

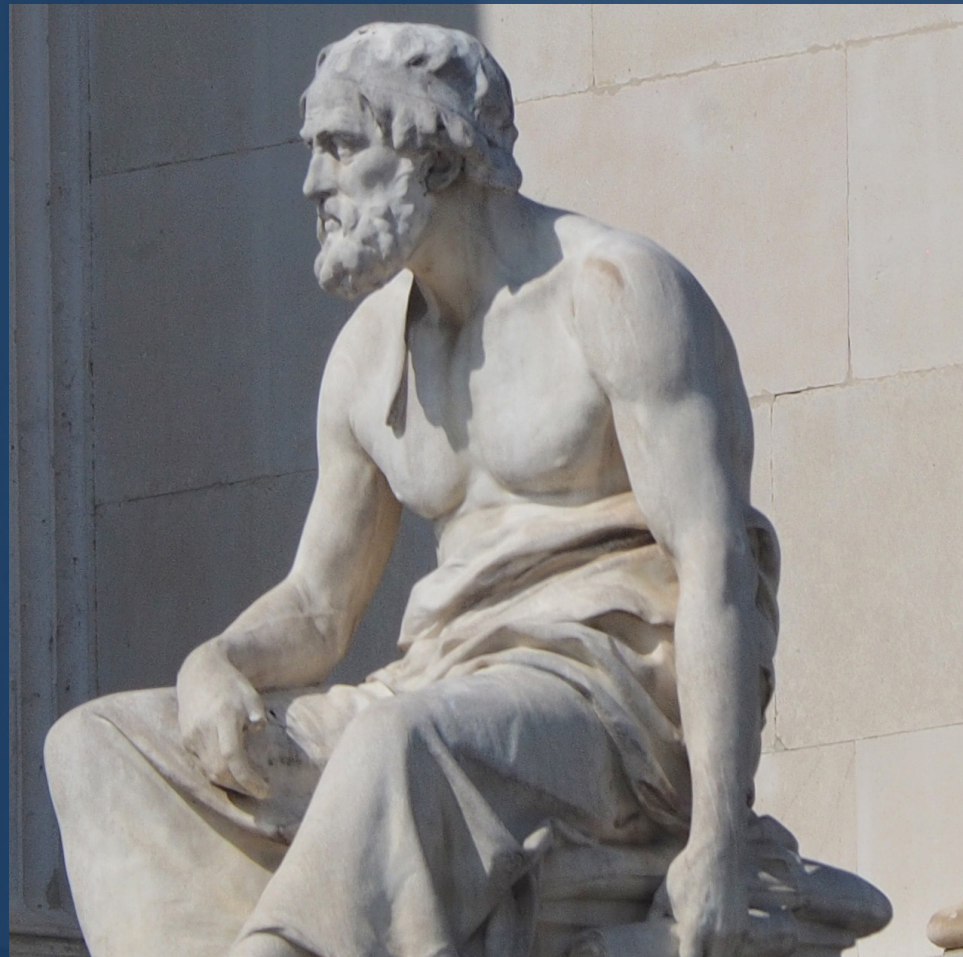


Thucydides Lives in Asia

Power Transition Traps Are Real

Patrick Porter, University of Birmingham

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Author:

Patrick Porter, University of Birmingham

Editors:

Paul van Hooft and Tim Sweijjs

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Why is there an escalating rivalry between the US and China? Some European states are dipping their toes further into the Indo-Pacific theater. Implicitly or explicitly, they do so to help counter China's rise, and to increase their influence and prestige. Into what kind of environment are they tilting? The stakes are high. There is intensifying debate over the security order in Asia, open competition between the US and China, a standoff brewing over Taiwan, and a fear that rivalry could erupt into "hegemonic war."¹

Let's turn back to Thucydides, who haunts these discussions, and who gives rise to both reverence or fatigue. Talk abounds about the ancient Athenian admiral, exile, plague survivor, and historian of the Peloponnesian war in the fifth century BC.² Thucydides, some argue, laid down a template for the origins of crises that could blow up. Put simply, states grow at different paces and this raises alarm. Incumbent, dominant powers fear the rise of revisionist rivals that begin to aggrandise. As the rising challenger grows richer, more powerful and ambitious, the established state fears the future, fears time is against it, fears the new power will displace it, and is tempted to use its waning military preponderance to suppress the challenge. A security competition results, which can erupt into war.

