measures short of war.

Chinese commentators in recent years have tended to overperceive the U.S. domestic focus on job creation and other economic concerns as an exaggerated sign of national decline. On the U.S. side, economists speculate endlessly on how long the Chinese can sustain double-digit annual growth and on how severe the popular backlash will be when growth slows. Sustaining domestic support is vital for both China and the United States.<sup>88</sup>

#### **Trap 4: Economic Power**

Thucydides was no economist, but he is justly recognized as the first historian to appreciate the importance of wealth as an aspect of national power. He gives the wise and decisive (but impecunious) Spartan King Archidamus, who felt sharply the disadvantage of battling a well-financed adversary, one of the *History's* famous maxims: “War is a matter not so much of arms as of money, which makes arms of use.”<sup>89</sup> Thucydides returns to financial matters repeatedly over the course of war, emphasizing the immense cost of the Sicilian expedition and noting Athenian efforts—like the desperate imposition of a 5 percent tax on their subject-allies—to sustain cash flow and trim costs. The Athenians are hard-pressed to sustain the revenues necessary to cover the burgeoning cost of two simultaneous wars.<sup>90</sup> Over time, the Athenian treasury is inexorably depleted, while the Spartans eventually obtain foreign (Persian) funding sufficient to support a navy capable of defeating the Athenians.

For China, money tells the contemporary story. In the 1950s, the Chinese government had none. Today, Beijing is spending lavishly around the world, particularly in the Indo-Pacific

region, but also in Africa and beyond, to influence policies and draw new friends. A familiar joke notes that China has a market-Leninist system administered by a Communist Party in which nobody believes in communism. Widely publicized investments in port and transportation infrastructure in Australia and other Asian states (including a new Jakarta-Bandung fast train in Indonesia) are modernizing regional logistics and opening doors. The trillion-dollar "One Belt, One Road" project represents a monumental effort to reshape regional trade to Chinese specifications. Chas Freeman notes that the Obama administration played the economic angle poorly vis-à-vis the Chinese in Asia:

*Rather than facilitating the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes by the claimants, it embeds these disputes in Sino-American rivalry and promotes their militarization. Rather than working together to reform or replace outmoded international financial institutions and practices, it presumes that China and America are at cross purposes.<sup>91</sup>*

It is important to recognize that China, even while expanding its military capabilities, is establishing itself as the Indo-Pacific region's chief investor and peacemaker, from investing in high-profile projects across the region to mediating an end to the world's longest running civil war—the Kachin resistance to the 1962 coup d'état that installed in Rangoon a junta drawn from the ethnic Burmese majority. These are the actions of a player—the biggest player in the history of the world—who knows the rules established by the Washington Consensus and is willing to buy into the game at the full price of admission, but is also learning to leverage its economic power to expand global influence.

### **Trap 5: Leaders**

In Thucydides' *History*, leaders transcend process and circumstance to exert enormous influence in both war and statecraft. Just as Carl von Clausewitz recognizes military genius as an important imponderable of war, Thucydides sees the impact that each leader's uniquely different ledger of assets and liabilities has on the outcome of politics and war. Though national character is consistent, a change in leadership transforms decisionmaking and alters the trajectory of events. Athens under Pericles is prudent and consistent, subordinating operational decisions to a coherent (if controversial) grand strategy. But under Cleon, Hyperbolus, and Alcibiades (after Pericles succumbs to the plague), the city's decisions become rash and erratic with no clear guiding principle or long-term plan. Diodotus' success in opposing Cleon in the matter of

Mytilene shows the power of leadership as well as the fluidity and unpredictability of strategic decisionmaking.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Spartans commanded by Brasidas are innovative, resourceful, and successful in ways not seen with other Spartan forces before or after.<sup>93</sup>

In Book 6, the twists and turns of the war in Sicily demonstrate anew the contrast between sound leadership and its opposite. Hermocrates the Syracusan and Gylippus the Spartan exemplify a standard of personal honor, strategic vision, and tactical savvy that sets them apart from men like the slow-witted Anaxagoras, who are timid, blinkered, or cowardly in facing the Athenian threat. In Athens, the speeches of Nicias and Alcibiades, respectively opposing and advocating the Sicilian adventure, pose an even starker contrast.<sup>94</sup> Nicias sensibly warns of exactly the sort of disasters that eventually befall the Athenian armada, while the brash Alcibiades belittles the enemy and dazzles the assembly with talk of gain and glory.<sup>95</sup>

Thucydides' meticulous account of the Sicilian Expedition can easily be read as a simple morality tale: An unprovoked war of aggression invites divine wrath against the proud Athenians.<sup>96</sup> After six decades of magnificent achievement at home and abroad, including creation of "the greatest empire yet known, of present or former times, among the Hellenes,"<sup>97</sup> the Athenians now suffer calamitous downfall.

Thucydides reveals, as he seldom does, his own view that Alcibiades' support of the invasion is motivated more by personal ambition than patriotism, yet he does not reduce the difference to caricature—Alcibiades is a megalomaniacal narcissist and a traitor, but also a charismatic leader of troops and an ingenious tactician. Nicias, though cited by the historian as "the most fortunate general of his time," is also dilatory and fatally foolish in Sicily, not least in his irresponsible decision to delay withdrawal from the island for 27 days on the advice of (previously unmentioned) soothsayers after a lunar eclipse sparks amazement. Thucydides nevertheless comments later that Nicias, "of all the Hellenes in my time, least deserved such a fate" (that is, butchery at his enemy's hands) because "the whole course of his life had been regulated with strict attention to virtue." But did he deserve that horrid fate *less* than the tens of thousands of troops under his command who also perished because of his manifest ineptitude in the final stages of the war?<sup>98</sup> For Thucydides, Nicias' quality of earnestness, perhaps combined with his prior service—including negotiation of the peace with Sparta, which proves all too brief—seem to outweigh his deficient performance. Yet logic would suggest that Demosthenes and Lamachus, who both also died at Syracuse, are equally deserving of the regard that Thucydides accords to Nicias alone.<sup>99</sup>

Plato resurrects Nicias in his dialogue *Laches* as an interlocutor with whom Socrates engages on the topic of courage.<sup>100</sup> Plato's decision to use Nicias as an expert participant in a

discussion of military education and the nature of courage suggests that the Athenian people at the time—no more than three decades after the Sicilian Expedition—still esteemed him and did not regard his failure in Sicily as dishonorable. It is striking, nonetheless, to note that the *Laches* places Nicias in a discussion of courage not only in war, but also in public and private life. Though unfailingly brave in battle (if unduly cautious and prone to vacillation), Nicias in Thucydides' telling shows political cowardice in failing to reveal to the Athenian people the precarious circumstances of the Athenian army before Syracuse. Accordingly, "his life in itself illustrates the importance, recognized by Socrates, of cultivating courage in all the arenas of action and suffering."<sup>101</sup> As a leader, Nicias is problematic. Ultimately, it is not his superiority to Alcibiades, but his inferiority to Pericles that must define his legacy.

In the final book of the *History*, the Athenians are desperate for sound leadership as they struggle to rebuild their own naval capacity and avoid a further disaster but never find it. Alcibiades' period of renewed leadership brings tactical improvement but is undermined by his drive for personal, not national, success. Phrynichus, a "man of sense," is undermined by the jealousy of others. Worse is to come. On the Spartan side, leadership is better overall but still notoriously inconsistent. While Lysander (whose successes are chronicled by Diodorus Siculus and Xenophon in their respective volumes that take up the Ionian War at the point where Thucydides leaves off) is brilliant and irreproachable, other Spartan leaders run the gamut from the insecure Astyocus to the spineless, pettifogging Therimenes. Lichas seems at first high-minded and forthright, but proves inconstant. Thucydides makes it clear that every government is hard-pressed to find clear-thinking, reliable leaders.<sup>102</sup>

In early 2017, Graham Allison stated that the election of Donald Trump has heightened his pessimism over U.S.-China relations: "If Hollywood were producing a blockbuster on China and the U.S. on the path to war, central casting could not have come up with a better lead for Team America than our president."<sup>103</sup> Nonetheless, interaction between U.S. and Chinese leaders through the first year of the Trump administration has been relatively positive. Inevitably, U.S. perception of the character and intent of China's leaders will determine whether statements such as this are heard as conciliatory or threatening:

*The argument that strong countries are bound to seek hegemony does not apply to China. This is not in the DNA of this country, given our long historical and cultural background. China fully understands that we need a peaceful and stable internal and external environment to develop ourselves. We all need to work together to avoid the Thucydides trap—destructive tensions between an emerging*

*power and established powers. Our aim is to foster a new model of major country relations.*<sup>104</sup>

It is worth recalling that U.S. and Chinese leaders succeeded in maintaining stable relations and preventing the development of a war-demanding *prophasis* during the Cold War, when the volume of bilateral trade (always one measure of the financial cost a war would impose on both sides) was negligible. Now, facing new *aitiai* (contentious island claims), as well as a burgeoning commercial relationship and the serious risk of a North Korea conflict that would be costly for both sides, Presidents Xi and Trump can find in Thucydides both positive and negative examples worthy of their attention. Famed Thucydides scholar Donald Kagan reminds us that the Peloponnesian War “was caused by men who made bad decisions in difficult circumstances. Neither the circumstances nor the decisions were inevitable.”<sup>105</sup>

### **Trap 6: Allies and Alliances**

Thucydides identifies the beginning of the great war of his time with one “overt act”: the surprise assault by Thebes (a key Spartan ally) on its hated neighbor Plataea (Athens’ oldest ally) in 431 BCE.<sup>106</sup> In fact, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of alliances in Thucydides’ view of both macro-war and the moral predilections of the humans who wage it. He even identifies the ability of Greek *poleis* in prior centuries to collaborate on a large scale (especially in war) as a crucial threshold between primitive and modern.<sup>107</sup>

The acquisition of allies is a visible and crucially important metric of a great power’s status. This is reflected even in the Spartans’ repeated assertion that their war aim is to “liberate” the far-flung *poleis* of the Greek-speaking world from Athenian domination. Consider Sparta’s final ultimatum to Athens in the run-up to war: “Sparta wishes the peace to continue, and there is no reason why it should not, if you would let the Hellenes be independent.” The statement is precisely crafted so as to enhance Sparta’s standing with (current and potential) allies and to drive a wedge between Athens and the allies whose tribute payments sustain Athenian naval supremacy. The Spartan goal is not to bring freedom (*eleutheria/ἐλευθερία*) in a modern sense, but to *free* the Greek city states from their status as tribute-paying subject-allies of Athens. States enjoying autonomy (*autonomia/αὐτονομία*) will naturally incline toward future backing for the power that engineered their “liberation,” so Sparta’s own standing would rise in step with the decline of Athenian power.<sup>108</sup>

The making and breaking of alliances is a decisive factor in the Peloponnesian War, as battlefield victories for both Athens and Sparta typically hinge on the backing they are accorded,

or denied, by erstwhile allies.<sup>109</sup> Both also fall victim to a hazard of war that Thucydides has Athenian envoys warn against early on: "taking the wrong course on matters of great importance by yielding too readily to the persuasions of . . . allies."<sup>110</sup> British researcher Christopher Coker frames the implications of this fact for the United States and China as they interact across the vast expanse of the Western Pacific: "Do not allow your state to be manipulated into war." He continues:

*This accords with the story Thucydides actually tells: Neither Athens nor Sparta sought war, but somehow war came. Athens was convinced by another city-state, Corcyra, to protect it from the interference of a Spartan ally, Corinth. The Corinthians then convinced the Spartans to intervene on their side against the rapacious Athenians, and thus a "war like no other" began. A shift in power may or may not have been a necessary condition for the Peloponnesian War. But the way in which Athens and Sparta were manipulated by their lesser allies surely was.<sup>111</sup>*

Allies were no less central in the fateful Athenian decision to invade Sicily, 800 miles away, and in the eventual crushing defeat of Athenian forces there.<sup>112</sup>

In the Aegean world, as in Asia today, the number and strength of allies is an important metric of capacity and influence, a visible reflection of status as a great power. While overall the U.S. network of allies in the Indo-Pacific region appears strong and durable, China has exploited the anti-American views of President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, who has placed the United States in the awkward position of the Spartan general Brasidas when the people of Acanthus balk at accepting his offer of assistance to "liberate" them from Athenian domination: "I am . . . astonished at finding your gates shut against me, and at not meeting with a better welcome."<sup>113</sup>

For the United States, sustaining cooperation with regional allies without being manipulated by them remains a policy necessity. As Freeman underscores, "China's neighbors want American help to hedge against Chinese power even as they strive to reach an accommodation to it,"<sup>114</sup> but it remains for the United States to aggregate its strength in a way that will benefit itself. At the same time, Lam Peng Er of Singapore's East Asian Institute (and a critic of the Thucydides Trap concept) has noted that "it is not inconceivable that smaller Chinese and American allies in East Asia might well drag the United States and China into a conflict rather than a conflict directly caused by the 'power transition' between the two great powers per se."<sup>115</sup>

## Trap 7: The Role of *Tykē* (Chance) in Peace and War

Further undermining the idea that war (or anything in it) is “inevitable” is Thucydides’ frequent emphasis on the unexpected and the unpredicted. Homer epitomized the traditional Greek view of querulous Olympian gods whose selfish, partisan agendas stir conflict among hapless mortals. But the only preternatural element acknowledged in the *History* is chance, or *Tykē* (Τύχη), which plays a significant but unpredictable role in shaping war. An Athenian delegation visiting Sparta before the war sums up the matter succinctly: “Consider the vast influence of accident in war, before you are engaged in it.”<sup>116</sup> Pericles directs a similar admonition to his fellow Athenians: “Sometimes the course of things is as arbitrary as the plans of man; . . . this is why we usually blame chance for whatever does not happen as we expected.”<sup>117</sup> A fearful acknowledgement of the power of chance pervades the *History*.

