

FEATURE

Thucydides's Trap?

What Trump And Xi Can Learn From The Athens Vs. Sparta Rivalry

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Beijing and Washington have the immense challenge of avoiding war between a rising power and an established one.

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At this week's Mar-a-Lago summit, Presidents Donald Trump and Xi Jinping are expected to negotiate a host of urgent issues, from trade terms and currency manipulation to the South China Sea and — most importantly — North Korea. But do not be surprised if their discussion takes a turn toward ancient Greece. That is because Xi is a noted student of Thucydides, the ancient historian who chronicled the devastating Peloponnesian War. Xi speaks often about Thucydides, has integrated the great strategist's insights into his own thinking on the causes of war and has reflected on his counsel about how wars can be averted.

In his book *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides illuminated the causes of a war that destroyed Athens and Sparta and brought a golden age of civilization to an abrupt end. His work shows how these two leading city-states of classical Greece, which had managed to exist peacefully for decades, ultimately found themselves in a ruinous war that neither desired. In one of the most frequently quoted lines in the study of international relations, Thucydides explained,

“It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”

While other observers emphasized proximate causes, Thucydides went straight to the heart of the matter. What made war “inevitable” was the tectonic structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one—a phenomenon I've described as “Thucydides's Trap.”

Xi has studied the parallels between Athens and Sparta on the one hand and the U.S.-China relationship on the other. With Thucydides's Trap in mind, he has repeatedly affirmed his intention to do what he can to avoid the Greeks' tragic fate.

As long as we maintain communication and treat each other with sincerity, Thucydides' Trap can be avoided. —Xi Jinping

At a November 2013 meeting hosted by the Berggruen Institute's 21st Century Council in Beijing, for example, Xi went out of his way to tell world leaders that the U.S. and China “need to work together to avoid Thucydides's Trap—destructive tensions between an emerging power and established powers.”

When Xi met with former President Barack Obama during his 2015 visit to the U.S., he raised the issue of Thucydides's Trap, and the two discussed it at length.

In one of his public speeches during the trip, Xi warned that “should major countries time

and again make the mistakes of strategic miscalculation, they might create such traps for themselves.” And earlier this year, Xi told an audience of foreign dignitaries — including United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres — that “as long as we maintain communication and treat each other with sincerity, Thucydides’s Trap can be avoided.”

While the extent of Trump’s knowledge of Thucydides is uncertain, his national security team — including his national security advisor and secretary of defense — are fans. National

Security Advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster is fond of quoting Thucydides, especially to remind us, as he did in a 2013 op-ed, that, “People fight today for the same fundamental reasons the Greek historian Thucydides identified nearly 2,500 years ago: fear, honor and interest.”

Secretary of Defense James Mattis (whose personal library of more than 5,000 volumes earned him the nickname “warrior monk”) similarly identified these as “the root causes of why a nation chooses to go to hostilities” when asked during his confirmation

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



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hearing about his perspective on Thucydides's Trap.

Yet the biggest Thucydides fan in the White House is Stephen Bannon, Trump's chief strategist and close assistant. Those close to him describe him as a man "almost obsessed with military history." Bannon's personal favorite of the genre is none other than Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* — which he loves so much that his computer password before he came to the White House was reportedly "Sparta."

Bannon has a darker interpretation of Thucydides than Xi. He has said that he believes war between the U.S. and China is indeed inevitable within the next "five to 10 years." And he has apparently mused to colleagues that too much concern about Thucydides's Trap may intimidate U.S. policymakers into premature compromises that would undermine vital American interests.

So why are so many people, from Beijing to Breitbart, talking about Thucydides's Trap? Because, as Thucydides explained, there exists no better source of insight than "knowledge of the past as an aid to understanding the future." He hoped his book would help future statesmen, soldiers and citizens understand and avoid the tragic errors made by their predecessors.

As China threatens to surpass the U.S. and potentially set the world's two biggest powers on a path to a cataclysm neither wants, we

cannot help but remember the relentless rise of Athens and Sparta's growing sense that this was undermining its position of predominance in Greece. This phenomenon, after all, has haunted diplomacy in the millennia since.

But war between the U.S. and China is not inevitable. Indeed, Thucydides would agree that neither was the war between Athens and Sparta. Read in context, the book's claim about inevitability is clearly meant as hyperbole: exaggeration for the purpose of emphasis. The point of Thucydides's Trap is neither fatalism nor pessimism. Of the 16 cases of Thucydides's Trap over the past 500 years, four have ended without violence — not many but still, not all.

Thucydides's insight points us beyond the headlines and rhetoric to recognize the immense challenge that Beijing and Washington must master to construct a peaceful relationship — just as he intended when he wrote, "I have written my work, not as an essay to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time."