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A Critical Analysis of the Relevance of Thucydides' Trap in the Contemporary World

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Abstract

This article critically analyses the relevance of Thucydides' Trap in today's context-the idea that war becomes likely when a rising power challenges an established one. The framework, derived from Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War and later revived by Graham Allison, focuses on fear, honour, and interest as the forces that push great powers toward confrontation. But the modern world is a lot more complicated, and that complexity pushes back against the notion that conflict is inevitable. By comparing past and present cases, such as the smooth transition of power from Britain to the US and the deeply intertwined economic relationship between the U.S. and China, the article shows how nuclear deterrence, globalisation, domestic politics, economic interdependence, and international institutions all make large-scale war less likely. The overall takeaway is that while the clash between rising and established power can't be ruled out, it isn't predetermined either. Thucydides' Trap is better seen as a warning than a prediction, and it misses much of what keeps modern rivalries from turning violent.

Keywords

Thucydides' Trap, power transition, rising powers, U.S.–China relations, nuclear deterrence, globalisation, economic interdependence, multilateral institutions

Introduction

Throughout history, when a new power starts to rise, the global order tends to get unstable. That naturally raises an old question: do big powers always end up fighting each other, or can they actually manage a peaceful handover? The ancient Greek historian Thucydides, in his account of the Peloponnesian War, attributed the inevitability of war between Athens and Sparta to fear, honour, and interest, a logic later revived by Graham Allison (2017) in his "Thucydides' Trap" framework. Allison argued that structural tension between rising and dominant powers often leads to war, noting that 12 of 16 historical cases of power transitions ended in conflict (shown in Figure 1), a finding that has drawn comparisons between the U.S.-China rivalry and the Athens-Sparta dynamic (Kissinger, 2014).

Figure 1

The Thucydides' Trap Case File

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

Despite this, the relevance of the theory in the modern world is questionable. Many critics argue that it overgeneralises today's geopolitical reality by not accounting for mitigating factors such as diplomacy, nuclear deterrence, economic linkage, and global institutions (Nye, 2020). They also highlight examples such as the peaceful handover of global influence from Britain to the US (Kupchan, 2012), or the strong economic connections between Washington and Beijing (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016), which push against the idea that conflict is inevitable. This essay, therefore, takes a closer look at how relevant the Thucydides Trap really is in the 21st century. It concludes that the framework highlights structural pressures between rising and dominant powers, but it oversimplifies a far more complex world, given the new geopolitical realities.

The Thucydides' Trap Framework

Thucydides' Trap is rooted in Realist International Relations theory, which views the international system as anarchic, in which states primarily prioritise power and survival (Mearsheimer, 2001). From a Realist perspective, major conflicts often emerge when the distribution of power shifts, as dominant states try to defend what they have, while rising states seek greater influence. This framework is one of the earliest examples of this model, which shows how fear, honour, and interest can push states toward war. The Peloponnesian War was fought between a rising Athens and an established Sparta, along with their respective allies, from 431 to 404 BC (Platias & Koliopoulos, 2010). The War ended with Athens' defeat and the collapse of the Athenian Empire (Kegan, 2003).

Key Dynamics

Thucydides argued that fear, honour, and interest are the main forces that push states toward conflict during power shifts. These motivations help us to understand why tensions between rising and dominant powers so often escalate into war, and why major powers throughout history have struggled to coexist peacefully. Building on this idea, Graham Allison adapted Thucydides' insights from the Peloponnesian War into what he calls the "Thucydides Trap." According to Allison (2017), structural pressures along with psychological factors rooted in fear, honour, and interest can create conditions for war.

Fear. Fear forms the most prominent dynamic in Thucydides' Trap. It reflects the anxiety and insecurity experienced by an established power when a rising power threatens its dominance, security, and status. This kind of fear often pushes states into defensive behaviour, building new alliances, or even launching preemptive or preventive wars to protect their strategic advantage. A clear example comes from the early 20th century, when Germany grew anxious about Russia's rapid industrial and military rise. That concern led Berlin to back Austria-Hungary in 1914, a move that helped spark the First World War (Clark, 2012). Fear can also trigger arms races, with both the rising and dominant powers increasing military spending to deter the other. The result is a security dilemma: one side's defensive measures look threatening to the other, prompting further escalation on both sides.

Besides military concerns, fear involves the risk of losing influence, status, or key allies. Kori Schake (2017), for example, notes that Sparta was worried about harming its relationship with Corinth during the Peloponnesian War. It highlights that fear can sometimes go beyond basic security concerns and prioritise the protection of prestige, reputation, and alliance networks over it. Nevertheless, fear alone can't be a deciding factor for a war. It leaves us with an important question: amid structural tensions, can tools like diplomacy, deterrence, or shared strategic interests decrease fear and prevent conflict?

Honour. While fear raises insecurity, honour motivates countries to look for prestige and status in the international arena, sometimes even at the expense of practical interests. For both rising and established powers, honour is tied to national identity, pride, and respect. When that sense of honour is threatened, states may adopt risky or aggressive actions to avoid reputational decline, making political compromise much harder (Thucydides, 1874/1910). As Gilpin (1981) argues, losing prestige can ultimately be seen as weak, which can drive established states to assert their dominance even when doing so goes against their strategic interests.