In this, Thucydides anticipates Clausewitz, who also ascribes great significance to the random, unforeseen, and unforeseeable in war and does not expect divine intervention. For Thucydides, *Tykē* is an imponderable factor lurking in the friction and fog of war. The weak should not depend on it for salvation, and the strong cannot discount it as a potential counterweight to seemingly overwhelming military strength. *Tykē* has an endless capacity—from battlefield intelligence revealed to be false, to altogether unforeseeable events like the eclipse during Nicias’ retreat from Syracuse and the storm following the Athenian naval victory at Arginousae—for delivering “the surprises which upset human calculations.”<sup>118</sup> Recognition of the uncertainty of interstate relations in peace as well as war helps equip a leader for the most difficult challenges of statesmanship.

### Assessing the “Allison Trap”

Publication of *Destined for War* elicited a few critical reviews.<sup>119</sup> But, as British classicist Neville Morley and others have observed, the predominant response to the Thucydides Trap concept across the foreign policy community in the United States and elsewhere over the past 6 years has been uncritical acceptance of the notion that a grave normative trap for Washington and Beijing exists in the pages of Thucydides. In effect, credulity has filled the space that should have been reserved for critical engagement and analysis. Yet, as the preceding section attempted to show, Allison’s notion of a Thucydides Trap is simply not supported by Thucydides’ text. Changing the name to the “Allison Trap” might therefore be preferable. Dropping the ancient historian’s name would detract nothing from Allison’s work except an unmerited air of respectability conferred by the Thucydides “brand.”<sup>120</sup>



The use we make of ancient authorities in contemporary policymaking must be guided by rigorous scholarship. Specifically, if Thucydides' analysis of the war that shaped his age has value for us today, as I believe it does, that value will emerge only from attentive reading of the entire *History*. This means coming to grips with the manifold difficulties of its uneven and idiosyncratic text rather than seizing on a single line taken out of context as the distilled epitome of Thucydidean wisdom.

A closer look reveals additional shortcomings. Even though Allison devotes many pages of *Destined for War* to a review of events leading up to the onset of the Peloponnesian War, his Thucydides Trap metaphor does not accord with those events. As T. Greer incisively notes,

*A review of the origins and first moments of this war suggests that it was less a matter of growing fear and growing power, than a matter of tarnished honor and quests for glory. Athens' growing wealth was a necessary condition for the war, but it was hardly the only or the most important cause of it. Had Athens' quest for glory been less ambitious, had Sparta not tied herself to an ally hellbent on forcing her private wars and narrow interests onto the entire league of Spartan allies, and had the Greeks not been a people obsessed with insults, rank, and honor, this war may never have occurred. It was not an inevitable clash of fear and power that brought war to Hellas, but a very specific set of decisions made by a very specific set of leaders in the years before the war.<sup>121</sup>*

Even Allison's assertion of a transition from peace to war in 431 BCE is problematic. The thousand-plus Greek city states of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, grouped into shifting alliances around Sparta and Athens, had already been locked in nearly continuous warfare for more than 50 years prior to the Peloponnesian War. Athens had already been at war 2 out of every 3 years for more than a century, never once enjoying more than 10 consecutive years of peace. Thus, while Thucydides insists that the conflict that began in 431 was a new war, not all scholars share that view. Athens and Sparta fought a "First Peloponnesian War" from 460 to 446, and Ste. Croix, among others, sees not a new war in 432, but one long conflict stretching from 460 to 404 (much as some war historians look at World War I and World War II as "The Long War").

Allison's characterization of Sparta as a "ruling" power and Athens as "rising" is equally suspect. Among Greek city-states, Sparta had been preeminent in land war for seven centuries, but Athens had also long been a major power, possessing not only the capacity but also the will to undertake bold military initiatives with minimal allied support, including aiding the

Greek *poleis* of Asia Minor against Persian encroachment, meeting and defeating the Persians at Marathon and uniting the entire Greek-speaking world in an all-or-nothing bid to resist Persian conquest that, prior to the naval victory at Salamis in the autumn of 480, would have appeared foolhardy.

By the time the Peloponnesian War began in 431, Athens had thus been “rising” for nearly a century and had long since converted the pan-Hellenic anti-Persian alliance into an Athenian empire. The Spartans recognized, but did not fear, Athens’ growing activism and military capacity as early as 520, when Plataea appealed to Sparta for an alliance to fend off Thebes. The Spartans actually urged the Plataeans to ally instead with Athens, thus enhancing the power and reach of the Athenians in a region (Boeotia) under Spartan hegemony.<sup>122</sup> Sparta hoped to contain Athens by preventing reconstruction of the Long Walls linking the city to the port of Piraeus, but in the end acquiesced to the Athenians’ surreptitious building program with no more than a stiff demarche.

By 465, fear of Athens’ military power led the Spartans to insult the Athenians by rejecting their proffered military assistance after a devastating earthquake and consequent Helot uprising in Sparta’s home region. It is difficult, however, to discern a basis for a sudden crescendo of Spartan fear that made war with Athens “inevitable” in 431.

Furthermore, the actual course of pre-war Spartan decisionmaking as recorded by Thucydides (apart from the historian’s one-line summary judgment in 1.24.6) has no visible rising/ruling dynamic. The Spartans are spurred to declare war, not by evident fear of Athenian power, but by incessant browbeating from their Corinthian allies (who were motivated, in turn, by the narrow and specific fear of losing Epidamnus to Corcyra, which was, at the time, seeking assistance from Athens).

We can add to this the fact that the Athenians, once accused of violating the Thirty Years’ Peace that had ended the First Peloponnesian War in 464, offered to accept binding arbitration under the terms of that treaty:

- In Sparta, King Archidamus recommends delay, in the hope (though not the certainty) that war might thus be avoided altogether. Sthenelaidas overcomes that prudent advice through a passionate appeal, not to *fear* but to *honor*: “Vote therefore, Spartans, for war, as the honor of Sparta demands, and neither allow the further aggrandizement of Athens, nor betray our allies to ruin.”<sup>123</sup> (It is, notably, the Corinthians who have shaped their arguments to make the Spartans feel the sting of wounded honor, as well as the pointed demands of manipulative allies.<sup>124</sup>) The ephor’s central argument aligns with the *prophasis* but is not identical with it. The Spartans thus choose war by *not* following conventional procedure (that is, accepting the King’s recommendation).

- For their part, the Athenians request arbitration, their right under the Thirty Years' Peace. They opt for a policy of war (albeit an unprecedented and unusual war, involving confinement of the rural Attic population inside the city walls and confining offensive operations to relatively low-cost, low-risk coastal raids) only when the Spartans, against expectation, reject arbitration.

Far from challenging Sparta with destruction of the existing power balance, Periclean Athens offered to accept the limits imposed by the *status quo ante*. It is thus Sparta's decision (again, goaded by Corinth) to reject arbitration rather than Athens' provocations that precipitated the war.<sup>125</sup>

From an analytical standpoint, the Thucydides Trap fallaciously presumes to take local, idiosyncratic circumstances and elevate them to the level of eternal principle. To the extent that Thucydides judges the interplay of *prophasis* and *aitiai* to invoke *anangke* (necessity) and ignite the Peloponnesian War, that compulsion is narrowly and specifically cited as existing between *those* two Greek city-states at *that* time, under the influence of particular, specified circumstances. Allison reduces a "concatenation of circumstances"<sup>126</sup> to simple declaration of inevitability, even though Thucydides neither asserts a normative principle about the collision of rising/ruling powers nor provides an adequate basis for inferring one in the pre-war interaction of Sparta and Athens. As his inclusion of both the *Archaeology* and the *Pentecontaetia* as formal digressions in Book 1 of the *History* makes overwhelmingly clear, even if Spartan fear of rising Athenian power contributed to the outbreak of war in 431, it did so for reasons uniquely and inseparably linked to 5<sup>th</sup>-century Greece and 50 years of dynamic, shared history between its two most powerful states.

It is also important to recall that Thucydides is writing about events that have *already occurred*, and is therefore attempting to reason out why those events *must* have occurred as they did. This logical, backward-looking perspective has nothing in common with Allison's effort to contrive an analytical framework for predicting *future* events.<sup>127</sup> Looking back, the outbreak of the war would naturally appear *inevitable* in the strict sense that it had actually happened. Martin Ostwald frames the conclusion: "If the 'truest *prophasis*' (ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις) of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war is that, in view of the situation prevailing in the Greek world at the time, it was necessary for it to break out, we may assume that [Thucydides] selected his facts with a view to demonstrating this necessity."<sup>128</sup>

More broadly, the difficulty and unevenness of Thucydides' text necessitates a quotient of humility in attempting to distill from it principles applicable over time. The historian spent 30 years or more in composition, but left no account of a quarter of the war. What we do have is incomplete and unevenly edited; sections were written at widely disparate times and we have

no way of knowing how much the author deemed final. As Anthony Andrewes notes, “Clearly there is much to be learnt from the study of Thucydides, but too much insistence on the unity of his thought may be dangerous.”<sup>129</sup>

More to the point, keying analysis solely to the power dynamic between rival states to the exclusion of other considerations (including quality of leadership; system of government; mode of decisionmaking; domestic stability; economic interest; structure, will, and capacity of military alliance structures; culture; and values) trivializes and oversimplifies a complex analysis. Allison’s posited understanding of the danger of great power rivalry based solely on 1.23.6 is thus an absurdly narrow view of what Thucydides has to say about inter-state relations. As Morley points out, it would be equally (in)defensible to seize on the Melian Dialogue and argue that Thucydides believes powerful states can do whatever they wish, including committing genocide, without fear of consequences.<sup>130</sup>

In his many published references to the risk of a U.S.-China war, Allison confutes disparate factors—including the prospect of economic *sorpasso*, the risk of unplanned escalation consequent to a minor military incident (over island claims), and the possibility of regional escalation due to North Korean actions—and calls them all the Thucydides Trap. Yet if North Korea initiates or catalyzes a war in Asia (a feasible scenario, as it has been for more than half a century), that conflict will *not* be the result of a Thucydides Trap.<sup>131</sup> Allison’s expression of concern about escalation from minor irritants (*aitiai*) in the South (or East) China Sea is particularly un-Thucydidean, as the Peloponnesian War did not come about in that way. As argued above, without an insurmountable *prophasis* of fear and mistrust built up over at least half a century, the *aitiai* that touched off the war need not have resulted in conflict at all.

The interplay of *prophasis* and *aitiai* yielded—within the state decisionmaking apparatus of both Sparta and Athens—a heightened probability of war, but by no means a certainty. War was not inevitable, as both Athens and Sparta reviewed their capabilities and options at length before adopting a carefully considered choice to go to war. They were not overtaken by events (like European leaders at the outbreak of World War I).

Finally, it is striking that Allison has apparently made no effort in 6 years to formulate a more rigorous linkage between his theory and the actual text of the *History*. Instead, he and his students at Harvard’s Belfer Center have attempted to buttress it with a “Thucydides Trap Case File” (see appendix) purporting to list examples of Thucydides Trap interaction—that is, the clash of “rising” and “ruling” powers—from centuries past. In 12 of 16 cited instances in which a *rising* power bumps heads with a *ruling* power, the result is war. When new Chinese leader Xi Jinping visited the United States for the first time in 2013, Allison invoked this 12-for-16 batting

average in asking rhetorically, "Can Mr. Obama and Mr. Xi successfully defy those odds?"<sup>132</sup>

This tendentious question invites a response. Those "odds" are based on the Case File, which in fact provides no basis at all. Its crippling deficiencies include:

- Selection bias. The list is meant to support a normative theory valid worldwide, for all cultures, and across the span of human history; yet the *very* few examples selected cover only the past five centuries, with a near-total emphasis on Europe. The sample set appears arbitrary. Why *only* these conflicts? If the rising/ruling dynamic is to be accepted as a *normal* pattern in human behavior, why are no examples adduced from Africa, Asia, or the indigenous peoples of the Americas or Oceania?<sup>133</sup>
- Incommensurability. The circumstances and decision mechanics that led to a "war" or "no war" outcome in the cited cases are so disparate and dissimilar—including a mix of idiosyncratic megalomania, religious passion, and a few instances of "modern" racist and nationalist impulses—that the supposed working of some single, unified, and inexorable theory in all is simply not visible. The radical asymmetry of the cases deprives the "file" of explanatory power and coherence.
- The changing nature of power. European conflicts in the centuries cited often involved rival claims to land, as the "rise" of a state typically meant territorial expansion. No such zero-sum problem exists between the United States and China today.
- The changing character of war. The appendix shows that the three most recent cited cases in the original (2015) iteration of the Case File—all dating from the age of nuclear weapons—resulted in "no war." This begs the question of whether the advent of nuclear weapons has negated the supposedly "inevitable" workings of the Thucydides Trap.<sup>134</sup>

It was perhaps to obviate such criticism that the Belfer Center took the astonishing step of altering the data set. An updated (2017) Case File chart prepared for the publication of *Destined for War* deletes one example (1970s–1980s: Soviet Union [ruling] vs. Japan [rising]: no war) and substitutes another not previously included in the data set (late 15<sup>th</sup> century: Portugal [ruling] vs. Spain [rising]: no war). The effect is to eliminate the clumping of "no war" outcomes in the post–World War II age of nuclear weapons and create the visual impression of a Thucydides Trap mechanism that yields "war" and "no war" outcomes in a fairly even distribution over the selected 500-year period.

