

## Major Powers Rivalries: Analysis of War (Choice or Compulsion)

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**Abstract:** *History is consistent with a pattern of the rise and fall of great empires that have dominated the international landscape, but the last five hundred years have simplified an irrefutable arrangement of the rise and fall of great empires. This study explores the rise of China in a historical context and vindicates the hypothetical and theoretical probability of war by using the Thucydides trap in the transition of power from an existing superpower to emerging power. Our results explore that war between the great powers is not a trap created by structural stresses of the international anarchic system, so war is a rational choice for pursuing the strategic goal.*

**Key Words:** Thucydides Trap, China, U.S, Peaceful Rise, Militarized Conflict, Superpower, Great Power Rivalry.

### Introduction

Great powers' rivalries are the trademark of international politics; this rivalry plays a significant role in defining the providence of world history. According to Toynbee's long cycle theory, 'great power competition unfolds distinctive phases where periods of war are followed by new world order, shift in power, institutions and allies.

I will choose theoretical predictions about great-power politics in the 21st century, unlike natural sciences, social sciences are based on theoretical foundations. Moreover, political phenomena are greatly multifaceted and complex; hence, precise political calculations are unlikely to suggest or explain phenomena without any theoretical tools. And consequently, there is a chance of error in all political predictions. Those who try to predict, as I do here, shouldn't be overly confident because the underlying factors upon which we are predicting are highly volatile and so are our

conclusions but this study rests its prediction on certain consistent behavioural patterns.

At the end of the Cold War, the West seems confident that "perpetual peace" among the great powers had decisively accomplished, and marked a sea change in how great powers interact with one another. (Mearsheimer, 2001). "We have entered a world in which there is little chance that the major powers will engage each other in security competition, much less war, which has become an obsolescent enterprise. In liberal orientations, the end of the Cold War has brought us to "the end of history" (Fukuyama, Summer 1989).

This liberal idealist perspective proposes that no longer will major powers be considered potential military rivals, but instead as members of a family of nations, what is sometimes called the "international community" by Barry Buzzan. In the new world, the area of cooperation among great powers is bigger than the competition, Even some hardcore realists who historically clutched doubtful opinions about the dreams

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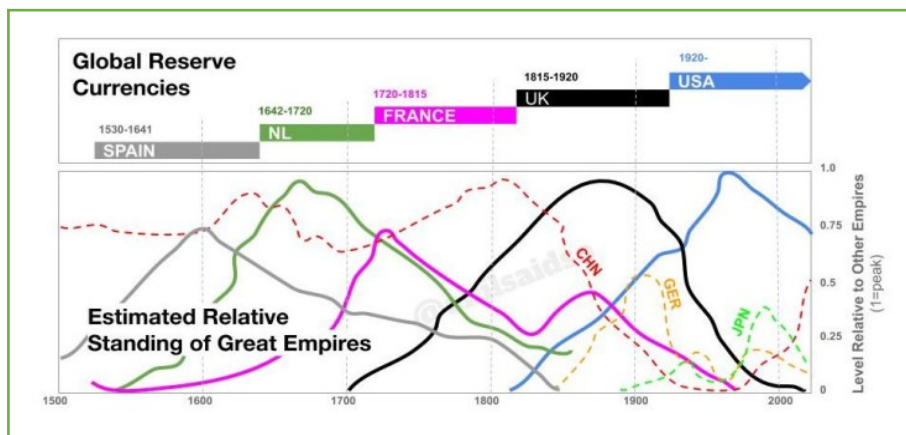
for peace among the great powers, appear to be optimistic, as echoed in an article from the mid-1990s titled “Realists as Optimists.” (Mearsheimer, 2001) Consider, for example, that even though the Soviet threat has disappeared, the United States still maintains about one hundred thousand troops in Europe and roughly the same number in Northeast Asia.