Likewise, rising powers also want recognition that matches their growing strength, and they sometimes challenge the existing order to enhance their status (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). History offers plenty of examples of this dynamic. Sparta's choice to confront Athens, driven by honour and pushed along by figures such as Sthenelaidas and allies such as Corinth, shows how prestige concerns can help spark war. Schake (1874) notes how Sthenelaidas appealed directly to Spartan pride, urging: "Vote, therefore, Spartans, for war, as the honour of Sparta demands". In contrast, we see states compromising their honour in modern cases, when they view strategic and economic interests as valuable to them. This suggests that even though honour increases the likelihood of conflict, it does not make war unavoidable, which challenges the deterministic assumptions of the Thucydides Trap.

Interest. Along with fear and honour, interest is another important force which influences state behaviour in the Thucydides Trap. It refers to the material and strategic benefits that can push nations toward confrontation. Whenever a rising power tries to extend its influence and a dominant power seeks to protect its position, we often observe competition over territory, resources, markets, or technology. Thucydides noted this dynamic in the Peloponnesian War, where Athens' expanding reach and its efforts to control key trade routes threatened Sparta's sphere of influence, helping set the stage for war (Thucydides, 1874/1910).

Economic interests can also push rivalries toward armed conflict, especially when a country believes its prosperity or even its survival is on the line. A clear example is Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. As U.S. pressure mounted, threatening Japan's access to crucial resources, Tokyo chose a path of territorial expansion that eventually led to the attack on Pearl Harbour (Brands, 2016; Iriye, 1987). Cases like this show just how central material interests are in shaping state behaviour and how easily they can feed into conflict. Therefore, the question remains whether that pattern is still relevant, particularly considering the tightly connected economies and increasingly intertwined national interests.

Historical Misapplications of the Thucydides' Trap

Thucydides' Trap can be a useful way to think about power transitions, but its application to historical or modern cases is frequently criticised for being too generic. When complex geopolitics are reduced to a simple narrative of a clash between rising and dominant powers, important details are often lost. This can mislead scholars and policymakers in their understanding of history or the causes of conflict. The issue arises when the framework is used without considering context—things like cultural dynamics, historical patterns, domestic politics, shifting alliances, or the leader's personality. These factors matter and can considerably affect outcomes. Most criticisms of Thucydides' Trap focus on the following areas:

Under emphasis on Domestic Factors. Thucydides' Trap usually pays more attention to international power struggles and overlooks what's happening inside states themselves. But domestic politics, economic pressures, and cultural attitudes often influence the behaviour of countries. Gaddis (2005) points out that the US's involvement in the Cold War against the Soviet Union was not only to counter its power, but it was also a reaction to strong anti-communist feelings among both the public and politicians. Likewise, China's rise is guided by its own priorities, especially economic growth and social stability, which make direct confrontation less appealing (Shambaugh, 2013). Public opinion, leadership beliefs, and concerns about regime legitimacy can both accelerate and delay foreign policy decisions. When these domestic factors are ignored, we miss key reasons why rising and established powers act the way they do. For that reason, any serious examination of global power shifts needs to account for internal dynamics as well as international ones.

Neglect of Successful Power Transitions. One of the key criticisms of Thucydides' Trap is its neglect of historical cases where power transitions occurred without conflict. While many power shifts have resulted in war, some have occurred without direct military conflict. The shift from British to U.S. hegemony in the early 20th century took place

without resorting to war. That shift happened smoothly because both sides had overlapping economic and strategic interests, similar political and cultural outlooks, and no real territorial disputes (Feng, 2006). Instead of clashing, they found it easier to work together. This example challenges the notion that all power transition ends in war. It highlights the role of diplomacy, shared institutions, and economic interdependence in helping peaceful power transitions. This case challenges the idea that every major power transition leads to war and demonstrates how diplomacy, shared institutions, and economic ties can make a peaceful handover possible.

Oversimplified Binary of Rising vs. Established Power

The framework of Thucydides' Trap presents a broad view of how power has shifted over time. It describes great-power competition as a binary struggle between a rising and an established power. However, the framework does not account for the wider set of actors, alliances, and institutions that influence international relations. In practice, major power shifts rarely involve just two players. We can see city-states like Corinth, Thebes, and Persia having a major influence on the course of the war in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War (Kagan, 2003). Similarly, World War I is sometimes framed as Germany versus Britain, but it was driven by a tangled alliance system of Austria-Hungary, Russia, France, Italy, and others, each having its own goals (Clark, 2012). The binary feature of the Trap also overlooks key aspects of the present world, such as economic interdependence and international institutions. They encourage cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution, and disregarding these factors makes Thucydides' Trap feel too deterministic. Therefore, the framework fails to capture the true complexity of modern power transitions.