This obvious rigging of the "research" vitiates any authority the Case File might have had. It is simply not a credible body of academic research on which a hypothesis might be ventured. Rather, it is manifestly an *ex post facto* contrivance keyed to a prefabricated theory.<sup>135</sup>

Morley has characterized the Thucydides Trap as a “meme,” lamenting the all-too-familiar phenomenon of pulling out isolated ideas from Thucydides or lines from his characters’ speeches and giving them marquee treatment as principles or rules. Unfortunately, he concludes,

*This is the Thucydides that, clearly, many readers want, especially when it comes to international relations; the fact that this isn’t the sort of Thucydides we actually have doesn’t really matter when we have a whole structure of discourse that turns his work into precisely the sort of pedlar of foreign policy maxims for which there’s a demand.*<sup>136</sup>

### **Conclusions: Destined for Difficult Diplomacy, Not for War**

Over the past 6 years, Graham Allison has tirelessly pushed a dark and downbeat message on U.S.-China relations: Both “Trump and Xi view the nation the other leads as the principal obstacle to achieving their core ambition.” They need to find consensus on “a new form of great power relations,” but “if they settle for business as usual, we are likely to get history as usual, where the odds of war are against us.” Provocative maneuvering by Taiwan could become “the shortest path to war between the United States and China.” Overall, war is “more likely than not” (which presumably accounts for the absence of a question mark in the primary component of his book’s title: *Destined for War*).<sup>137</sup>

As Allison himself points out, however,

*To recognise powerful structural factors is not to argue that leaders are prisoners of the iron laws of history. It is rather to help us appreciate the magnitude of the challenge. If leaders in China and the United States perform no better than their predecessors in classical Greece, or Europe at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will cite Thucydides in explaining the catastrophe that follows.*<sup>138</sup>

This view is consonant with the central argument of this case study: that it is the performance of leaders (acting in the interest of their citizens and aided by insights from Thucydides’ *History*) rather than any “iron law” of inevitability that will determine whether war awaits us in coming weeks, months, or years. As Nye puts it, “The task for international relations students is to build on the past but not be trapped by it.”<sup>139</sup> Accordingly, it is necessary for the United

States, together with its allies, to think creatively about how the region's future will be different from its past. Any attempt to contain or prevent China's "rise"—a term portending alteration of geopolitical norms to accommodate the objective fact of China's size and economic capacity but also embodying immense latitude in how that might occur—would be both foolish and unattainable. Whether or not it is described as a "new form of great power relations," adjustment is occurring and will continue. The interaction of leadership and statecraft from both sides will determine the degree to which the adjustment is gradual, mutually consensual, mutually beneficial, and broadly constructive. What is needed, as Zoellick points out, is mutual commitment to avoiding conflict in the process:

*China and the United States each have good, self-interested reasons to pursue structural reforms and global rebalancing. Yet cooperation can boost mutual prospects and the likelihood of success. Moreover, the effectiveness of Chinese and U.S. reforms will boost global economic conditions and enhance the likelihood of structural reforms elsewhere.*<sup>140</sup>

As Eikenberry suggests, the institutions associated with the U.S.-led post-World War II international order (the Washington Consensus) are capable of adjusting to new realities. They are not mere instruments of American power but the foundations of a global system that has proved beneficial for both China and the United States. They can become more inclusive and "less American" without undermining the prosperity or the vital security interests of either side.

For Thucydides, war occurs through human agency and as a consequence of human nature. The Greek civilization he portrays cannot imagine the elimination of war from human experience, and the historian himself is convinced that human nature is unchanging through history and does not vary appreciably from one place to another.<sup>141</sup> The *History* is thus meant to be a portrayal of typical, characteristic behavior likely to be recognized, understood, and (as appropriate) imitated (or eschewed) by people of the future. Thucydides ventures no comment on how people *ought* to be, as his aim is to describe them as they *are*. His vivid presentation of war in his time, its origins, and its toxic effect on human values and behavior is moving and intellectually engaging, but applying it to contemporary experience is not straightforward, even though that is exactly what the historian invites his future readers to do.<sup>142</sup> The *History* is not a policy manual or even a linear chronicle of events. Distilling, to say nothing of applying, Thucydidean "lessons" is not straightforward. As Romilly states:

*Lessons are implicit in Thucydides' account, not explicit. Thucydides generally does not signal his meaning overtly, but lets it emerge from clues in the text, in particular from repeated words and phrases and from the nearly mathematical rigor of the relationships he draws between separate events. This coherence is the principal characteristic of Thucydides' text, the product of [his] raison.*<sup>143</sup>

It also bears noting that Thucydides' Greek text is uniquely difficult. Gomme's classic commentary and Simon Hornblower's recent reboot highlight hundreds of instances in which comprehending his exact intent, much less rendering it in clear English, poses a serious challenge. As Jeremy Mynott puts it, "The meaning is sometimes highly compressed and, as with poetry, resists decompression."<sup>144</sup>

The book's value to contemporary strategists and policymakers is not to be found in any predictive formula readily applicable to future events but in the lucid exposition of human behavior (both individual and collective) in the shaping of political action—especially matters of war and peace. While it would be foreign to Thucydides' intent to read the *History* for straightforward predictions about the future, its lessons about the way Fear, Honor, and Interest drive political outcomes—and, moreover, the way the seven listed "traps" can become either pitfalls or tools for managing and potentially mitigating crisis—are certainly relevant to the current security dilemma as it exists in the South and East China seas.

In addition, it must be said the rational imperative of U.S. national security policy requires prudential readiness for conflict with a roster of potential adversaries including China, along with Iran, North Korea, and Russia. Our knowledge of history and our understanding of the contemporary world demand nothing less. At the same time, Thucydides and common sense concur in demanding that a rash assumption that war is inevitable is to be resisted, not least because it can become self-fulfilling.

Yet the temptation to embrace a glib assumption—either that interdependent globalization will render war impossible or that hegemonic Chinese policies will render war inevitable—is sure to remain strong as evidence of China's increasing wealth, military capacity, global influence, and even soft power continues to mount at a torrid pace. Headlines bring new examples on a daily basis. To cite only a few recent examples:

- China's Singles Day, the Alibaba Group's annual one-day shopping festival, initiated in 2009, registered a record \$25.4 billion in sales in its November 11, 2016, iteration. This reflects an increase of 39 percent over the previous year and exceeds the value of the U.S. Black Friday (\$5.03 billion) and Cyber Monday (\$6.6 billion) combined.<sup>145</sup>



- On May 5, 2017, China's first domestically manufactured jetliner successfully completed its maiden voyage.<sup>146</sup>

Even in the realm of media soft power, Chinese influence is visible as never before:

- DC Comics' latest reboot of its superhero properties included creation not only of a young Chinese hero with the powers of Superman—"The New Super-Man!"—but also an entire "Justice League" of Chinese variants of Batman, Green Lantern, and other popular DC superheroes.<sup>147</sup>
- In Marvel comics, the year-ending 2016 Spider-Man "annual" features a story in which the New York-based wall-crawler pays his first visit to Shanghai.
- In November 2016, Chinese billionaire Wang Jianlin's Dalian Wanda Group paid a billion dollars to purchase Dick Clark Productions, which produces the Golden Globe Awards, American Music Awards, and Billboard Music Awards, among others.<sup>148</sup>
- China is the world's leading source of rare earth minerals, producing 95 percent of the world's total and estimated to possess 70 percent of the world's reserves. China will thus have a vital interest in global tech production, from magnets in wind turbines and electric car motors to smartphones and flatscreen TVs, for the foreseeable future.<sup>149</sup>

The well of similar stories is not likely to run dry soon, even though the 2017 World Happiness Report shows China stuck in 79<sup>th</sup> place (out of 155 countries) compared to the U.S. ranking at 14<sup>th</sup> place.<sup>150</sup> Economists, politicians, and strategic analysts around the world will, justifiably, continue devoting enormous attention to political, economic, and security-oriented interactions between Beijing and Washington. While such data are useful to the strategic decisionmaker, there is no basis (at least not in the pages of Thucydides' *History*) for positing that China's rising levels of income, material comfort, economic influence, and military power by themselves make war inevitable. Rather, statistical metrics of the U.S.-China relationship provide a sense of the complexity and dynamism that leaders on both sides must take into consideration. They render peace neither more nor less uncertain, and war neither more nor less likely. What is certain is that the economic, political, and military interaction of the United States and China going forward will be both complex and difficult, demanding that policymakers be on top of their game—and that they avail themselves of analytical advantage to be gleaned from Thucydides.

### **Geography, History, Destiny**

No matter how much geography we might learn in coming years from wars and rumors of wars, there is no basis for suggesting that it is a divinely decreed instrument of instruction. On

the contrary, U.S. experience in the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Indo-Pacific region reminds us that war can be averted even beyond what may seem the last possible moment.

Though largely forgotten today, the protracted crisis over the Quemoy and Matsu island groups during the Eisenhower administration brought the United States and China to the brink of nuclear war. In September 1954, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended the use of nuclear weapons against mainland China. Eisenhower demurred, and diplomatic efforts proceeded in tandem with military developments. In February 1955, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill warned against a U.S. nuclear strike, but a few weeks later American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles stated publicly that the United States was “seriously considering” exactly such a step. It seemed that alternatives to war had been exhausted and that conflict was truly *inevitable*.

But the war decision never came. The Quemoy Island group, today better known as Kinmen Island, has become an important trading point between China and Taiwan. Old defensive works, including tunnels excavated as shelters for Nationalist troops against mainland artillery and air attack, are a popular attraction for tourists from both Taiwan and the mainland. The underlying dispute over the status of Quemoy and Matsu (and of Taiwan itself) has not been solved officially, but prudent leadership on both sides, combined with judicious action by allies to uphold the rule of law and avoid unnecessary escalation over a sustained period, allowed the moment of danger to pass. It is far from inevitable that most of us will master Asian geography, but it is no more so that actual war will compel us to do so.

This case study has argued that Graham Allison’s Thucydides Trap metaphor falls short as a predictive framework in international relations and is, moreover, not properly attributable to Thucydides at all. The historian of the Peloponnesian War identifies Fear, Honor, and Interest as the prime considerations in political decisionmaking (in both peace and war), as well as decisionmaking rationales and factors that contribute to a given political decision (including the decision to go to war), but the war decision is *always* an act of will rather than a stroke of fate administered blindly by *Tyké*, *Fortuna*, or Providence. Humans are the agents and instigators of war, not merely its passive victims.<sup>151</sup> It is not only inaccurate but also pernicious to argue, as Allison does, that war can properly be viewed in terms analogous to a thunderstorm—a dangerous event to be dreaded and feared but one that will *inescapably* result when certain atmospheric conditions—all beyond human control—occur. It is thus necessary to reject the notion of war as an inexorable phenomenon to which human beings may be “destined.”<sup>152</sup> Rather, citizens and their leaders must remain mindful that their own decisions will result either in causing war or in preventing it. This is no less true today in the South China Sea—or in the Congo, Iraq, Libya,

Mali, Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, or Yemen—than in the Mediterranean world of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Thucydides provides two different explanations of the importance of the war that dominated his life and shattered the brief Golden Age of classical Greece. In 1.1 he writes that he believed at the outset that it would be “a great war, and more worthy of relation [that is, ‘of being talked about’ (*axiologōtaton*/ἄξιολογώτατον)] than any that had preceded it” due to the impressive size and character of its motion, energy, and daring. In 1.23, however, he indicates that the Peloponnesian War was unsurpassed, eclipsing the Persian wars, because of the great sufferings (*pathēmata*/παθήματα) that it brought to so many people over so long a time (27 years):

*Never had so many cities been taken and laid desolate (the old inhabitants sometimes being removed to make room for others); never was there so much banishing and bloodshedding, now on the field of battle, now in political strife.*

It is such human costs that must be kept uppermost in mind through the coming years of evolving bilateral relations between the United States and China. Just as the Peloponnesian War did not occur as the preordained consequence of a destiny-shaping Thucydides Trap, war between rising and settled powers<sup>153</sup> in our own time is not inevitable. Indeed, expectations of imminent conflict may have diminished over the 6 years since the Thucydides Trap metaphor entered the public eye.<sup>154</sup>

War remains possible, nonetheless, and leaders on both sides must act wisely, mindful of their own national interests and the “traps” always latent in great power relations, to avoid an unnecessary and unwanted conflict that would bring suffering and bloodshed far beyond anything Thucydides ever imagined. As Eikenberry says, success will be impossible if leaders in Washington and Beijing indiscriminately cast China and the United States as tragic actors condemned to reenact the Peloponnesian War. In this endeavor, American and Chinese leaders might take counsel from the Spartan envoys who treated for peace after the unexpected Athenian victory at Pylos:

*If great enmities are ever to be really settled, we think it will be, not by the system of revenge and military success, and by forcing an opponent to swear to a treaty to his disadvantage; but when the more fortunate combatant waives his privileges and, guided by gentler feelings, conquers his rival in generosity and accords peace on more moderate conditions than expected. . . . And men more often act*

*in this manner toward their greatest enemies than where the quarrel is of less importance.*<sup>155</sup>

Graham Allison has declared tirelessly over the past 6 years that Washington and Beijing “are on a collision course for war.”<sup>156</sup> If they are, the factors that may drive the two nations toward conflict do not stem from a normative “dynamic” of interaction between “rising” and “ruling” powers discerned by Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. As with the Spartans and Athenians twenty-five centuries ago, future relations between China and the United States will be shaped by the idiosyncratic actions and decisions of their leaders, who will be spurred by domestic opinion and guided by the perceived requirements of Fear (national security), Honor (national status and societal values), and Interest (prosperity and economic advantage). Those leaders can nevertheless find beneficial counsel in the pages of the *History*, as noted above.