### Historical Overview

The rise and fall of empires have a long history dating back to the famous Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta. According to Thucydides, ‘It was the rise of Athens (naval and democratic) that fears it installed in Sparta (military power and authoritarian) made the war inevitable (Thucydides)

A watchful analysis of the Greek Thucydides’ book The History of the Peloponnesian War suggests that a U.S.-China

war is barely unavoidable and Such a conflict for hegemony is a deliberate strategic planning of a declining superpower United States and rising power China and is not a deception, and choosing the suitable U.S. outstanding policy is the approach to circumvent it similarly China faces significant geographical and technological complications to broadens its imperial standings in the region. Thucydides’ essential instructions for the present-day United States with its competitor China is that democratic Athens stumbled when it hunted preeminence by getting bigger and mightier its realm during Peloponnesian War; currently we do not requisite to reserve a spot on primacy in East Asia but can instead break gratified with upholding an equilibrium of supremacy. Although China is rising, the United States and its regional allies are in a resilient situation to uphold a regional equilibrium that preserves peace and serve American interest in the region.



**Figure 1**

*Source: The U.S-China, and the Thucydides trap\_ Asia Times.*

<https://images.app.goo.gl/kk6D9tCpuBMzNVAm7>

*Access time and Date: 11:01 am / 15 March 2022*

### Taking the Right Lessons from Thucydides

Thucydides charged that his concept will be relevant and applicable to any era of human history. He was confident that his work would subsist during his passing because he supposed he had identified certain enduring features of human nature and statecraft that

would remain relevant despite dramatic changes in technology and other elements of the modern world (Strassler, 1996)

The courageous prophecy of his book’s persistent worth may strike readers as a rational generalization—it is impactful for the ancient Romans; Machiavelli during the Italian

chaos, Thomas Hobbes in the English Civil War; the American Founders particularly John Adams and John Quincy Adams; Edward Everett's Gettysburg Address; and even the modern-day Germany after unification in the nineteenth century is witness to the botched Athenian general's accomplishment at residual pertinent (Thucydides).

The Thucydides trap Cold War significance is totally applicable to the United States and was extensively acknowledged. As Secretary of State George Marshall expressed to the Princeton class of 1947, "I can't think of an event that prevails in the modern sense of conflict have no relevance to the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta the greatest powers competing for hegemony, especially the situation emerged after the cold war was highly synonymous for the newly emerged superpower United States." (Ed, J. W. (1995)). The unipolar power America had suddenly found itself relevant to the situation" (Bornstein, November 4, Fall 2015).

It defines the ongoing national, domestic and international encounters to democratic values in a leading role in realpolitik, particularly in the case of leading global power. It likewise recommends tangible strategies that force present-day America to shape the tactical loop like ancient Athens never could.

## A Thucydides Trap?

The extensively chatted modern toil using Thucydides as a tool for a twenty-first-century impressive approach is Graham Allison's *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (Allison, May 30, 2017). Identical to power transition theorists, Allison suggests that there is a strong probability of conflict between the declining power fighting for preserving its hegemony and the rising power to establish and expand its supremacy, the former in this case is the United States and the latter is China. Undeniably, in the last five hundred years great powers are trapped by war in their struggle to establish their primacy. (Gilpin, Spring 1988). It isn't shocking that Allison and other contemporaries will find it relevant to refer to Peloponnesian War as the evidence lies there for yet one more competition with China now "rising" comparative to the United States in multiple directions and more importantly as a potential competitor for becoming a global hegemon. (Allison, May 30, 2017). Today it seems like China is rising, the one that the world had already experienced in East Asia earlier. (Zoellick, July/August 2013). Now the question is how the Thucydides trap will be used to explain the response of the United States.

Comparison of US-China military spending;