Did Thucydides ascribe the Peloponnesian war to a power transition crisis between the two poles of his own time, Sparta and Athens? Can we use this ancient idea to understand the fraught power politics in East Asia? Is there a 'Thucydides Trap' that explains, if not war, the risk of war, through militarized international disputes and competition for alliances, economic supremacy and strategic territory?

A chorus of sceptics doubts this.³ They argue the 'trap' neither helps explain Thucydides' text, or his world, or politics in Asia now. It is either irrelevant or part of the problem, leading to a fatalistic embrace of great power competition. Graham Allison's recent re-articulation of the argument did not counter charges of simplistic determinism, given he entitled it *Destined for War*.⁴ Thucydides, they contend, did not consistently trace the conflict to the distribution of power. In some accounts, he didn't offer any grand view of what drives international politics. Either he had another chief concern – the demise of Athens, debased by hubris and war, or his own exoneration or immortality, or to commemorate the defining struggle of his era – or he was mainly writing a work of humane sympathy. In common, sceptics agree that power shifts don't explain well how crises tend to break out. And the pessimistic intellectual tradition that he stands for, realist power politics, is Eurocentric.⁵ As David Kang observes in his contention that Asian states are culturally predisposed to accommodate China's rise, "Thucydides didn't live in Asia".⁶

1 Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18:4 (1988), pp.591-613.

2 Michael Crowley, "Why the White House is Reading Greek History", *Politico* 21 June 2017; Kori Schake, "The Summer of Misreading Thucydides", *The Atlantic* 18 July 2017. See also Neville Morley's state-of-the-art treatment of the subject, *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides*. (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2014).

3 Steve Chan, *Thucydides' Trap? Historical Interpretation, Logic of Inquiry and the Future of Sino-American Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Jonathan Kirshner, "Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right", *Security Studies* 28:1 (2018), pp.1-24; Lawrence Freedman, Book Review, Graham Allison, *Destined for War*, in *Prism* 7:1 (2017), pp.175-178; D.A. Welch, "Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides", *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003), pp.301-319; Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, "China is a Declining Power, and that's the Problem", *Foreign Policy* 24 September 2021.

4 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: can America and China escape Thucydides' Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)

5 James Palmer, "Oh God, Not the Peloponnesian War Again", *Foreign Policy* 28 July 2020.

6 David Kang, "Thucydides Didn't Live in Asia" *The Washington Quarterly* 41:1 (2018), pp.137-154; David Kang, *China Rising: Power, Peace and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)

Critiques go beyond the complaint that realists get Thucydides wrong. They also accuse realists of over-weighting systemic pressures. War-prone crises, the objection goes, are matters of choice and contingency or ideational variables, in which material power shifts are not particularly implicated.⁷ What's more, they allege that the 'trap' concept ill-suits the complexity of politics in Asia today. Accordingly, realists who fetishize Thucydides allegedly are helping to foist a potentially disastrous, escalating militarized contest onto a region which, if treated more delicately, would be stable and peaceful enough. Asia need not become a powder keg, primed for collisions, this approach says.⁸ And if it does, it will be realists' fault and the rulers who freely choose to do realist things.

This scepticism has reached the point of overcorrection. The dangerous interaction between a revisionist and a status quo power can be identified in the text of Thucydides' history. And it is observable in our own time in the Indo-Pacific theater. As far as we reasonably can tell, a relative power shift, spurred by uneven growth, is helping to drive an intensifying crisis that threatens to spill over into conflict. And a fresh reading of Thucydides and recent events offers a further insight. We can discern a phenomenon ancient and modern, of 'delayed and reluctant balancing', as states that would prefer a quiet life increasingly fear being eclipsed. Realists are fundamentally right, about Thucydides and the sources of the present impasse.