As it has since the flashpoints of the 1950s, and even more so since China’s economic transformation in the 1980s, successful management of the bilateral relationship will demand continual attention at the highest levels of leadership. As Allison points out, it will also demand “a depth of mutual understanding not seen since the Henry Kissinger-Zhou Enlai conversations that reestablished U.S.-China relations in the 1970s.”<sup>157</sup> Perhaps reading Thucydides together can help Americans and Chinese begin to build such understanding, including progress toward a mutually agreed “new form of great power relations” that assures prosperity and security for both sides and stability for the region. While U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific region necessitate prudent readiness for the worst, it is possible that that new model could take the form of mutually beneficial, positive-sum engagement.

Thucydides may well be expressing his own view when he has Corinthian envoys declare that “There is . . . no advantage in reflections on the past further than may be of service to the present.”<sup>158</sup> If reading Thucydides’ dense and provocative *History* can reinforce our confidence that war is never inevitable—that its outbreak is always a consequence of human intellect and action, and that there are qualities of governance and citizenship that can help us avoid it—then the advantage will indeed be great.

## Appendix

2015 Version: Belfer Center Thucydides's Trap Case File

	Period		Ruling Power	Rising Power		Result
1	First half of 16th century		France	Hapsburgs		War
2	16th–17th centuries		Hapsburgs	Ottoman Empire		War
3	17th century		Hapsburgs	Sweden		War
4	17th century		Dutch Republic	England		War
5	Late 17th–early 18th centuries		France	Great Britain		War
6	Late 18th–early 19th centuries		United Kingdom	France		War
7	Mid-19th century		United Kingdom, France	Russia		War
8	19th century		France	Germany		War
9	Late 19th–early 20th centuries		Russia, China	Japan		War
10	Early 20th century		United Kingdom	United States		No war
11	Early 20th century		Russia, U.K., France	Germany		War
12	Mid-20th century		Soviet Union, U.K., France	Germany		War
13	Mid-20th century		United States	Japan		War
14	1970s–1980s		Soviet Union	Japan		No war
15	1940s–1980s		United States	Soviet Union		No war
16	1990s–present		United Kingdom, France	Germany		No war

2017 Version: Belfer Center Thucydides's Trap Case File

Nº	Period	Ruling Power	Rising Power	Domain	Result
1	Late 15 <sup>th</sup> century	 Portugal	 Spain	Global empire and trade	No war
2	First half of 16 <sup>th</sup> century	 France	 Habsburgs	Land power in western Europe	War
3	16 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> centuries	 Habsburgs	 Ottoman Empire	Land power in central and eastern Europe, sea power in the Mediterranean	War
4	First half of 17 <sup>th</sup> century	 Habsburgs	 Sweden	Land and sea power in northern Europe	War
5	Mid-to-late 17 <sup>th</sup> century	 Dutch Republic	 England	Global empire, sea power, and trade	War
6	Late 17 <sup>th</sup> to mid-18 <sup>th</sup> centuries	 France	 Great Britain	Global empire and European land power	War
7	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> and early 19 <sup>th</sup> centuries	 United Kingdom	 France	Land and sea power in Europe	War
8	Mid-19 <sup>th</sup> century	 France and United Kingdom	 Russia	Global empire, influence in Central Asia and eastern Mediterranean	War
9	Mid-19 <sup>th</sup> century	 France	 Germany	Land power in Europe	War
10	Late 19 <sup>th</sup> and early 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries	 China and Russia	 Japan	Land and sea power in East Asia	War
11	Early-20 <sup>th</sup> century	 United Kingdom	 United States	Global economic dominance and naval supremacy in the Western Hemisphere	No war
12	Early-20 <sup>th</sup> century	 United Kingdom supported by France, Russia	 Germany	Land power in Europe and global sea power	War
13	Mid-20 <sup>th</sup> century	 Soviet Union, France, UK	 Germany	Land and sea power in Europe	War
14	Mid-20 <sup>th</sup> century	 United States	 Japan	Sea power and influence in the Asia-Pacific region	War
15	1940s–1980s	 United States	 Soviet Union	Global power	No war
16	1990s–present	 United Kingdom and France	 Germany	Political influence in Europe	No war

Source: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Except where otherwise stated, all quotations from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* cited in this case study are drawn from Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1996), hereafter, *History*. See Graham Allison et al., Thucydides Trap Forum, transcript, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, March 22, 2017, available at <[www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Thucydides%27s%20Trap%20Forum%20Transcript%20-%20March%2022%202017.pdf](http://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Thucydides%27s%20Trap%20Forum%20Transcript%20-%20March%2022%202017.pdf)>. (Allison's reference comes from Thuc. 1.23.6.). English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who found in Thucydides what he deemed a useful framework for understanding the English Civil Wars (1639–1651) of his own time, was the first to translate the *History* directly from Greek into English in 1628. See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Thomas Hobbes (London: Bohn, 1843).

<sup>2</sup> The state's decision to go to war, or not, is of course a matter of the utmost importance to every citizen, although not all governing systems allow the citizen meaningful scope to influence that decision, or to hold government decisionmakers accountable for its consequences. The Sovereign People of classical Athens, the world's first direct democracy, were especially close to the national decisionmaking process. Male citizens 20 years of age or older debated options in the *Ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία), or Assembly, and if they decided by simple majority vote to commit the state to war, the same men returned the next day with armor and weapons ready to fight.

<sup>3</sup> Garson O'Toole, "War Is God's Way of Teaching Us Geography," *QuoteInvestigator.com*, available at <<http://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/05/19/geography/>>. "Garson O'Toole," pseudonym of the online Quote Investigator, believes this witticism (which over many years has been erroneously attributed to Ambrose Bierce or Mark Twain) may be more than a century old. Sadly, some important geographical lessons imparted by war (or by the prospect of war) seem perishable, and thus require periodic renewal.

<sup>4</sup> Robert B. Norris, "Quemoy and Matsu: A Historical Footnote Revisited," *AmericanDiplomacy.org*, November 2010, available at <[www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2010/0912/comm/norris\\_quemoymatsu.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2010/0912/comm/norris_quemoymatsu.html)>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 36. The Joint Chiefs of Staff reportedly recommended a nuclear strike against China during the first crisis, as Chinese diplomats reportedly recalled, and complained in expressing their own veiled nuclear threats, in conjunction with the third.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Iskyan, "China's Middle Class Is Exploding," *Business Insider*, August 27, 2016, available at <[www.businessinsider.com/chinas-middle-class-is-exploding-2016-8](http://www.businessinsider.com/chinas-middle-class-is-exploding-2016-8)>. Overall bilateral trade volume declined slightly in 2016 and 2017, as did the U.S. trade deficit with China (\$346 billion for 2016); Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). In *Destined for War*, Allison amply highlights many such statistical metrics of China's rapid economic rise. He cites the prophetic pronouncements of Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015)—Singapore's first Prime Minister—who might be compared to Pericles in both length of service and magnitude of the positive transformation he led for his country, in characterizing China as "the biggest player in the history of the world." It is notable, in this regard, that Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) visited

Singapore for widely celebrated talks with Lee Kuan Yew just 2 months before China's historic "opening" to the global economy in January 1979.

<sup>7</sup> See U.S. Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with China," available at <[www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html](http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html)>. Between 1988 and 2008, middle class income grew by 70 percent in China, compared to only 4 percent in the United States. Economists speculate endlessly about how long China's unprecedented growth can continue and whether the country can avoid social fissures and domestic instability from income inequality, environmental degradation, demands for political pluralism, or other factors. The overarching reality is clear: Export-led growth has led China to the point of "challenging" the United States in certain statistical metrics traditionally associated with national power, a concept resistant to precise evaluation.

<sup>8</sup> See appendix. Because Allison and others routinely cite China's provocative policies and practices in the South and East China seas in conjunction with the Thucydides Trap concept, this snapshot of the issue is included to provide context and perspective. Readers interested in the legal and historical origins of the conflicting claims of China and other states in the region can consult the excellent Department of State *Limits in the Seas* volumes. Also, Eleanor Freund's "Practical Guide," published by Harvard's Belfer Center, offers detailed information in a uniquely user-friendly format. Finally, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (affiliated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies) provides an indispensable online window on regional trends unfolding over such vast expanses of ocean that up-to-date facts and analytical coherence are often difficult to obtain. See Department of State, *Limits in the Seas*, 6 vols. (Washington, DC: Department of State [Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs]); See also Eleanor Freund, *Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea: A Practical Guide: Special Report* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center, June 2017), available at <[www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/SCS%20Report%20-%20web.pdf](http://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/SCS%20Report%20-%20web.pdf)>; and "China's Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 9, 2017, available at <<https://amti.csis.org/paracels-beijings-other-buildup/>>. It is beyond the scope of this essay to evaluate the conflicting claims and operational measures undertaken by the rival claimants, beyond advocating a strictly fact-based approach both to describing such claims and to adducing comments from Thucydides' *History* that are potentially relevant to those claims and to the broader U.S.-China relationship. That said, while China has been aggressive in asserting its maritime claims, particularly since 2014, it is useful to keep in view countervailing arguments like those of Taiwan-based analyst Michael Turton. He sees Beijing's contention that its claims date back to time *literally* immemorial as a powerful, little-remarked and utterly spurious assertion of Chinese soft power: "Outsiders view [China] as exotic and opaque, giving undeserved weight to its territorial claims on its neighbors, all 20<sup>th</sup> century re-interpretations. . . . China makes its spurious claims reinforce each other [through] its creation of a *faux* historical continuity which can then be quote-mined and re-interpreted for support for China's modern and wholly anachronistic expansionist territorial claims." See Michael A. Turton, "Constructing China's Claims to the Senkaku," November 6, 2013, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2013/11/constructing-chinas-claims-to-the-senkaku/>>.

<sup>9</sup> "China's Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels."

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Jennings, "China Calmed Asian Maritime Dispute in 2017 Without Ceding Sovereignty," VOANews.com, December 11, 2017, available at <[www.voanews.com/a/south-china-sea-disputes-calm-ing-down/4158167.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/south-china-sea-disputes-calm-ing-down/4158167.html)>.



<sup>11</sup> David E. Sanger, "Superpower and Upstart: Sometimes It Ends Well," *New York Times*, January 22, 2011, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/weekinreview/23sanger.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/weekinreview/23sanger.html)>.

<sup>12</sup> The G-2 concept, suggested early in the Obama administration by American economist C. Fred Bergsten and subsequently endorsed with varying emphasis by former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Scottish historian Niall Ferguson, and former World Bank president and former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, among others, appeared to elicit little enthusiasm from officials of either China or the United States.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Schott, "The Thucydides Trap," *New York Times*, January 31, 2011, available at <[http://schott.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/31/the-thucydides-trap/?\\_r=0](http://schott.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/31/the-thucydides-trap/?_r=0)>.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), chap. 1, available at <[http://165.193.140.14/assets/hip/us/hip\\_us\\_pearsonhighered/samplechapter/0205778747.pdf](http://165.193.140.14/assets/hip/us/hip_us_pearsonhighered/samplechapter/0205778747.pdf)>. Nye is a long-time Thucydides enthusiast and knows the *History* well. He included a masterful short summary of Thucydides' analysis of the causes of the Peloponnesian War in his 1993 book *Understanding International Conflicts* and notes in his introduction: "Some aspects of international politics have not changed since Thucydides; there is a certain logic of hostility, a dilemma about security that goes with interstate politics. Alliances, balances of power, and choices in policy between war and compromise have remained similar over the millennia."

