

Thucydides Trap and Its Relevance in Contemporary Politics

Qige Sun

Department of English, Stony Brook University, Long Island, United States

qige.sun@stonybrook.edu

Abstract. This paper examines the Thucydides Trap, a framework positing that structural power shifts between a rising and an established state heighten the risk of conflict, and its relevance in contemporary politics. Through historical case studies, including the Cold War, Napoleonic Wars, and World War I, the analysis reveals that while power transitions create inherent tensions, outcomes are shaped by factors such as alliance dynamics, ideological rivalries, and strategic statecraft. The study highlights instances where war was averted through diplomatic engagement, economic interdependence, and institutional frameworks, as exemplified by the US-Soviet Cold War and Portugal and Spain's negotiated division of global spheres. Conversely, cases like Britain-Germany pre-WWI demonstrate how security dilemmas and zero-sum thinking escalate hostilities. The paper concludes that mitigating the Thucydides Trap in modern contexts, such as US-China relations, requires prioritizing economic ties, multilateral institutions, and dialogue to transcend zero-sum paradigms. By learning from historical successes and failures, policymakers can navigate power transitions peacefully in an era of existential risks.

Keywords: International relations, international politics, thucydides trap, conflict prevention, US-China Relation.

1. Introduction

Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian, is often regarded as one of the founding figures in the study of international relations due to his seminal work, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. His analysis of the conflict between Athens and Sparta provides timeless insights into the nature of power, fear, and human behavior in international politics. Thucydides emphasized that the root cause of war lies in the shifting dynamics of power, particularly the fear and insecurity that arise when a rising power challenges an established one. This idea is vividly illustrated in the Melian Dialogue, where the Athenians, driven by their imperial ambitions, assert that "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must," highlighting the ruthless realities of power politics. Centuries later, American political scientist Graham Allison revived Thucydides' ideas through the concept of the Thucydides Trap, arguing that when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, conflict becomes highly likely. Allison's work has brought renewed attention to Thucydides' theories, applying them to modern geopolitical rivalries, such as the US-China relationship, and underscoring their enduring relevance in understanding the risks of war in an era of shifting global power. This paper will analyze the relevance of contemporary politics. Though analyzing historical examples such as World War I and the Cold War, this paper will provide insights towards avoiding future conflicts in similar cases.

2. Cases in History

Although the term Thucydides Trap was inspired by Sino-American relations, the situation that it is referring to was seen numerous times in history. However, these examples did not always lead to active conflict, as the Thucydides Trap theory suggests.

2.1. Resulting in No War

2.1.1 Portugal (Ruling Power) vs. Spain (Rising Power), Late 1400s

Portugal has dominated over its neighbors for most of the 15th century. However, as Spain united and rejuvenated it started to challenge Portugal's dominant position in world trade and colonial

powers. Disputes over territories like the Canary Islands and later the Americas created friction. These clashes fit the Thucydides dynamic of a rising power, Spain, challenging an established one, Portugal [1].

However, these two nations did not directly engage in warfare because of several reasons. Firstly, religion played a pivotal role during the period. Pope Alexander VI of the Catholic Church issued the 1493 Inter Caetera bull, dividing exploration rights, which was later refined by the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494. This diplomatic framework averted war by legally partitioning the globe into Spanish and Portuguese spheres. Secondly, these two nations had mutual economic interests such as the Portuguese spice trade and the Spanish silver extraction. Both nations emphasized wealth as a priority and had no intentions of risking the consolidated kingdoms. Both monarchies recognized that a war is highly costly and uneconomic compared to a peaceful negotiated settlement.

2.1.2 United States (Ruling Power) vs. Soviet Union (Rising Power), Cold War Period

The Cold War, 1947-1991, between the United States and the Soviet Union can be analyzed through the lens of the Thucydides Trap, a framework positing that tensions between a rising power and an established ruling power often escalate to war. In this case, the Soviet Union's rapid post-WWII ascent as a nuclear-armed superpower challenged U.S. dominance, creating structural rivalry akin to the dynamics described by Thucydides. However, the outcome diverged from historical precedent--instead of direct war, the Cold War manifested as a prolonged standoff marked by proxy conflicts, ideological competition, and nuclear deterrence. Graham Allison's research identifies this as one of four cases where war was avoided despite the Trap's conditions, attributing this to the existential risks of nuclear weapons and strategic statecraft that prioritized containment over direct confrontation. The Soviet Union's territorial expansion in Eastern Europe and support for communist movements abroad mirrored the aggressive behavior seen in many Thucydides Trap cases, such as Athens' imperial overreach. Yet, unlike historical examples like the Peloponnesian War or World War I, the U.S. and USSR avoided direct conflict by institutionalizing deterrence, such as mutually assured destruction, and channeling rivalry into non-military domains such as the Space Race [2]. This highlights a critical nuance: while the Trap emphasizes material power shifts, the Cold War underscores how perceptions of risk such as nuclear annihilation and institutional frameworks such as the NATO and the UN can mitigate war. Notably, the absence of territorial disputes between the two powers' core territories reduced immediate existential threats, unlike cases such as France vs. Habsburgs or Germany vs. Britain, where border disputes or colonial clashes precipitated war.

