
Memorandum

TO: *POSC 3300 International Security Studies*
FROM: *Allexus Bain*
SUBJECT: *Allison: The Thucydides Trap*
DATE: *October 11th, 2022*

Executive Summary:

The Thucydides trap has, for centuries, been a part of the ‘great power struggle.’ Two domineering nations can easily find themselves as competitors on the world stage. The United States and China have found themselves entrapped in this power struggle of Thucydides, where the best method of escape is through cooperation. The only downside is that cooperation can result in losses, sometimes unbalanced losses, which can give one side more leverage over another. An outcome as such has the ability to fetter compromise.

Thucydides’ Entanglement on the United States and China

The United States has been a leading world power for over a century. The U.S was able to maintain unipolarity for the last three decades, until China’s ascendance began to threaten that way of life. China, once having an economy comparable to that of the Netherlands, has, in today’s time, already exceeded the United States in its rising prosperity. “Most are stunned to learn that on each of these 20 indicators [largest economy, primary engine of global growth, and biggest market for luxury goods], China has already surpassed the U.S.” (*Allison, pp. 4*)

This is a remarkable feat for China, but it does bring the Thucydides Trap into question, and whether the United States and China will fall short of a mutual consensus. History has shown that two co-existing great powers are fated to have rivalries; as Sparta and Athens once did, as France and Hapsburgs once did, and as the United States and the Soviet Union once did. Nonetheless, there is opportunity for two great powers to escape this trap. The U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were successful in doing so, but it took many close-calls, and discussions, to resolve the issue. “When the parties avoided war, it required huge, painful adjustments in attitudes and actions on the part not just of the challenger but also the challenged.” (*Allison, pp. 1*) There was also the collapse of the Soviet Republic which tremendously decreased the preservation of this threat.

As the U.S and China have facilitated a variety of partnerships in the past, both states would be wise to continue on that path of working together; that is if they seek to ensure a peaceful, but multipolar-ized, future. “As Xi Jinping himself said during a visit to Seattle on Tuesday [2015], ‘There is no such thing as the so-called Thucydides Trap in the world. But should major countries time and again make the mistakes of strategic miscalculation, they might create such traps for themselves.’” (*Allison, pp.1*)

But of course, a state’s growth in power unavoidably creates tension. That tension then manifests in the nation, drawing the possibility of war ever-so-close. Though, it depends on how well the people can control their fear, and how secure they feel, even with their rivals becoming as powerful, or more powerful, than they are. It also depends on the opposing nation as well, and its intentions. “On whether China’s leaders are serious about displacing the United States as the top power in Asia in the foreseeable future, Lee answered directly: ‘Of course. Why not ... how could they not aspire to be number one in Asia and in time the world?’ And about accepting its place in an international order designed and led by America, he said absolutely not: ‘China wants to be China and accepted as such—not as an honorary member of the West.’” (*Allison, pp. 4*)

Analysis

The Thucydides Trap is a critical security study that continuously needs to be recognized in maintaining good foreign relations. Unwavering powers have fallen based-on the principles of Thucydides’ research. “When it ended 30 years later, Sparta was the nominal victor. But both states [Athens and Sparta] lay in ruin, leaving Greece vulnerable to the Persians.” (*Allison, pp. 2*) “A millennium in which Europe had been the political center of the world came to a crashing halt.” (*Allison, pp. 1*)

However, if China wants to become a unitary power, and wants to enforce its own ideals for the ‘greater good’, it would be a game of parlay. That is due to some of the history the United States has-had with other countries. “At the core of China’s civilizational creed is the belief—or conceit—that China is the center of the universe.” (*Allison, pp. 5*) This is similar to Roosevelt’s threats to Britain and Germany against blockading Venezuela, even though the U.S’s agenda was later forced onto the Venezuelan government. “Roosevelt defended the U.S. intervention on the grounds that it was ‘justified in morals and therefore justified in law.’” (*Allison, pp. 4-5*) In the end, every nation hopes to achieve some form of gain, which entails a loss for another. Though, when no one wants to accept that loss, the Thucydides trap begins to surface, bringing about the absolute worse outcome—war and death.

Reference

Allison, Graham. 2015. "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *the Atlantic*.