<sup>15</sup> Munir Akram, "Rising Dragon, Wounded Eagle," *Dawn* (Pakistan), April 16, 2016, available at <[www.dawn.com/news/1327278/rising-dragon-wounded-eagle](http://www.dawn.com/news/1327278/rising-dragon-wounded-eagle)>.

<sup>16</sup> Allison, *Destined for War*. In *Destined for War*, the 10<sup>th</sup> of Allison's "Twelve Clues for Peace" acknowledges as much: "Thick economic interdependence raises the cost—and thus lowers the likelihood—of war." Yet the book, like Allison's many published articles and recorded interviews on the Thucydides Trap concept over recent years, presents such positive observations within the context of an overarching view that war is, as the title declares, *destined*.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Eikenberry, "Thucydides Trap," The United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, August 1, 2014, available at <[www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/thucydides-trap](http://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/thucydides-trap)>.

<sup>18</sup> John Mearsheimer, "Can China Rise Peacefully?" lecture, University of Chicago, December 18, 2013, video, available at <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DMn4PmiDeQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DMn4PmiDeQ)>.

<sup>19</sup> Graham Allison, "Thucydides's Trap Has Been Sprung in the Pacific," *Financial Times*, August 21, 2012, available at <[www.ft.com/content/5d695b5a-ead3-11e1-984b-00144feab49a](http://www.ft.com/content/5d695b5a-ead3-11e1-984b-00144feab49a)>.

<sup>20</sup> Graham Allison, "Obama and Xi Must Think Broadly to Avoid a Classic Trap," *New York Times*, June 6, 2013, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/opinion/Obama-and-Xi-must-think-broadly-to-avoid-a-classic-trap.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/opinion/Obama-and-Xi-must-think-broadly-to-avoid-a-classic-trap.html)>. The appendix shows the Belfer Center's Case File, which purports to provide a historical foundation to the notion of a Thucydides Trap as a normative pattern in the encounter of "rising" and "ruling" powers during the past five centuries of European history.

<sup>21</sup> Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, available at <[www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/)>.

<sup>22</sup> Sharon Wilke, "Will the U.S. and China Collide in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" *Belfer Center Newsletter*, Spring 2015, available at <[www.belfercenter.org/publication/will-us-and-china-collide-21st-century](http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/will-us-and-china-collide-21st-century)>. The term *sorpasso* (Italian for "overtaking") has languished long on the sidelines of political science waiting to

be put back into the game in a memorable way. In the 1970s and early 1980s, it was invoked in reference to the Italian Communist Party's (ultimately unsuccessful) bid to overtake the Christian Democrats as Italy's largest political party. In the 1990s, Spain's Communist Party adopted the term as it nearly (but not quite) overtook the Socialist Workers Party as the country's leading party of the left. In 1987, economists announced (to little fanfare) that Italy had achieved *sorpasso* by overtaking Britain as the world's fifth largest economy in nominal GDP terms. Britain regained its former status in 1997, only to be surpassed again by Italy in 2009, which prompted the Italian ambassador in London to hail a *secondo sorpasso*. Each time, the statistical event had no measurable impact on life in the real world. In 2010, China's GDP surpassed Japan's to rank behind only the United States. This *sorpasso*, similarly, brought no visible change to bilateral relations or the power dynamic within the Indo-Pacific region. Renowned scholar of strategy and international relations Niall Ferguson became the first to apply the term to Allison's Thucydides Trap metaphor in a March 22, 2017, Harvard roundtable event to promote the impending publication of *Destined for War*. At least in a small way, this background suggests that measuring how (and whether) a moment of *sorpasso* actually *matters* in relations among states may be more difficult than calculating the statistical metric(s) that confirms its existence.

<sup>23</sup> Allison, "Thucydides's Trap Has Been Sprung in the Pacific."

<sup>24</sup> Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?"

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Allison clearly intends the term *Thucydidean proportions* to convey a sense of great magnitude, although the term has no visible foundation in Thucydides' *History*. At about the same time, Harvard's Belfer Center Web site added a brief account of Allison's elegantly simple methodology for selecting the 16 historical vignettes in his Case File. Taking a "rapid shift in a regional balance of power between a major ruling power and a rival that could displace it" as the independent variable, and "war" as the dependent variable, Allison and his students reviewed European conflicts since 1500 for instances that appear to involve a flashpoint between ruling and ruled.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> See "A Conversation with General Martin Dempsey," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, May 2, 2012; and Martin E. Dempsey, "Remarks and Q&A," Joint Warfighting Conference & Exposition, Virginia Beach, VA, May 16, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Dingding Chen, "Defining a 'New Type of Major Power Relations,'" *The Diplomat*, November 8, 2014, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/defining-a-new-type-of-major-power-relations/>>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Mackie, "Malcolm Turnbull, and Thucydides, and All That," *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 17, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> See Robert B. Zoellick, "U.S., China and Thucydides: How Can Washington and Beijing Avoid Typical Patterns of Distrust and Fear?" *The National Interest*, July/August 2013, available at <<http://nationalinterest.org/article/us-china-thucydides-8642>>. The fact that both U.S. and Chinese officials over the past 6 years have made a point of speaking to the Thucydides Trap concept may reflect an important factor that will serve to diminish the likelihood of conflict: that the Chinese leadership is (a) attuned to influential trends in American academic and political discourse and (b) inclined to enter that discourse with the aim of lowering bilateral tension.

<sup>32</sup> Zhang Feng et al., "Thucydides Trap Not Etched in Stone," *China Daily*, August 20, 2015, available at <[www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-08/20/content\\_21655686.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-08/20/content_21655686.htm)>. Feng suggests *Xuncius Breakthrough* as an alternative to the phrase *Thucydides Trap*. Chinese philosopher Xuncius (313–238 BCE) declared that a set of well-planned manners or actions, as opposed to selfish designs, can help avoid conflicts and facilitate cooperation. Hence, Xuncius's theory can lead China and the United States toward sustainable cooperation.

<sup>33</sup> See Renée Jeffery, "Evaluating the 'China Threat': Power Transition Theory, the Successor-State Image, and the Dangers of Historical Analogies," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 2 (June 2009), 309–324, available at <[www.researchgate.net/publication/44190679\\_Evaluating\\_the\\_%27China\\_threat%27\\_power\\_transition\\_theory\\_the\\_successor-state\\_image\\_and\\_the\\_dangers\\_of\\_historical\\_analogies](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/44190679_Evaluating_the_%27China_threat%27_power_transition_theory_the_successor-state_image_and_the_dangers_of_historical_analogies)>. Allison has made no published claim that he is the first analyst to suggest that the rise of a new power can lead to war with the power it appears destined to challenge or supplant. At the same time, it is notable that Allison's published work on the Thucydides Trap concept makes no reference whatsoever to A.F.K. Organski's remarkable effort to devise a quantitative model to measure the impact—including war risk—of a shift in the concentration of political power either on a regional or a global basis. Broadly speaking, the least that can be said is that Organski and Allison examine the same historical phenomenon from perspectives that are broadly synoptic. The fact that Organski's work is included, without elaboration, in a list of "other sources" in the Belfer Center's "Thucydides Project" Web site appears to confirm that Allison's failure to acknowledge an important predecessor is not a mere oversight. See A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 206. Also see "How Is Allison's and Coker's Work on the 'Thucydides Trap' Not Plagiarism?" *Political Science Rumors*, October 21, 2015, available at <[www.poliscirumors.com/topic/how-is-allisons-and-cokers-work-on-the-thucydides-trap-not-plagiarism](http://www.poliscirumors.com/topic/how-is-allisons-and-cokers-work-on-the-thucydides-trap-not-plagiarism)>. Postings in 2015 by purported political science graduate students on the *Political Science Rumors* blog went further, suggesting that Allison is guilty of plagiarism.

<sup>34</sup> Alek Chance, "Is Thucydides Helpful in Explaining Sino-U.S. Relations?" *The Diplomat*, May 20, 2015, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/is-thucydides-helpful-in-explaining-sino-us-relations/>>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Liz Sawyer, "Translating the Untranslatable," review of *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, by Thucydides, ed. and trans. Jeremy Mynott, *The Oxonian Review* 22, no. 6 (July 8, 2013), available at <[www.oxonianreview.org/wp/translating-the-untranslatable/](http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/translating-the-untranslatable/)>. Translating the untranslatable is the resonant phrase of Thomas Hobbes's 1628 text, the first translation of Thucydides' complete *History* directly from Greek into English. Sawyer notes that since Hobbes, there have been 11 full translations of the *History*, as well as numerous revisions of translations and innumerable translations of popular excerpts such as "Pericles' Funeral Oration" and the "Melian Dialogue."

<sup>38</sup> Thuc. 1.22.4.

<sup>39</sup> Seth N. Jaffe, "Thucydides on the Outbreak of War," Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 2012, 6–7, available at <<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.georgetown.thesis>>, underscores this point: "The *History* can be an 'everlasting possession' only if it truly portrays man, only if it reveals that which is typical of him. Thucydides asserts the timelessness of his work on the ground that the future will resemble

the past, because the men of the future will resemble those of the past. History as a singular chain of events will not repeat itself, but the way Thucydides depicts singular events is nonetheless intended to bring out what is universal or representative about them.”

<sup>40</sup> Thuc. 1.22.2–1.22.3.

<sup>41</sup> The early Warring States Period roughly coincides with Thucydides’ lifetime, approximately 460 to 400 BCE. While our biographical knowledge of Thucydides is limited to the few hints provided in the *History* itself, there is no doubt that he existed. Sun Tzu, in contrast, may be a composite, and the *Art of War* attributed to him may be a compilation from multiple sources.

<sup>42</sup> Thuc. 2.35–2.46.

<sup>43</sup> Thuc. 5.84–5.111.

<sup>44</sup> Thuc. 3.70 and 2.47.3–2.54.5.

<sup>45</sup> Thuc. 1.22.4.

<sup>46</sup> Jaffe, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.1253a.20.

<sup>48</sup> Thuc. 1.24.7, 1.32, 1.56, 1.68, 1.120, and 1.140.

<sup>49</sup> This aspect of the *History* appears relevant to recent and ongoing discussion within the United States about the prosecution of current wars and the contemplation of possible future ones. In 2002 and early 2003, advocates of the Iraq war selectively quoted Pericles’ unbending refusal to alter course or make concessions for peace (for example, 1.144.3), but that Athenian policy failed disastrously in the end. Moreover, an attentive reading of the *History* as a whole shows that war, while likely necessary because of human nature, is a “hard master.” It may yield a peace on better terms than those which preceded the war, but the costs will be high and the prospects far from certain.

<sup>50</sup> See Thuc. 1.66.

<sup>51</sup> Thucydides highlights many cases in which the citizens of a *polis* must decide whether or not to go to war. In many of the instances listed here, strong emotions and narrow, short-term agendas get in the way of rational decisionmaking keyed to a dispassionate survey of known facts and available options.

<i>Thuc. Citation</i>	<i>Decision</i>
1.24.7	<i>Corcyraeans</i> must decide whether to settle their disagreement with Epidamnus or enter a war virtually certain to escalate to include Corinth and perhaps other city-states
1.32	<i>Athenians</i> must decide whether to ally with Corcyra in its war with Corinth
1.56	<i>Potidaeans</i> must decide whether to join neighboring <i>poleis</i> in revolt against Athens
1.68	<i>Spartans</i> , after conferring with Corinthians and other allies, must decide to declare war on Athens
1.120	<i>Allies of Sparta</i> must vote on whether to support the Spartan declaration of war on Athens
1.140	<i>Athenians</i> must decide whether to offer terms to Sparta or to enter a state of war

2.2	<i>Plataeans</i> must decide whether to resist a surprise incursion by Theban forces
2.72	<i>Plataeans</i> must decide whether to submit to a Spartan ultimatum to surrender their city, or to remain allies of Athens and thus enemies of Sparta
3.9	<i>Spartans</i> and their allies must decide whether to send forces in support of Mytilene's revolt from Athens
4.59	<i>Sicilians</i> must decide whether to enter an island-wide truce (advocated by Syracuse) and unite in opposition to the Athenian invasion, or continue current local wars
4.85	<i>Acanthians</i> must decide whether to join Brasidas in opposing Athens
4.91	<i>Boeotians</i> must decide whether to pursue and attack the Athenian army or to allow the Athenians to depart their territory without engagement
4.105.1	<i>Amphipolitans</i> must decide whether to admit the Spartan general Brasidas and his besieging army—and thereby revolt from Athens—or remain an ally of Athens and resist him
5.27	<i>Argives</i> must decide whether to go to war with Sparta, a conflict many in Argos regard as "inevitable" because the Peace of Nicias gives Sparta respite from war with Athens
5.29	<i>Mantineans</i> must decide whether to join the Argive alliance with Athens against Sparta
5.84	<i>Melians</i> must decide whether to submit to an Athenian ultimatum or resist militarily
6.1	<i>Athenians</i> must decide whether to invade distant Syracuse
6.76	<i>Camarinaeans</i> must decide whether to remain in alliance with Syracuse or ally with Athens in war against Syracuse

<sup>52</sup> Thuc. 6.10.5.