2.2. Resulting in War

2.2.1 United Kingdom (Ruling Power) vs. France (Rising Power), French Revolution and Napoleon War

By the late 18th century, Britain was a dominant global power with naval supremacy, a sprawling colonial empire, and a burgeoning industrial economy. It sought to maintain the European balance of power and protect its overseas interests. Meanwhile, Post-Revolutionary France, particularly under Napoleon Bonaparte (1799-1815), underwent rapid militarization and territorial expansion. Napoleon's reforms and conquests transformed France into a centralized and expansionist state, seeking hegemony over continental Europe and challenging British global influence. While France was historically an established power, its post-revolution resurgence under Napoleon represented a revisionist rise, seeking to overturn the British-led status quo. This aligns with the Trap's core dynamic: a shifting power balance creating inevitability of conflict. The clash between revolutionary France, promoting republicanism and anti-monarchism, and conservative Britain, defending the *ancien régime*, added ideological fuel. The conflicting ideological dimensions further heightened the mutual distrust [1].

The major reasons that the United Kingdom and France came to war were more complex than merely the Thucydides Trap. The United Kingdom and France have had a history of rivalry since the Medieval Period in arenas such as colonies, trade, and dominant position in Europe. Both nations

competed for global empires, clashing in North America, India, and the Caribbean. Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War (1763) stripped France of key colonies, fueling French resentment and a desire for revenge. In addition to history, France's post-revolution ideology also clashed with that of the United Kingdom, which features a conservative monarchy. As a ruling power, the UK saw revolutionary France as a destabilizing force that could inspire domestic unrest. As a rising power, France, then under Napoleon's rule, attempted to export revolutionary ideals and dominate Europe alarmed Britain, which viewed itself as the defender of the European balance of power. In conclusion, the cause of conflict between the United Kingdom and France in the Napoleonic period is multifaceted. While the Thucydides Trap framework explains structural tensions between a rising France and established Britain, the conflict was also shaped by Napoleon's personal drive, revolutionary ideology, and the global nature of their empires. The UK's eventual victory at Waterloo marked the end of French hegemony but cemented Britain's role as the 19th century's dominant global power.

2.2.2 England (Ruling Power) vs. Germany (Rising Power), WWI Period

The rivalry between England (Britain) and Germany in the early 20th century was a central catalyst for World War I (1914-1918). Their competition, rooted in shifting power dynamics, imperial ambitions, and mutual insecurity, exemplifies the Thucydides Trap, in which a rising power (Germany) challenged an established ruling power (Britain), creating conditions ripe for conflict. Unified in 1871, Germany rapidly industrialized, surpassing Britain in steel production in less than 30 years, and by 1900, had sought global influence. Wilhelm II, Emperor of Germany at the time, aimed to build a navy and empire that would match those of Britain's. At the same time, Britain, a global hegemon of the time, viewed Germany's ambitions as an existential threat to its dominant power.

The major reasons that England and Germany had to come to war are that the two powers had an arms race, diplomatic rigidity, and their zero-sum thinking. The naval build-up, such as Germany's Tirpitz Plan, created a "security dilemma" in which both nations' build up made the other less secure. In 1898-1914, Germany's Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz designed a military plan that envisions Germany to become a world power through naval forces. Germany's launch of the HMS Dreadnought in 1906 intensified the race, with both nations pouring their military resources into building battleships. Along with this is the zero-sum thinking from both nations. Both nations consider the world a rigid resource, and one side's gain is the other side's loss. Both nations considered that striking first would guarantee a victory, and thus began World War I. It could be concluded that the Thucydides Trap applied to the case of Britain versus Germany at the start of WWI in several ways: structural stress, fear-driven escalation, and failure of restraint. The structure itself in the Thucydides Trap is definitely stimulated, with Germany as Sparta and Britain as Athens, and interestingly both cases ended with the challenging power being defeated.

3. War-Causing Factor Analysis

3.1. Structural Power Shifts and Fear-Driven Security Dilemmas

A central factor is the objective shift in relative power between a rising state, such as Sparta or China, and a ruling hegemon, such as Athens or the U.S. Thucydides emphasized that Sparta's fear of Athens' growing economic, military, and cultural influence destabilized the balance of power, creating a "security dilemma" where defensive actions by one power are perceived as threats by the other. This dynamic is exacerbated by subjective perceptions of threat, even when intentions are peaceful. For instance, China's naval expansion and economic dominance today mirror Athens' maritime empire, heightening U.S. anxieties about losing primacy in the Asia-Pacific.

3.2. Alliance Entanglements and Proxy Conflicts

Thucydides highlighted how alliances can escalate localized disputes into full-scale wars. In The Peloponnesian War, smaller states like Corinth and Kerkyra dragged Athens and Sparta into conflict by invoking treaty obligations. Similarly, modern US-China tensions are influenced by alliances and proxy disputes in regions such as the South China Sea. Allison's research notes that 11 of 12 historical Thucydides Trap cases involved territorial expansion or alliance-driven escalation.