In sum, objections to the 'trap' point to two related problems: a *textual interpretation* problem regarding interpreting Thucydides, and a *historical anachronism* problem about the misapplication of the theory to the history of Asia and what is unfolding now.

To clarify what exactly we are arguing about, let us return to the text.

1. Thucydides' Traps

What is the 'trap', and its moving parts? A Thucydidean approach looks first to a destabilising power shift. What states *do* with it is not predetermined, but the result of conscious choices, albeit choices made under pressure. Sensitive readings of his history should steer between the poles of simplism, whereby the power shift is everything and there is no agency, and nuance-ism, whereby emphasizing the subtleties of the text drown out its explicit, recurrent theme.

Attacks on the 'trap' model usually summarise Thucydides' explanation for the Peloponnesian war's origins as the "inevitable" result of Athens' rise and Sparta's fear. To the modern ear, that sounds glibly aphoristic, ahistorical, and too mechanically deterministic. It is then a quick job to dismiss the intellectual tradition that attributes conflict to power transitions.

Closer inquiry, however, shows that Thucydides was not a crude determinist. He offered a layered set of causes.⁹ The Athenians' growing power and the pressure it placed on Sparta's

7 Richard Ned Lebow, "Contingency, catalysts and international system change", *Political Science Quarterly* 115 (2000), pp.591-616; (with Benjamin Valentino) "Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory" *International Relations* 23:3 (2009), pp.389-410.

8 Van Jackson lays out the main policy implication of arguments that realist power transition theories are overdetermined: "America is Turning Asia into a Powder Keg", *Foreign Affairs* 22 October 2021. See also: Thomas Shugart, "Beijing's Belligerence Has Set the Stage for Conflict", *Foreign Affairs* 1 Dec 2021.

9 1.23.5-6; I am indebted to Arthur Eckstein, whose translations I draw upon: "Thucydides, the Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, and the Foundation of International Systems Theory" *The International History Review* 25:4 (2003), pp. 757-774.

The dangerous interaction between a revisionist and a status quo power can be identified in the text of Thucydides' history. And it is observable in our own time in the Indo-Pacific theater.

alliances caused alarm and compelled Sparta towards war. But the power shift was the “truest”, not the only, cause of the conflict. He assigned causal weight also to the behavior of a third party, Corinth. Thucydides takes the trouble to depict Sparta’s internal debate about whether to strike or wait. And the grievances that precipitated the war were not mere pretexts but contributing elements. Elsewhere he emphasized the causal role of leaders’ decision-making in Athens. Thucydides’ audience saw the concept of compulsion — *anankē* — not as hard fate, but as generated by both the force of circumstances and agents’ attitudes and beliefs.¹⁰ So to speak of a trap is not to fall prey to determinism. The trap does not have to be sprung.

Still, Thucydides had an unmistakable theme. The frequency of statements by characters or in the commentary about the dangers of power shifts and fear of future decline, the frequency of the word “danger”, (over two hundred times),¹¹ and the emphasis on a preventative logic,¹² suggest Thucydides reckoned systemic pressures exerted themselves, and were hard to ignore. In his history, local shifts in the power balance also drive fear, leading to defections or appeals for assistance, by such city-states as Corcyra and Mantinea.¹³

Thucydides was not simply a forerunner of modern Power Transition Theory (PTT). In contrast to starker versions, he portrays the impetus coming from both directions, riser and incumbent. Allies also propel the collision by appealing for help, in contrast to the more strictly dyadic version of power transition crisis. Athens the challenger is impelled primarily by fear, of the loss of power and status, rather than greedy dissatisfaction. This could come especially via rebellion from its subject allies if it does not appear strong. Increasingly, though, it projects power into Sparta’s domain. As well as getting rich, it converts its wealth into an enlarged navy and forms an alliance network that it turns into an imperial tributary system. It is both a typical consequence of power, as Thucydides makes clear, but also of specific situations and conscious decisions (often close-run) in the Assembly at Athens. Sparta for its part fears the consequences of Athens becoming ever stronger, and after agonising debate and pressure from its own allies who fear Athenian power, acts. The relative weight of decision ultimately lies with Sparta. Both count.