<sup>53</sup> Thuc. 6.18.3. The Athenians at this point exemplify the Chinese proverb: "He who rides the tiger is afraid to dismount." Alcibiades' argument seems to echo Pericles' own warning that "You cannot decline the burden of empire and still expect to share its honors," (2.63.1) although Pericles also issues a strong admonition against strategic overstretch: I have many other reasons to hope for a favorable outcome [in the war] if you can consent not to combine schemes of fresh conquest with the conduct of the war, and will abstain from willfully involving yourselves in other dangers; indeed, I am more afraid of our own blunders than of the enemy's devices (1.144.1). This remark exemplifies a common aspect of the speeches in the *History*: The speaker's remarks prefigure a subsequent outcome known to the historian (who composed some and edited at least part (perhaps all) of the *History* after the end of the war in 404). The magnitude of the loss suffered in Sicily as a direct consequence of the Athenians' failure to heed this warning makes it likely that this statement by Pericles also reflects the opinion of Thucydides himself.

<sup>54</sup> Thuc. 6.88.10 and 7.18.1.

<sup>55</sup> Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Mind of Thucydides*, ed. Hunter R. Rawlings III, trans. Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 164. This line of analysis is heavily indebted to Romilly, whose 1956 work *Histoire et raison chez Thucydide* transformed Thucydidean studies through her compelling recognition of the organizing intelligence (*raison*) of the historian at work behind the events of the *History*, shaping the reader's perception with precision and purpose. While he creates the illusion of providing vetted, objective facts and allowing the reader to decide how to interpret them, Thucydides succeeds—through the selection of details both included and omitted—the impact of the 44 emotionally freighted (and rhetorically masterful) speeches in guiding the reader's judgment. See Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). As Hammond recounts, prior to Romilly, and the additional impetus of W.R. Connor's *Thucydides* (1984), scholarly attention focused heavily on the "Thucydidean Question": When did the historian form his views on war and human nature? Was it early in the war, as a young man in exile, or after his return to Athens at war's end, as an old man scarred by decades of exile and the Spartan subjugation of his homeland? Which parts of the text reflect the one or the other? Many years of meticulous scouring of the text for *scholia*, *otiosa*, emendations, and clues that a passage is "early" or "late" (in parallel with the emergence of Biblical hermeneutics from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) yielded a detailed survey of the "strata of composition" and revealed indications of incompleteness in the *History*. From the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, scholarly emphasis shifted to examination of the text as a whole, with general acceptance of the expedient assumption that, gaps and imperfections notwithstanding, "it is the text which Thucydides intended his readers to have." Of course neither the "old school" of textual analysis nor post-Romilly Thucydidean scholarship would attempt to seek studies but would seize on a single, brief passage as the full and final articulation of Thucydides' insight into human nature, the human condition, and the reality of war. However, if the author of this case study were compelled to nominate one passage as the essence of Thucydides' insight into human nature, the human condition, and the reality of war, it would be his poignant summation of the catastrophic Athenian invasion of Syracuse, a fellow democracy 800 miles distant by sea: "Few out of many returned home" (ὀλίγοι ἀπὸ πολλῶν ἐπ' οἴκου ἀπενόστησαν) (Thuc. 7.87.6).

<sup>56</sup> Thuc. 1.23.6.

<sup>57</sup> Gomme, in his classic *Commentary* on the *History*, provides a simple, incisive observation regarding the historian's stated goal: "This object has not been achieved." As in the case of Thucydides' clinically detailed account of the plague at Athens (which he intended to help future generations [2.48.3]), we have not recognized or identified the disease and thus have failed to reap the benefit he intended. See Arnold Wycombe Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1945).

<sup>58</sup> Thuc. 1.139.1–2.

<sup>59</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

<sup>60</sup> Thuc. 1.21.1.

<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, Book 1 includes numerous instances in which Thucydides' account of earlier events explicitly agrees with Herodotus, who was about 13 years his elder. Criticism of another historian—Hellanicus of Mytilene (20–25 years older than Thucydides), who is mentioned by name at 1.97.2—may also be intended.

<sup>62</sup> The 11 extant plays of Aristophanes shape our understanding of Old Comedy as a depiction of the life of the *polis*, with a corresponding focus on issues of concern to the city and its citizens. His four "peace plays"—*The Acharnians* (425 BCE), *Peace* (421), *Lysistrata* (411), and *The Frogs* (405)—focus directly on the Peloponnesian War, which was at its height just as Aristophanes was enjoying his greatest success as a playwright. In the *Acharnians*, Dikaiopolis, an Everyman protagonist, attributes the war to Pericles' support for the Megarian Decree(s), traditionally regarded as sanctions imposed on Megarian citizens and/or the city of Megara supposedly because Megarians had abducted two prostitutes from the brothel of Aspasia in retaliation for the abduction of a prostitute from Megara. Thus, "for three whores Greece is set ablaze." Pericles had died in 429, two years prior to Aristophanes' first stage production and, by war's end in 404, would have seemed a remote historical figure to many Athenians. Thus, even though Dikaiopolis' account of the war's cause is certainly intended as a ribald joke, many (though not all) scholars have traditionally seen Thucydides' *History* in part as an effort to set the record straight and defend the Periclean legacy against such diminishing revisionism.

<sup>63</sup> This is Richard Crawley's translation of 1.23.4–6 as it appears in the Landmark edition. Allison has used variant translations of the key sentence (1.23.6) over the years: "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm that this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable"; see Graham Allison et al., "Avoiding Thucydides's Trap: Managing the Rise of China," Belfer Center Conference, March 23, 2017; and "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable"; see *Destined for War*, xiv. Neither corresponds precisely with any of the major published English translations, but both are close to Crawley and substantially sound. See Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 2008).

<sup>64</sup> See John R. Wilson, review of *Ananke in Thucydides*, by Martin Ostwald, *Phoenix* 45, no. 4 (Winter 1991).

<sup>65</sup> Jaffe, 6–7; and Antony Andrewes, "Thucydides on the Causes of the War," *The Classical Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (November 1959), 223–239. Scholars over time have tended toward the view that 1.23.6, an expression of Thucydides' *personal view* (ἡγούμαι), is a late (perhaps, postwar) insertion into a text mostly written much (perhaps, decades) earlier. Andrewes describes it as the product of a very different mood, and years of "cool reflection on the implications of imperial policy." Andrewes also cited that Schwartz and others have argued, furthermore, that the historian late in life reversed his opinion on this key point: "Having once thought that the determining factor was Athens' pressure upon Sparta's allies, especially on Corinth, and that Sparta herself was reluctant to fight, then he turned over to the view that the true cause was rather Sparta's fundamental hostility to Athens." In 44.2, Thucydides makes clear that even back in Athens a segment of public opinion held war to be inevitable—"it began now to be felt that the Peloponnesian War was only a question of time"—but there is no explanation for this remark, which may be another late assertion.

<sup>66</sup> The fact that the truest (*alethestate*) cause of the war would be least spoken of reflects more a convention of political rhetoric throughout the *History* than revelation of any effort to conceal or falsify the reasons for the war. In fact, Thucydides regarded confusion, distortion, and deception in the debate over whether to enter a war to be par for the course, both because common people could not easily grasp some of the subtle, underlying forces at play and because elite participants in the debate often had hidden agendas and intentionally did not reveal their true motives. Contemporary Americans need look

no further than our own national debate in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq to confirm that this human proclivity is alive and well. Some American decisionmakers were taken in, as were the Athenians, by reports from would-be allies that proved “as attractive as [they were] untrue” (6.8.2). In Thucydides’ *History*, exactly the same practice is evident in the Athenian discussion of whether to invade Sicily during the 7-year hiatus in the war with Sparta. While advocates of the audacious enterprise publicly espouse the “specious design of aiding their kindred and other allies in the island,” their *actual* goal (Thucydides employs the same term—*alethestate prophasis*—used in his Book 1 discussion of the causes of the Peloponnesian War) is to conquer the entire island and thus extend their Aegean empire into the central Mediterranean (6.6.1). Of course, Greek *poleis* commonly engage in *outright deception* as well (for example, 1.26 and 1.90.3).

<sup>67</sup> Giovanni Parmeggiani, ed., *Between Thucydides and Polybius: The Golden Age of Greek Historiography* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2014), 116.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. See also Tim Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>69</sup> Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 1. The phrase is adapted from the work of historian Sidney Bradshaw Fay, who opens his classic study of World War I with a reference to the Peloponnesian War:

*The Greek historian Thucydides, in his history of that catastrophe to ancient civilization when Spartan militarism triumphed over Athenian democracy, makes the distinction between the more remote or underlying, and the immediate, causes of war. It is the distinction between the gradual accumulation of inflammable material which has been heaped up through a long period of years and the final spark which starts the conflagration. The distinction is a good one. It is equally applicable to the World War.*

*Of course, Fay’s distinction between formal and efficient causes is more explicit (and less muddled) than that of Thucydides, whose History predates Aristotle’s crystallization of the Four Causes (in Physics II.3 and Metaphysics V.2) by about half a century. Aristotle adopted the grammatically neuter form, aition, for his philosophical purpose.*

<sup>70</sup> In this instance, however, the human hand of the historian, rather than the scientific detachment he wished to convey on this point, is all too evident. His summation of the Spartan vote for war in 1.88 indicates that the Spartans were explicitly focused on (and not merely influenced internally by) the *prophasis* rather than the *aitiai*: “The Spartans voted that the treaty had been broken, and that war must be declared, not so much because they were persuaded by the arguments of the allies, as because they feared the growth of the power of the Athenians, seeing most of Hellas already subject to them.” Moreover, the only speech of the allies we are provided—that of the Corinthians—devotes only a single sentence (1.68.4) to the *aitiai*, otherwise focusing almost entirely on the dangers posed by Athens’ imperialist expansion. As Andrewes notes, this is evidence of editing and/or a changing viewpoint by the historian during the decades of his project.



<sup>71</sup> Parmeggiani, 120. He refers to this broad conceptual knowledge and exacting background study as "the theoretical backbone of [Thucydides'] political science."

<sup>72</sup> Thuc. 2.59.

<sup>73</sup> Thuc. 6.8.2.

<sup>74</sup> Thuc. 1.75.3, 1.76.2, and 1.123.1. The interplay of these three elemental factors unfailingly leads every state to judge its own policies and actions as just, whether its national command authority opts to go to war. Thucydides refers to them repeatedly throughout the *History*. For example, the Corinthian envoys touch upon all three (1.120.2, 1.122.2, and 1.123.1) in their rather strident effort to persuade Sparta and its other allies to declare war on Athens. It is within the overarching context of Fear, Honor, and (self-)Interest that a state's national decisionmaking process examines the more visible but less significant factors often cited in decisions of whether to go to war (for example, military capacity, economic power, quality of leadership, depth of patriotism (1.1.74), and the important "traps" discussed below.

<sup>75</sup> H.R. McMaster, "The Pipe Dream of Easy War," *New York Times*, July 20, 2013, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/opinion/sunday/the-pipe-dream-of-easy-war.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/opinion/sunday/the-pipe-dream-of-easy-war.html)>.

<sup>76</sup> James R. Holmes, "Thucydides, Japan and America," *The Diplomat*, November 27, 2012, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2012/11/thucydides-japan-and-america/>>.

<sup>77</sup> Thuc. 1.75.3, 1.76.2, and 1.123.1.

<sup>78</sup> Thuc. 1.1.74.

<sup>79</sup> Leon Whyte, "The Real Thucydides' Trap," *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2015, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/the-real-thucydides-trap/>>.

<sup>80</sup> Thuc. 1.68–71. Thucydides later validates the main points in 4.55.2 and 8.96.4.

<sup>81</sup> Like the Thebans in their fixation on local rival Plataea, the Corinthians view the affair of Epidamnus and Corcyra as a local matter and for that reason fail to grasp fully the broader context of events leading up to the Peloponnesian War.

<sup>82</sup> Yan Xuetong, "Alliances Can Prevent Greater Conflicts between China, U.S.," *Global Times*, March 31, 2016, available at <[www.globaltimes.cn/content/976854.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/976854.shtml)>.

<sup>83</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, "Chinese Media: Maybe It's Time the U.S. Heeded Deng Xiaoping's Advice," *The Diplomat*, April 2, 2015, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/chinese-media-maybe-its-time-the-us-heeded-deng-xiaopings-advice/>>.

<sup>84</sup> See Jaffe, 4.

<sup>85</sup> Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, ed. and trans. Jeremy Mynott (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>86</sup> Thuc. 1.2.4 and 1.18.

<sup>87</sup> Thuc. 3.82.2.