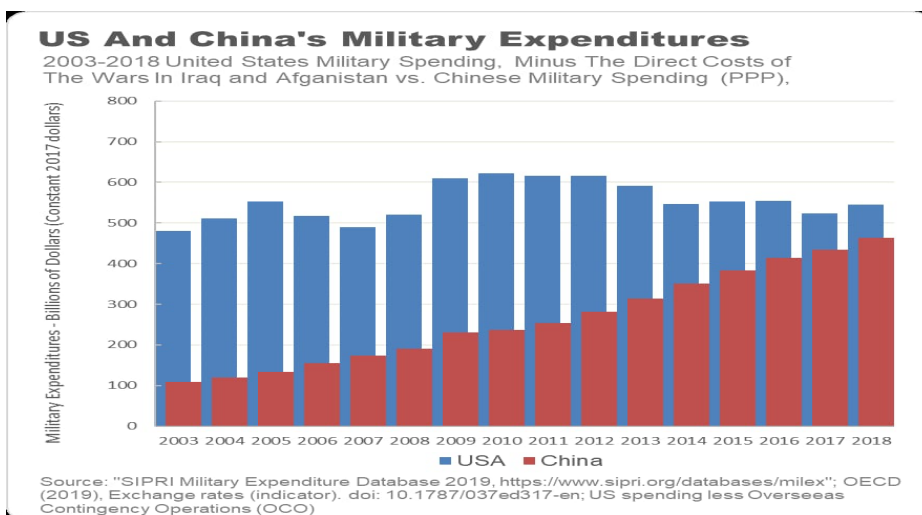


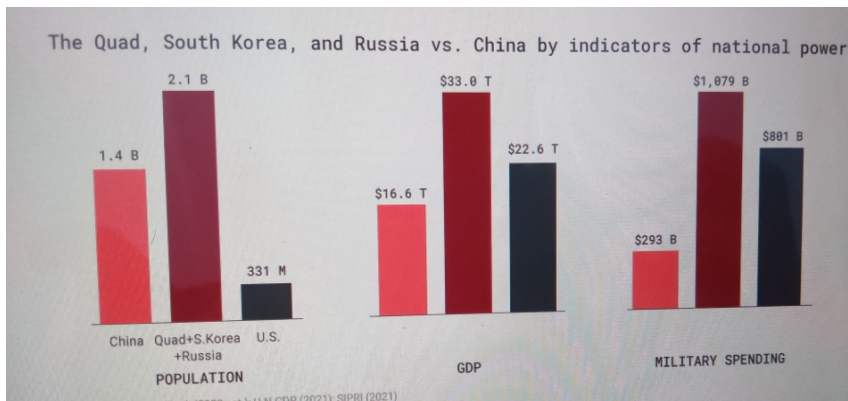
Figure 2

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2019.

Western academia went critical but Jonathan Kirshner went too far in discharging Alison's argument as "messy, shallow, overgeneralized, over-optimistic, and monotonous," (Kirshner, January–March [2019](#)). Similarly, Chinese diplomats or academics aren't dismissing it and found it irrelevant to the U.S.-China trial. President Xi has unconditionally dismantled any "such thing as the so-called Thucydides traps in the world." Similarly they "throw away any supposed metaphor and repudiate such naive bygone equivalence as an up-to-date version of the American centric 'China Threat Theory.'

(Mo Shengkai and Chen Yue, National Interest, [2016](#)) China Threat Theory is a sunshade below which numerous pieces of evidence gathered to suggest that the Chinese rise will be violent and bloody (Emma V. Broomfield, (August [2010](#))). Allison individually reacts to that: He confesses he clamps "dual self-contradictory concepts at once."

Similarly, the statistics of different alliances made by both sides to pursue their imperialist ambitions are highlighted in the following chart;



**Figure 3**

*Source: CIA world fact Book 2021, U.N GDP 2021.*

### WAR is a Choice?

Allison believes that the destiny of war is inevitable for both powers and highly competent leadership on both sides can only avoid the geopolitical complexities leading to war. Somewhere, Allison framed the deception term as "the prehistoric world's two most remarkable rivals" groundbreakers' exertions to "circumvent" conflict. In another place, Allison believes that Thucydides trap "craft such a forcefully complex dynamics which remain remarkably hard to escape." (Allison, May 30, [2017](#)). As for the conclusion the war or conflict may be avoided but the magnitude of growing fear and geopolitical and geostrategic complexities are tremendously leading to such a situation where conflict is most likely to happen. More importantly the last five hundred years have had a consistent pattern of conflict between the rise and fall of great powers. Alison calculated that 75% of opportunities have been patronized in these

years and if the trend continues history will see another blow in the case of the US and CHINA. (Allison, May 30, [2017](#)). Allison's jumble on the very matter might replicate the deliberation amid academics and interpreters around Thucydides' understanding of the "predictability" of conflict between Athens and Sparta. The well-known Crawley translation of section 1.23.6 interprets Thucydides as affirming "the growing power of Athens made the conflict inevitable" (Allison, May 30, [2017](#)). New versions, although, are far-off. Jeremy Mynott, for instance, interprets Thucydides as portentous that "the Athenians stood attractive, authoritative and stimulated terror in the Spartans and so enforced them into conflict." (Allison, May 30, [2017](#)) I may approve, with Arthur M. Eckstein that Thucydides is never disgusting and that conflict is an "unavoidable," preoccupied choice of Spartans and particularly Athenians, so the extensively recycled Richard Crawley interpretation is confusing. (Allison, May 30, [2017](#)) Arlene