Contemporary Relevance in Global Politics

The Thucydides Trap is still a popular way to think about how rising powers might clash with established ones; however, we need more nuance when applying it to today's world. Modern geopolitics is far more complex compared to the conditions that Thucydides described. Today, economic interdependence, international organisations, nuclear deterrence, and even public diplomacy all play major roles in guiding state behaviour. Unlike ancient powers, which often settled disputes through force, rivalries today are addressed through many other forms, including trade wars, cyber operations, ideological competition, and quietly negotiated diplomacy. These features of the 21st century make the Trap less deterministic than it first appeared, and suggest that cooperation rather than conflict can define modern power transitions.

Nuclear Deterrence. Nuclear deterrence has been one of the main reasons major powers haven't fought large-scale wars since the mid-20th century, which challenges Allison's (2015) claim that great-power conflict is inevitable. With Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), everyone understood that a nuclear fight would destroy both sides. That fear shaped the Cold War, during which the U.S. and the Soviet Union maintained distance rather than clashing directly. As President John F. Kennedy noted in 1963, nuclear states must steer clear of situations where the only choices are humiliation or nuclear disaster. In effect, deterrence rather than aggression became a defining feature of modern power politics.

The same deterrent logic also applies to modern rivalries like India-China, India-Pakistan, and the US-China, where nuclear weapons helped maintain strategic equilibrium despite their disputes. A glaring example is the 2020 clash in the Galwan Valley between India and China, where both sides refrained from using firearms despite casualties. This highlights how nuclear capability can shape the behaviour of states on the ground (Boehlefeld, 2020). Although some fear that nuclear weapons might be used in desperate situations, history shows that mutual deterrence usually encourages caution and de-escalation. In this way, nuclear deterrence complicates the deterministic assumptions of the Thucydides Trap, showing that the fear of catastrophic destruction can push rival powers toward diplomacy over war, even when competition remains intense.

Globalisation and Economic Interdependence. Globalisation and economic interdependence have made war between major powers far less attractive by tying their financial systems, production networks, and markets together. In the modern global economy, a military conflict would come with enormous economic costs, disrupting trade, investment flows, and supply chains. The U.S.–China relationship is a clear example: in 2023, their bilateral trade exceeded $575 billion, with US companies relying heavily on Chinese manufacturing and China depending on U.S. consumers (Sutter, 2024). Researchers like Lee and Pyun (2009) support this claim, showing that higher levels of trade interdependence reduce the likelihood of interstate conflict. Similarly, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) argue that globalisation encourages caution since major disruptions would damage markets, slow production, and push both countries toward recession.

Moreover, the deep links between today's financial systems and global supply chains make large-scale conflict far less attractive to major powers. The 2008 financial crisis exposed the vulnerability of the global economy. It highlighted how a shock in one country can quickly spread across the world (Keohane & Nye, 2012). In today's world, most economies are interdependent. We see American industries depending on Chinese rare earth materials and China relying on U.S. semiconductors (Nathan, 2011). A war between them would affect global markets, creating inflation and shortages. This level of widespread economic turmoil makes such a confrontation strategically unreasonable. As globalisation continues, such interdependence turns war into a self-destructive act, which pushes nations toward diplomacy and negotiation. While rivalry still exists, globalisation increases the cost of war to the point that the outcome predicted by the Thucydides Trap is far from inevitable.

Multilateralism and Global Governance. Today, multilateral institutions and global governance play an important role in preventing great-power conflict, which encourages dialogue and offers peaceful ways to manage disputes. International bodies like the UN and World Trade Organisation (WTO) provide spaces for diplomacy and legal arbitration that reduce the chances of direct confrontation. The UN Charter promotes sovereignty, bans the use of force, and calls for peaceful dispute resolution (United Nations, 1945). Similarly, the WTO handles trade disagreements to stop economic issues from becoming geopolitical crises (Davis, n.d.). Through regular diplomatic interaction, these institutions help uphold a rules-based international order that prioritises cooperation rather than confrontation.

Peace is also strengthened through global governance by using legal and diplomatic frameworks to regulate states and encourage accountability. The International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court enforce international law, settle disputes, and discourage aggression. Similarly, forums such as the G20, G7, BRICS, SCO, and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) keep leaders in ongoing dialogue that helps to defuse tensions early. Although countries will continue to compete, these institutions provide platforms for negotiation and conflict management. Unlike the anarchic world of Thucydides' time, today's multilateral system, supported by globalisation, presents mechanisms that make major-power war far less inevitable.

Conclusion

Thucydides' Trap offers a useful way to think about the tensions that can emerge when a rising power challenges an established one, but treating conflict as inevitable overlooks how different today's international system is. Both historical and present evidence show that fear, honour, and interest can be moderated through diplomacy, economic interdependence, nuclear threat, and multilateral institutions. Examples such as the peaceful transition of power from the British to the Americans and the nonviolent U.S.–China rivalry show that power transitions do not always end in war. The presence of global institutions with international law at its core adds to this argument. In practice, cooperation, shared interests, and restraint increasingly define major-power relations in this contemporary world. For this reason, the modern value of Thucydides' Trap is less about predicting unavoidable conflict and more about serving as a warning. Therefore, structural tensions will continue, but their outcomes depend on leadership decisions, the strength of institutions, and the willingness of states to prioritise stability over confrontation.

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