<sup>88</sup> In public remarks on March 18, 2014, stressing the need for government to retain credibility with the citizenry, Xi Jinping used a new term—the *Tacitus Trap*—that in China is now regarded in parallel with the Thucydides Trap. The Tacitus Trap, as reported in Chinese media over recent years, warns leaders against statements or actions that could cause the government to lose credibility with the citizenry. Variant formulations have appeared: "Neither good nor bad policies would please the governed if the government is unwelcome." "When a government loses credibility, whether it tells the truth or a lie, to do good or bad will be considered a lie or to do bad." The concept is familiar from Marxist

theory, but also echoes a line from Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus (56–117 CE): “When a ruler once becomes unpopular, all his acts, be they good or bad, tell against him.” See Tacitus, *Complete Works of Tacitus*, ed. Alfred John Church et al. (New York: Random House, 1873, reprinted 1942, ed. for Perseus Catalog), book 1, chapter 7. The term now has an officially sanctioned form (塔西佗陷阱) and has gained currency in academic discourse and been incorporated in the Civil Service Test. The original source of the Tacitus Trap concept is uncertain (some credit Xi Jinping himself), but in China it is seen as a long-established doctrine presumed to be well-known in the West. See also Neville Morley, “Alliterative Ancients’ Aphorisms,” *Sphinx*, September 4, 2017, available at <<https://thesphinxblog.com/2017/09/04/assorted-alliterative-ancients-aphorisms/>>. Morley has usefully gathered data on this topic, and credits Gerald Krieghofer with first identifying the appropriate line from Tacitus.

<sup>89</sup> Thuc. 1.83.2. See also, 1.1.83, 1.11.2, 1.19, 1.142, 1.4, and 1.7.

<sup>90</sup> Thuc. 6.31.3 and 7.28.4.

<sup>91</sup> Chas Freeman, “Avoiding the ‘Thucydides Trap’ in the Indo-Pacific,” *Chasfreeman.net*, available at <<http://chasfreeman.net/avoiding-the-thucydides-trap-in-the-indo-pacific/>>.

<sup>92</sup> Thuc. 3.41. See also Gerald Mara, “Thucydides and Political Thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Political Thought*, ed. Stephen G. Salkever (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 98.

<sup>93</sup> Thuc. 4.81.1–3, 4.105.1–2, 4.107.3, 4.108.2–3, etc.

<sup>94</sup> The two also provide an exceptional study of opposing rhetorical techniques, with craft and technique augmenting the persuasive power of (and at other times merely concealing) the genuinely held views of each.

<sup>95</sup> Thuc. 6.36, 6.9–14, and 6.16–18.

<sup>96</sup> John H. Finley, Jr., *Three Essays on Thucydides* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), xi. The distinguished Harvard scholar John Finley was a leading voice among classicists who believe that “the topographical and other detail of the sixth and seventh books makes as certain as such things can be that Thucydides visited Syracuse, necessarily after 413.”

<sup>97</sup> The characterization of the great Spartan general Gylippus just before leading Syracusan and allied forces into the decisive battle that would doom Athens to defeat in the Peloponnesian War and extinguish Athenian imperial power (7.66.2).

<sup>98</sup> Numbers are often difficult to pin down, but Thucydides states that “not less than forty thousand” men, Athenians and allies, embarked from Syracuse on their desperate overland flight (7.75.5). Only about 7,000 were captured alive (7.87.4), of whom many perished in squalid confinement in the Syracusan quarries. Some few escaped to the allied city of Catana and “found refuge,” thus receiving further postwar assistance from an important ally (7.85.4). Thucydides does not specify their number, but notes that all alike “suffered evils too great for tears” (7.75.4).

<sup>99</sup> Thuc. 5.16.1, 7.50.4, and 7.86.5.

<sup>100</sup> Plato’s *Laches* is typically grouped among the early dialogues composed between the death of Socrates in 399 BCE and Plato’s own first trip to Sicily in 387.

<sup>101</sup> See Paul Woodruff, “Plato’s Shorter Ethical Works,” in *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016), ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab), available at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/plato-ethics-shorter/>>.

<sup>102</sup> Thuc. 8.27.5, 8.29.2, 8.43.3, and 8.84.5.

<sup>103</sup> Allison et al., Thucydides Trap Forum.

<sup>104</sup> See Mark J. Valencia, "China Needs Patience to Achieve a Peaceful Rise," *South China Morning Post*, February 7, 2014, available at <[www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1422780/china-needs-patience-achieve-peaceful-rise?page=all](http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1422780/china-needs-patience-achieve-peaceful-rise?page=all)>. Optimistic U.S. observers interpret Xi's call for "a new model of major country relations" as reference to a rational, necessary, and essential adjustment in the international order, already well underway, to accord China a status more in keeping with its capacity and aspirations. Those of a more pessimistic turn of mind interpret it as a demand for American capitulation and withdrawal from East Asia.

<sup>105</sup> Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 356.

<sup>106</sup> Thuc. 2.2 and 2.7.1. The Theban assault on Plataea marks the culmination of five decades of deteriorating stability in the Boeotia region of central Greece. The attack ruptures the Thirty Years' Peace concluded by Athens and Sparta in 446, but for Thebes is merely an attempt to exploit "international" tensions to settle an old score close to home. The Plataeans, because of their longstanding alliance with Athens, had long held out against Theban hegemony. Plataea was the only *polis* to join the Athenians in resisting the first Persian invasion at Marathon in 490, arriving "with all available force" (*pandemei/πανδημει*) at a critical moment and thus sharing in one of the most glorious, and improbable, military victories in the long history of Hellas. See Herodotus, *Herodotus: The Histories: The Complete Translation, Backgrounds, Commentaries*, ed. Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, trans. Walter Blanco (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), 6.108.1. Plataea paid a price for its loyalty as an ally. The city was razed to its foundations by the Spartans in 417, the 5<sup>th</sup> year of the Peloponnesian War, because the Athenians reneged on their promise to come to the relief of their ally (Thuc. 3.68.3–5).

<sup>107</sup> Thuc. 1.1.3, 1.3.1, 1.3.4, and 1.4.

<sup>108</sup> Kevin Carroll, review of *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War*, by Thucydides, trans. Steven Lattimore, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, June 18, 1999, available at <<http://bmc.brynmaur.edu/1999/1999-06-18.html>>. Carroll highlights a revealing distinction between Thucydides' use of *eleutheria* and *autonomia* in his review of Lattimore's new English translation (1998), acknowledging previous work by Martin Ostwald (1982) and Elias Bickerman (1958).

<sup>109</sup> This factor is frequently underappreciated or ignored altogether by commentators who fixate on the direct contrast between Athens and Sparta (even though each frequently acts with or at the behest of allies throughout the Peloponnesian War), and compound that error by attempting to transfer this spurious, binary analysis to modern conflicts like the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Cold War or the current rivalry between the United States (cast by Allison, like Sparta, in the role of status quo power) and China (portrayed as Athens, the *rising* power destined to overturn a long-established power balance). It is hardly surprising that extrapolation of such an oversimplified reading of Thucydides would yield negligible analytical insight.

<sup>110</sup> Thuc. 1.73.1.

<sup>111</sup> See Jared McKinney, "China-U.S.: Avoiding the 'Improbable War,'" *The Diplomat*, April 10, 2015, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/china-us-avoiding-the-improbable-war/>>. As Nicias tells the Athenian Assembly during debate of the proposed Sicilian Expedition, "We ought not . . . to allow

ourselves to be persuaded by foreigners into undertaking a war with which we have nothing to do.” See Organski and Kugler. The authors’ power transition theory research similarly accords a crucial role to allies in the initiation and subsequent conduct of war: “Alliances not only play a decisive part in widening a narrow conflict between the challenger and the dominant nation into a world war, they also exert a decisive role in winning such wars once they are started.”

<sup>112</sup> Thuc. 6.6.2, 6.8.2, 6.18.1, 6.33, 6.50.4, 7.2.3–4, 7.3.1, 7.18.2, 7.28.3, and 7.42.1.

<sup>113</sup> Thuc. 4.85–87.

<sup>114</sup> Freeman.

<sup>115</sup> Lam Peng Er, “China, the United States, Alliances, and War: Avoiding the Thucydides Trap,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 43, no. 2 (2016), 36.

<sup>116</sup> Thuc. 1.78.1.

<sup>117</sup> Thuc. 1.140.1.

<sup>118</sup> Thuc. 1.78, 2.11.4, 7.50.4, and 8.24.5. Thucydides mentions Arginousae at 8.101.2, but details of the fateful Athenian decision to execute the victorious generals after the naval battle at Arginousae (406 BCE) are recounted by Xenophon (*Hellenika*, 1.7) and Diodorus Siculus (13.101), who (separately) take up the events of the Peloponnesian War at the point where Thucydides’ *History* ceases. The *History* amply illustrates *Tyke’s* penchant for humbling the strong or (less often) exalting the weak. With that in view, it is difficult not to read Nicias’ resonant appeal to the Athenian Assembly—be generous in outfitting the invasion force for Syracuse because “I wish as much as possible to make myself independent of fortune” (6.28.3)—as a dramatic turn worthy of the tragic poet Euripides, Thucydides’ contemporary.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, *The Economist*: “Mr. Allison’s overall thesis is too gloomy” (“The Thucydides Trap: Will America and China Go to War?” *The Economist*, July 6, 2017); Albert Wolf: “Power transition theory may be mistaken, and in any event the expected transition may not come off as expected” (“What Thucydides’s Trap Gets Wrong about the United States and China,” *Modern War Institute*, July 25, 2017); Michael Vlahos: “Allison transforms a trope of city-state rivalry into universal historical law and then ascribes its creation to Thucydides, thus giving Allison’s offspring a radiant, ancient, authority” (“Who Did Thucydides Trap?” *The American Conservative*, July 5, 2017); and Ilias Kouskouvelis: “Allison’s Thucydides Trap is ‘a distorted compass” (“The Thucydides Trap: A Distorted Compass,” *E-International Relations*, November 5, 2017).

<sup>120</sup> Neville Morley periodically reminds readers of his blog that “Thucydides is always right about everything!” See Neville Morley, “Thucydides Is Always Right About Everything Part 796,” *Sphinx*, March 9, 2014. This is not so much excessive praise for the historian’s surpassing wisdom as a rueful comment on the way politicians, scholars, and assorted experts over a period of centuries have sought to co-opt Thucydides’ name to valorize and validate their own idiosyncratic reading of contemporary wars or other events. This is, in fact, a particular focus of Morley’s own scholarship. He argues that the *History’s* unique ability to appear at once compellingly incisive and impenetrably obscure makes it uniquely suited to this objectionable practice of latter day *ipse dixit*. Thucydides is not, however, the only ancient authority currently being subjected to such treatment in the Indo-Pacific region.

<sup>121</sup> T. Greer, “The Thucydides Roundtable,” *Zenpundit.com*, October 2016, available at <<http://zenpundit.com/?p=52965>>.

<sup>122</sup> Herodotus, 6.108.

<sup>123</sup> Thuc. 1.86–87.

<sup>124</sup> Thuc. 1.68–71. Indeed, the Corinthians' strident harangue is calculated to convey a sense that war really is *inevitable*, and that delaying its onset will only benefit the enemy (for example, 1.69.5).

<sup>125</sup> To be fair, scholars have adopted many approaches in analyzing the fact-set provided by Thucydides—a fact-set that includes only passing reference to the Megarian Decree, which both sides considered extremely important.

<sup>126</sup> Wilson.

<sup>127</sup> It is striking that many reputable international relations analysts have overlooked this fundamental point altogether. Rather than rejecting Allison's Thucydides Trap metaphor on this basis alone, many have proceeded directly to analyzing whether, and how, the supposed Trap can be avoided.

<sup>128</sup> Jaffe, 44.

<sup>129</sup> Although assuming the unity of Thucydides' text is customary for scholars, at least Romilly.

<sup>130</sup> Thuc. 5.84–5.111; and Morley, "The Thucydides Trap," *Sphinx*, October 30, 2012.

<sup>131</sup> Cited by Greg Myre, "From Ancient Greece, Lessons on the Risk of a Modern, Accidental War," *National Public Radio*, May 3, 2017, available at <[www.wfdd.org/story/ancient-greece-lessons-risk-modern-accidental-war](http://www.wfdd.org/story/ancient-greece-lessons-risk-modern-accidental-war)>. Such a lack of analytical rigor is not characteristic of Allison's earlier work on the Cuban Missile Crisis. His 1971 book *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* has been credited with revolutionizing the field of international relations.

<sup>132</sup> Allison, "Obama and Xi Must Think Broadly to Avoid a Classic Trap."

<sup>133</sup> For example, Vlahos questions omission of crisis between the United Kingdom and the United States just prior to the American Civil War. War seemed inevitable at the time, but did not occur; see Michael Vlahos, "Who Did Thucydides Trap?"