Saxenhouse acknowledges that there is a new concept that she termed as a “power trap” in Thucydides—fear brands the controlling power hunt hitherto additional supremacy to pawn the conflict search of contending group, subsequently leads to partial clash, but neither Thucydides nor his superman general Pericles supposed such an extremely disastrous battle would remain inescapable. (Arthur M. Eckstein, December [2003](#)) Definitely, in his well-known exaltation for Pericles in Book II, Thucydides admires Pericles’ premeditated farsightedness and censures the absence of it amongst his descendants, thus portentous as a chief protagonist for option. (Ryan K. Balot, [2017](#)).

### Allison's View on the Balance of Power

Allison appears to appreciate certain rudiments of a strategy of Balance of Power as a means to prevent U.S.-China power encounters; however, in the book he impeaches realpolitik or realist power politics as a share of this delinquent, connecting it to an Athenian proposition at Melos—“the durable power organize what they canister and the

feeble bear their necessity, simply to put them hem in these terms the stronger must survive and the weaker must be perished” (Strassler, The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide To The Peloponnesian War, [1998](#))—and possibly binding it to those current predictors who contemplate the methods in which U.S. ought to react to Chinese rise and kept them at bay. (Strassler, The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide To The Peloponnesian War, [1998](#)). Assuming this thesis, the realist perspective of the balance of power is at its own place and the question of dealing with a rising China still remains to be finished, because the equation is shifting towards China in the last three decades but the rise of China can still be strictly defined in economic terms, while the US is a multidimensional empire as suggested by James Garrison in his book; America as empire Global leader or Rogue power? (GARRISON, [2004](#)). Similarly, Clinton's secretary of state Madeleine Albright called it an ‘indispensable power’ but the question of how long can it survive will stay under intellectual scrutiny to address (GARRISON, [2004](#))

	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

Figure 4

Source: *Destined for war: can America and China escape Thucydides trap* by Graham Allison pp 50.

## U.S. Possible Strategic Options Today

### Opportunities and Possibilities

Let's analyze the strategic opportunities and possibilities available to the United States to counter the rising power of China. Twofold levels of options are incredibly important: The single most dominant approach in western and American academia is to maintain dominance to avoid any conflict with China rising and establishing its supremacy, such an approach is widely influential in Washington and endorsed by scholars and political commentators for avoiding hegemonic war, where scholars have highlighted both direct and indirect elements of power and influence on a global scale.

This might be finished one-sidedly by residing dominant and advance of the Chinese as much as conceivable in all sectors of competition against China, to put it in simple terms this is the grand planning similar to "preeminence." (Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, March/April [1997](#).)

### Collective Institutional Efforts

The second most dominant strategy is using international institutions like an international monetary fund, World Bank, and the world health organization for preserving supremacy emphasizing its joint reimbursements. Mutually the "deep engagement" and the use of United States military supremacy to tackle

international issues and promote "liberal internationalism" through the application of international institutions like the World Bank, IMF, WHO, and UNO for preserving the American interest throughout the globe) service this strand of pieces of evidence and argumentation. (G. John Ikenberry, (January/February [2008](#)))

The rest of the approaches belong to realpolitik explaining the United States' response to rising China and the most stands out approach is the effort to preserve the balance of power. The most optimal pivot is the prominent problem of the theory of international relations: first of all, maintaining the balance of power should be considered a natural equilibrium for preventing the rise of the hegemon to the international anarchic system. Or it maintains the hegemony of certain imperialist power states? Is this the most favourable situation which is reasonable for peace, stability and harmony among states? Is the great power or superpower really happy with maintaining the balance of power without serving them imperil interests? (Paul C. Avey, November [2018](#)) Military strategies are one of the aspects of managing to maintain the balance of power mechanism and prevent the outburst of war or transition of power. (Barry R. Posen, [1984](#)) a lesson one must draw from Thucydides' history of Conflict between Athens and Sparta and apply it to the liberal logic in the modern world.