Yet it took pressure from Sparta’s allies, and the push by the ephor Sthenelaidas, to push the reluctant Spartans into confrontation with Athens: Sthenelaidas is emphatic that they must strike while they still can, or risk losing their allies. There is no ‘inevitability’ that Sthenelaidas gave this speech—it is the act of an individual. And there is no inevitability, either, to Pericles’ ability to persuade the Athenians to resist the subsequent Spartan demands. Still, Thucydides clearly sees the pressure of a power-transition as “shaping and shoving” decisions and actions. He is a complex, multi-level thinker. And it’s exactly the case that his “truest cause” doesn’t mean that other causes aren’t true. It’s not a dichotomy between true and false.

Thucydides’ account is notable for its portrayal not of Sparta’s war enthusiasm but of its aversion, its delay in accepting competition. Athens, after all, had grown for decades and Sparta had mostly tolerated it. It was not Athens’ economic rise that disturbed. Rather, it was the rising polity’s conversion of economic, trading strength into hard naval power, and

10 Martin Ostwald, *ΑΝΑΓΚΗ in Thucydides* (Atlanta: Scholars Press 1988), pp.1-5; Mark Fisher and Kinch Hoekstra, “Thucydides and the Politics of Necessity” in S. Forsdyke, E. Foster, and R.K. Balot, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, (Oxford 2017) pp. 373-389; Erich S. Gruen, “Thucydides, His Critics and Interpreters”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 1:2 (1971), pp.327-337, 331-332.

11 See Daryl Edward Grissom, “Thucydides’ Dangerous World: Dual Forms of Danger in Classical Greek Interstate Relations,” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Maryland, 2012).

12 1.88; 1.88.5; 1.118.2; 1.44.2.

13 1.31.2; 1.77.6.

its encroachments on Sparta's allies: "but at last the power of Athens was clearly attaining a height, and the Athenians began to lay hands on Sparta's alliance. Then the Spartans could bear it no longer, but felt it necessary to attack Athenian power and destroy it, if they could."¹⁴ Sparta's decision for war did not come easily. It took time to perceive Athens' growth as a threat, given the lag between its economic expansion and its conversion of wealth into hard power. Though optimised for land fighting, Sparta was not predisposed ideologically or organizationally to a protracted, distant military campaign, especially against a formidable sea power. Such undertakings were unappealing not only because of the risks of distant military adventures, but given Sparta's anxiety about preventing slave revolts at home. Anarchy's systemic pressures, fear of predation in a world of self-help, was present in the classical as well as the structural realist tradition,¹⁵ and bore down on the reluctant.

So the 'trap' is best conceived as a family of pessimistic theories about the linkage between power shifts and war-prone instability. These modern strands have their intramural disagreements. Some present the challenger, others the incumbent power as the main protagonist. The "dynamic differentials" variant emphasises the orientation of the dominant state and its fear of steep decline.¹⁶ Scholars disagree about the relative importance of the challenger's level of satisfaction (some regard this as an analytical constant, PTT theorists as a variable). They differ too about the importance of polarity. Above all, they debate whether it is more power hierarchy or power balance that generates crisis.

Thucydides of course was not a modern-day IR theorist and did not explicitly address these sub-questions. But his outlook on the relation between power shifts and conflict broadly enjoys empirical corroboration from work in recent decades. As Levy and DiCiccio observe, "The confluence of a dissatisfied challenger's rise and a dominant state's decline or stagnation is correlated with the onset of major wars."¹⁷ Power transitions tend to increase the risk of militarized conflicts, in localized as well as global conflicts.¹⁸ Even some accounts that challenge power transition theory concede that it can be a mechanism in an important minority of cases.¹⁹ Much recent World War One historiography recognizes a strong preventive element within the mindset of the *Kaiserreich* which feared a rising Franco-Russian bloc and felt impelled to act given the closing window of military advantage (in a conflict also propelled by other destabilising shifts in and over the Balkans paralleling Trotsky's "uneven and combined development."²⁰

It is important here to distinguish between two things that can be conflated, explanations of major war and explanations of crises and security competitions short of war. If we treat

14 Thucydides 1.118.2; Eckstein's translation, p.762.

15 On this point, see Joseph M. Parent & Joshua M. Baron, "Elder Abuse: How the Moderns Mistreat Classical Realism" *International Studies Review* 13 (2011), pp.193-213.