<sup>134</sup> Organski and Kugler, 179. In their own study of power transition theory, they reach the surprising conclusion that "nuclear weapons do not deter confrontations at all levels. To believe they do is to believe in magic." In *Destined for War*, Allison reviews possible scenarios for the use of nuclear weapons and concludes that the United States must keep a nuclear option "in its toolkit for purposes of deterrence," but he offers no response to the problem suggested by the three consecutive "no war" outcomes in the 2015 Belfer Center Case File. Since the updated 2017 Case File obscured it, perhaps no response is deemed necessary.

<sup>135</sup> In appendix II (287–288) of *Destined for War*, Allison provides statements responding to previous criticism (characterized as "straw man" attacks) of the Thucydides's Trap Case File. These responses are not convincing and do not address the objection that the Case File is clearly based on the Thucydides Trap metaphor and not the other way around. In contrast, one might agree or disagree with Organski's work on power transition theory, but in *The War Ledger* it is clear that posited theories concerning state behavior are based on examination of a historical data set, and not vice versa. In discussion of this Case File question at an academic conference in 2017, one classicist remarked to the author: "It seems Graham Allison printed the bumper sticker and then found a car to stick it on."

<sup>136</sup> Neville Morley, "The Thucydides Trap," *Sphinx*, October 30, 2012, available at <<https://thesphinxblog.com/2012/10/30/the-thucydides-trap/>>. This suggests, at best, disdain for what Thucydides *actually* did or did not say. The Belfer Center's effort to tap the popularity of the DC/Warner Bros. film *Wonder Woman* in promoting Allison's book carried that disdain still further. The film, released in the

United States on June 2, 2017, includes a scene in which Wonder Woman's adversary, a cynical *Miles Gloriosus*, declares that "peace is only an armistice in an endless war." The erudite Wonder Woman immediately "recognizes" the remark as a quote from none other than Thucydides—even though the line in fact has *no connection whatsoever* to him or the *History*. As the film became a summer blockbuster, the Belfer Center added to its Web site a movie still of Gal Gadot as Wonder Woman, along with a slogan promoting Allison's book: "Wonder Woman knows Thucydides. Do you?" This promotional decision suggested that the Belfer Center, in common with Wonder Woman, does *not* know Thucydides. See Allison, "The 'Wonder Woman' Guide to Avoiding War With China: It Might Take a Woman," *USA Today*, July 8, 2017, available at <[www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/07/07/wonder-woman-war-china-graham-allison-column/452549001/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/07/07/wonder-woman-war-china-graham-allison-column/452549001/)>. Allison himself followed up in July with this op-ed, and in it he discusses the ersatz Thucydides quote at length, noting that it raises "a fundamental question about the relationship between mass violence and human nature." He even invokes Kissinger to rebut its air of militarism, but he never gets around to mentioning that the quote is merely a bit of movie villain dialogue with no *actual* linkage to war, human nature, or Thucydides.

<sup>137</sup> Allison, "How Trump and China's Xi Could Stumble into War: When a Rising Power Threatens to Displace a Ruling Power, It Rarely Ends Well," *Washington Post*, March 31, 2017, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/03/31/how-trump-and-chinas-xi-could-stumble-into-war/?tid=a\\_inl&utm\\_term=.81b6debee6ed](http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/03/31/how-trump-and-chinas-xi-could-stumble-into-war/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.81b6debee6ed)>. His commentaries have typically overlooked less negative facets of the bilateral relationship, for example, ongoing Sino-American counterpiracy cooperation in Combined Task Force 151 off the East Africa coast, joint training by U.S. and Chinese forces for disaster assistance, and new trade deals worth a reported \$253 billion signed during President Trump's November 2017 visit to Beijing.

<sup>138</sup> Allison et al., "Avoiding Thucydides's Trap." In presentations on the Thucydides Trap over recent years, Allison has studiously equivocated concerning whether war between China and the United States really is "inevitable." While typically voicing a hedging acknowledgement that war *may not* be inevitable, he typically asserts that conflict, *more likely than not*, is already inscribed in the book of destiny. His book develops this Janus-like outlook in both directions by including a chapter offering many creative scenarios on how war might break out, and a subsequent section entitled "Why War Is Not Inevitable." The latter offers "clues for peace" distilled from the four "no war" outcomes in the Belfer Center Case File. Again, however, the clues appear within the context of an overarching view that war is, as the title declares, *destined*. In this regard, Allison's remark (viii) that Thucydides' *History*, if "read in context," makes it "clear that [Thucydides] meant his claim about inevitability as hyperbole: exaggeration for the purpose of emphasis" is odd. In fact it is not at all *clear* that Thucydides, in this passage or any other, exaggerated for emphasis, and Thucydidean scholarship does not support such a view. "Exaggeration" for what purpose? "Emphasis" for whose benefit? This remark may reveal Allison's own intention—in light of the fact that war traditionally sells more books than peace—but there is no basis for linking it with Thucydides.

<sup>139</sup> Nye, 2.

<sup>140</sup> Zoellick, "U.S., China and Thucydides."

<sup>141</sup> All who find his *History* useful in the analysis of political situations subsequent to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE would appear to join him in that belief. Thucydides notes, for example, that the catastrophic breakdown of law and moral norms due to *stasis* reflects a pattern of human behavior that "always will

occur as long as the nature of mankind remains the same" (3.82.2). Niccolò Machiavelli, who found much to agree with in the pages of Thucydides, also saw human nature as unchanging over time. He observes that, as a result, "the same dissensions appear in every age"; See Machiavelli, *The Discourses* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1984), 1.39, 278. It is solely because human nature is so enduring that wisdom proffered by ancient authors remains relevant today.

<sup>142</sup> At least this is the traditional reading of Thuc. 1.22.4:

*The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.*

<sup>143</sup> Romilly, 56.

<sup>144</sup> Sawyer, "Translating the Untranslatable." Jeremy Mynott's translation of Thucydides sought to avoid the "anachronistic concepts [and bias] derived from later developments and theories that he detected in some earlier translations." He provides an exceptionally vivid summary of the translator's challenge:

*The text is often articulated in long structures that, unlike the periodic prose of Demosthenes, Cicero and Gibbon, do not have a progressive forward movement, to be resolved and completed in their final cadences. Rather, a whole series of clauses shuffle forward together, each deliberately fashioned in a different grammatical construction to create a much more open texture. Within these there are many distortions of the natural word order to generate particular emphases and effects; and there are other innovations in (or liberties with) syntax and vocabulary. The meaning is sometimes highly compressed and, as with poetry, resists decompression. Thucydides wrote at an early stage in the development of Greek prose and was undoubtedly trying to forge an original style for what he rightly regarded as a new form of enquiry. At its best his prose is a very powerful and vivid vehicle for this, but often he seems to be straining too hard for his effects with artificial contrasts, asymmetries and abstractions. In addition, there are the purely practical uncertainties of knowing which parts of the text Thucydides himself regarded as finished and which were only drafts. In the case of some obscure passages, therefore, one can never be quite sure whether one is dealing with clumsy expression, unrevised draft, unreliable textual transmission, overwrought stylistic innovation or deliberate ambiguity.*

Greco-Roman historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus (ca. 60–7 BCE), active in the age of Augustus, might agree. He penned a critique (*De Thucydeide*) complaining of the "forced

expressions,” “artificialities,” and “riddling obscurity” of Thucydides’ dense and difficult Greek: “If people actually spoke like this, not even their mothers or their fathers would be able to tolerate the unpleasantness of it. In fact they would need translators, as if they were listening to a foreign language.”

<sup>145</sup> Alibaba, often described as China’s version of Amazon, inaugurated Singles Day in 2009—initially a celebration for the country’s lonely hearts on a date reflecting their singleness (11/11)—with only 27 participating merchants. In 2016 (total revenue: \$17.8 billion), more than 16,000 brands participated, with Apple, Burberry, Lululemon, and Victoria’s Secret joining for the first time. The event has become a barometer of China’s consumer economy, although some analysts have questioned Alibaba’s methodology for calculating sales totals.

<sup>146</sup> China thus joined the ranks of the few states—Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—that have developed homegrown large airliners. The 168-seat C919, developed by the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (Comac), is similar in size to the Airbus A320 and Boeing 737-800.

<sup>147</sup> The September 2016 industry solicitation for DC Universe Rebirth’s volume 1, issue 1, of *New Super-Man*, “Made In China, Part One,” carried this descriptive blurb: An impulsive act of heroism thrusts an arrogant young man into the limelight of Shanghai as China begins to form its own Justice League of powerful heroes. . . . When the world needed a new hero, China made him!” It is debatable whether this unprecedented innovation reflects Chinese soft power reshaping American popular culture, *arte et marte*, in a shocking reversal arguably comparable to the Athenian victory at Pylos, or rather a master stroke for American soft power—*non ducor, duco*—calculated to attract a potentially enormous new audience to the only popular art form original to the United States.

<sup>148</sup> Wang Jianlin, a 62-year-old former People’s Liberation Army commander-turned-real estate developer with a net worth estimated at \$32 billion, is one of China’s richest men. He also owns the AMC movie theater chain in the United States as well as Legendary Entertainment, the movie studio that coproduced *Man of Steel* and the *Dark Knight* films. Such billion-dollar investments in the American entertainment market appear at odds with a Chinese drive to provoke war and defeat the United States militarily.

<sup>149</sup> “China’s Rare Earth Dominance: Another Global Resource Scramble in the Making?” *Knowledge@Wharton*, April 5, 2011, available at <<http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/chinas-rare-earth-dominance-another-global-resource-scramble-in-the-making/>>.

<sup>150</sup> J. Helliwell, R. Layard, and J. Sachs, eds., *World Happiness Report 2017* (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2017), available at <<http://worldhappiness.report/>>. Indeed, the report’s algorithms indicate that, despite the “new-found plenitude” of Chinese society, the subjective well-being of Chinese citizens is not keeping pace with the continuing rise of income and consumption levels.

<sup>151</sup> This is true despite the fact that many who have no hand in the war decision will indeed fall victim in the conflict their leaders choose to initiate. As the Spartan prisoners held in Athens after Pylos understood all too clearly, in war the arrow strikes at random; it has no regard for the victim’s qualities of character (or lack thereof) (4.40.2). Moreover, the history of warfare from Thucydides’ time to ours



indicates that even the initiators of unnecessary, aggressive war tend to feel victimized by exogenous and unjust hazards, rather than the consequence of their own actions, once war is underway. Thucydides' account of the plague in Athens (2.47.3–2.54.5 and 3.87.1–3) and *stasis* in Corcyra (3.70.1–3.85.1) chillingly illustrates the breakdown of ethical norms and social order in wartime. The Athenian decisions to reject Spartan peace overtures at Pylos (4.21), exterminate the people of Melos (5.84–5.111), and invade Sicily (6.9–6.14 and 6.21–6.25) demonstrate the parallel degradation of clarity, consistency, and coherence in political decisionmaking once the fog of war sets in. When the Spartan fleet entered the Piraeus, and Spartan hoplites garrisoned the Acropolis and enforced destruction of the Long Walls, it is to be expected that most Athenians saw only the unmerited aggression of a hated enemy, rather than an *inevitable* reaction to their own *hubris* and overreach.

<sup>152</sup> The title of Graham Allison's book must therefore be judged especially unfortunate. Inclusion of a question mark—*Destined for War?*—would have rendered it at least marginally less so.

<sup>153</sup> To the extent that Allison's view of "rising" and "ruling" powers has validity at all. As noted above, power transition theory is not universally accepted by international affairs specialists. Moreover, in *The Future of Power* Joseph Nye points out that the nature of a power "transition" may not be what it seems:

*The power transition occurring in this century is sometimes called the rise of Asia, but it is more accurately called the recovery of Asia. In 1800, more than half of the world's population was in Asia and more than half of the world's product was in Asia. One hundred years later, more than half of the population was still in Asia, but only about 20 percent of world product was. Now, in the twenty-first century, we are getting back to proportions that are historically more normal.*

<sup>154</sup> See Ralph Jennings, "China Calmed Asian Maritime Dispute in 2017 Without Ceding Sovereignty," VOANews.com, December 11, 2017, available at <[www.voanews.com/a/south-china-sea-disputes-calming-down/4158167.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/south-china-sea-disputes-calming-down/4158167.html)>.

<sup>155</sup> Thuc. 4.19.2–4.

<sup>156</sup> Allison, "How Trump and China's Xi Could Stumble into War."

<sup>157</sup> Allison, *Destined for War*, xix–xx. The State Department's "Memorandum of Conversation" on November 12, 1973, suggests how daunting the diplomatic task of building such mutual understanding might be. Few diplomats of Henry Kissinger's generation (and fewer today) could establish common ground by so readily engaging Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai on points of Marxist theory and its intellectual debt to G.W.F. Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach. Over coming years, the U.S. side will need to cultivate comparable insight into the evolving interaction of nationalism and consumerism within Chinese society, and the policy implications of a transition from *taoguangyanghui* (keeping a low profile) to a strategy of *fenfayouwei* (striving for achievement). See Henry Kissinger et al., "Memorandum of Conversation," Document 58, Beijing, November 12, 1973, 5:40–8:25 P.M., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XVIII, China, 1973–1976*, available at <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v18/d58>>.

<sup>158</sup> Thuc. 1.123.1.

## About the Author

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