Table 1

Theoretical Framework	Dynamics of Power	Logic
Liberal Supremacy	Perceive dominance and primacy by containing rising power. Prevent the transition of power by maintaining preeminence. Left no space for competitors. Sharpen the probability of nuclear conflict.	To preserve superiority.
Balance of power	Maintain equilibrium of power by continuous checks on the rising power. Continuously shrink the area of influence for emerging power.	Advance interests. Reduce security dilemma dynamics.

Such an interpretation of Thucydides advocates U.S. determinations to uphold its

predominant status of a superpower, whichever separately or through institutions.

(Layne, March 2012) The post-Cold War Charles Krauthammer “unipolar moment” is an object of surprising degeneration of the USSR as an end in a bipolar system. With tremendous economic growth, China replaced the Soviet Union as a new competitor in challenging the United States in the twenty-first-century international system.

The most important question is now how much of US hegemony will be lost in this new bipolarity emerging between US and CHINA or will soon the multi-polarity be evidenced in the international system? How much challenging it will be for the United States to be compatible and adjust itself to the new international reality? Or will the challenge lead to competition and competition leads to the cold war and then militarized war, another bloody conflict on a global scale? (Waltz, Summer 1964)

## Security Dilemma

The security dilemma is another potential cause for hegemonic war in which different states are currently clubbed, the underlying dynamics, changing geopolitical and geo-economic realities, the growing china and African countries' economic partnership, changing political landscape of the Middle East, the growing American fear and declining influence are potential cases for a new hegemonic war, these changes will certainly change the security dynamics and pose new challenges on all fronts military, economic, diplomatic, cultural and strategic, in an anarchic system. Thus reconsidering Peloponnesian War and its underlying political, economic and imperial dynamics we are consistent to conclude that China and U.S. will repeat the Athenian and Spartan wars.

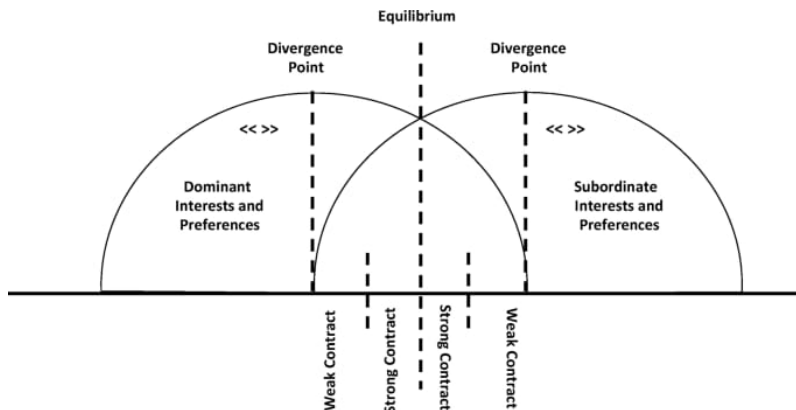


Figure 5

Source: *The Thucydides Trap And Korean Peninsula: So Why the U.S.A Won't Get Caught?*

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11366-018-09595-7>

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## Conclusion

In the end, Thucydides' ultimate instructions and directives for the current superpower United States in its competition with China is, that during the Peloponnesian war the democratic Athens staggered by seeking primacy or hegemony by expanding its empire, Paul Kennedy, 1988 rightly called it an 'Imperial overstretch' that cause the downfall of empires, through unfathomable analysis of geopolitical, geo-strategic and geo-economic international realities United States currently

cannot maintain primacy at global level, rather it can maintain the famous approach of 'Balance of Power' which can serve as preserving hegemony and provide stability to the declining power to re-evaluate what Joseph Nye called as 'Short Coming of U.S Power'. The best possible political calculation that can serve US currently is to maintain "equilibrium" of power at international level rather than seeking hegemony, thus restrains or offshores balancing, regional connectivity through economic integration like BRI, use of

international institutions, reduce the imperial overstretch, build strong coalitions, connecting strong allies, reduce economic and capital flow to China, prevent China from creating alliances, increase regional instability, reduce international military interventions and promote engagement with weaker nations, regional and multi-regional counter balancing rather seeking hegemony through war, liberal

crusades, humanitarian interventions, control the information technology and continuously expand and advance it and then once you reach to the point once you emerged after the WW2, then power can only be acquired and maximized to EXERCISE, then consider the Henry Kissinger approach that "WAR is a shortcut to domination as no diplomatic route leads to it".

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