3.3. Expansionism of Territory and Ideologies

Aggressive territorial or ideological ambitions amplify tensions. The Peloponnesian War was partly driven by Athens' imperial overreach, transforming the Delian League into an empire. Similarly, China's island-building in the South China Sea and the U.S. enforcement of "freedom of navigation" operations reflect competing visions of regional order. Allison argues that territorial expansion, such as Germany in pre-WWI period, is a stronger predictor of conflict than mere power shifts. Ideological clashes, such as democracy vs. authoritarianism, further complicate U.S.-China relations, mirroring Athens' democratic ideals against Sparta's oligarchy [3].

3.4. The "Double Trap" of Mutual Fear

Thucydides' original analysis reveals a reciprocal fear dynamic--Athens feared Spartan containment, while Sparta feared Athenian dominance. This "double trap" is evident in U.S.-China relations, where mutual suspicions over military buildups create a cycle of escalation [4]. The 1914 analogy, where cultural and economic ties failed to prevent WWI, also serves as a cautionary tale.

4. Future Suggestions

Nowadays with violent conflicts being more costly than ever in history with the development of contemporary weapons, the importance of avoiding falling into the Thucydides Trap is never greater. To avoid falling into the Thucydides Trap nowadays, especially with the context of the China-US relation, below are considered factors of maintaining peace.

4.1. Diplomatic Engagement

Diplomatic engagement has historically proved itself a useful factor for preventing conflicts from escalating. For instance, the ASEAN and the South China Seas dispute in recent decades provides an example of effective diplomatic engagement [5].

4.2. Economic Interdependence

Deep economic ties create mutual incentives to avoid conflict, as war would harm the economic benefit of both nations. For example, the contemporary US-China relation demonstrates a perfect example of the context of the Thucydides Trap. However, arguably the largest factor preventing the breakout of a violent conflict is the economic interdependence of both China and the US for goods and markets. With \$758 billion dollars worth of goods traded in 2022, China is the United States' largest trading partner, while the United States is China's largest export market. Despite tension over technology rivalry and military posturing, both China and the US maintain efforts to avoid direct conflict. United States companies, such as Apple, rely on Chinese factories for their production.

4.3. Institutional Frameworks

International institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) provide peaceful platforms to resolve disputes, enforce norms, and promote cooperation.

4.4. Domestic Stability and Governance

Internal stability and effective domestic governance in both of the rising and dominating power can reduce the chance of erupting direct conflict. With prosperous internal governance and development, leaders and people's attention are less likely to become distracted by external problems and are more likely to consider the cost of conflict. However, this is only effective on the basis that both sides do not have a zero-sum thinking and consider a win-win situation possible.

5. Conclusion

The Thucydides Trap, rooted in the ancient wisdom of Thucydides' analysis of power dynamics, remains a critical lens for understanding the risks of conflict between rising and established powers in contemporary geopolitics. Historical case studies--from the peaceful resolution of Cold War tensions to the catastrophic clashes of the Napoleonic Wars and World War I--demonstrate that structural shifts in power alone do not predetermine conflict. Instead, the interplay of material forces, ideological rivalries, and human agency shapes outcomes.

Key factors such as structural power imbalances, alliance entanglements, territorial expansionism, and mutual perceptions of threat amplify tensions, as seen in the Peloponnesian War and modern US-China competition. Yet, the Cold War illustrates that even under conditions of intense rivalry, war can be averted through deterrence, institutional frameworks, and strategic restraint. Similarly, economic interdependence and diplomatic engagement, as exemplified by US-China trade relations and multilateral platforms offer pathways to de-escalation.

To navigate the Thucydides Trap in the 21st century, policymakers must prioritize mechanisms that mitigate fear-driven escalation: fostering economic ties, strengthening international institutions, and pursuing dialogue to address grievances. Crucially, domestic stability and a rejection of zero-sum thinking are vital to redirecting rivalry into cooperative competition. While structural pressures may be inevitable, history shows that conflict is not. By learning from past successes and failures, the international community can transcend the fatalism of the Trap, ensuring that power transitions occur peacefully rather than catastrophically. In an era marked by unprecedented global interconnectedness and existential risks, the imperative to choose prudence over provocation has never been more urgent.

References

- [1] Information on: www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/case-file.
- [2] Jefferies, W. Polycrisis and the Thucydides Trap. In: *War and the World Economy*. Palgrave Insights into Apocalypse Economics. 2025.
- [3] Sullivan, Declan. Destined for Competition: An Analysis of Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Information on: <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/1/24/destined-for-competition-an-analysis-of-graham-allisons-thucydides-trap>.
- [4] Lee, James. Did Thucydides Believe in Thucydides' Trap? The History of the Peloponnesian War and Its Relevance to U.S.-China Relations. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 2021, 4 (5): 1-19.
- [5] Bartosiak, Jacek. The Thucydides Trap and the Rise and Fall of Great Powers. Information on: <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-thucydides-trap-and-the-rise-and-fall-of-great-powers/>.