16 Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

17 Jack S. Levy and Jonathan M. DiCiccio, "Power Shifts and Problem Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 43:6 (1999), pp.675-704, p.694.

18 "Dangerous Liaisons: Dyadic Power Transitions and the Risk of Militarized Disputes and Wars." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 46:1 (2013), pp. 69-92; Woosang Kim, "Power Parity, Alliance and Wars in East Asia, 1860-1993", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46:5 (2002), pp.654-671.

19 Michael Lee, eg: "Falling Down: An Empirical Test of Dynamic Differentials Theory, 1500-1999", in William R. Thompson (ed.) *Systemic Transitions: Past, Present and Future* (2009), pp.75-98.

20 Alexander Anievas, "1914 in world historical perspective" Jack S. Levy, "The Sources of Preventative Logic in German Decision-making in 1914", in Levy and John A. Vasquez, *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.139-166; David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Why the World Went to War in 1914* (New York: Vintage, 2004), pp.289-290; Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); see also David Blagden, "Uneven and combined development: convergence realism in communist regalia?" *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34:2 (2021), pp.250-266

power transitions as the independent (causal) variable rather than just selecting 'wars' as the dependent (caused) variable, we should recognize that there are also power transitions that don't lead to major war, but which lead to cold wars, with their duels, standoffs and indirect (at times violent) competition, where participants knowingly run the risk of war to prevent their fall. While a general theory of major war is elusive, predicting the circumstances in which states will run the risk of war is more within reach.

Willingly running the risk of major war, reluctantly and belatedly, in the wake of a power shift: that formula is a decent first cut for what is happening in Asia now.

2. Thucydides in Asia

Does a trap now loom in Asia?

Some say it does not. Asia in their eyes is averse to competitive and violent power politics, hence many states are under-balancing, thereby defying realist prophecies. Some take this further, arguing that it has macro historical roots. East Asia in this telling has long been instinctively hierarchical, with a peaceable way of politics that rests on ideational foundations and the values of harmony and stability, in contrast to the European state system's historic lack of an attractive hierarchical model.

Firstly, there is a problem in the culturally essentialist notion of what we mean by 'Asia', and who counts as participants or visitors. The argument that Asia possesses a distinctive and long-standing tradition overdraws the Europe/Asia/America gulf and smells of the Huntingtonian fallacy, demarcating peoples with messy histories into strictly separate, sealed, macro-scale civilisations. If cultural/ideational variables were indeed paramount, the Asia of 2021 is constituted in a fundamentally different way than it was under the Ming dynasty. Namely, it has the US embedded in it, along with countries written off as 'non-Asian', like Australia. Indeed, America became an Asian power long before it became a European power. These worlds are not hermetically sealed and separate.

More fundamentally, the claim that the region inherently resists competitive power politics is suspect history. While the East Asian state system was ordered hierarchically for long periods, the best explanation for the lack of power balancing need not lie in some shared Confucian ethos. As Yuan Kang Wang observes, it is better explained by the large lop-sidedness of power in China's favour.²¹ States mostly band-wagoned rather than balanced because they were within reach of the largest state. There wasn't a sufficiently strong counterweight to balance against. More distant and stronger states, such as the Timurid Empire, did resist. Beijing felt the need to hold together its tributary empire through overt brutal coercion, from the withdrawal of trading access to threats of annihilation. Japan, the one proximate, potential counterweight, was often internally in conflict and constrained. Both China and Japan were often distracted by localised security problems. When both were more integrated and power shifted, they fought the Imjin war (1592-1598). That clash, with steep costs in lives and material, was triggered by Japan's assault on Korea, China's tributary, and was also occasioned by a relative power shift, Japan's recent unification in conjunction with China's fiscal weakening and its preoccupation with piracy and Mongol rebellions. China's deliberations in deciding for

²¹ Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp.146-151.

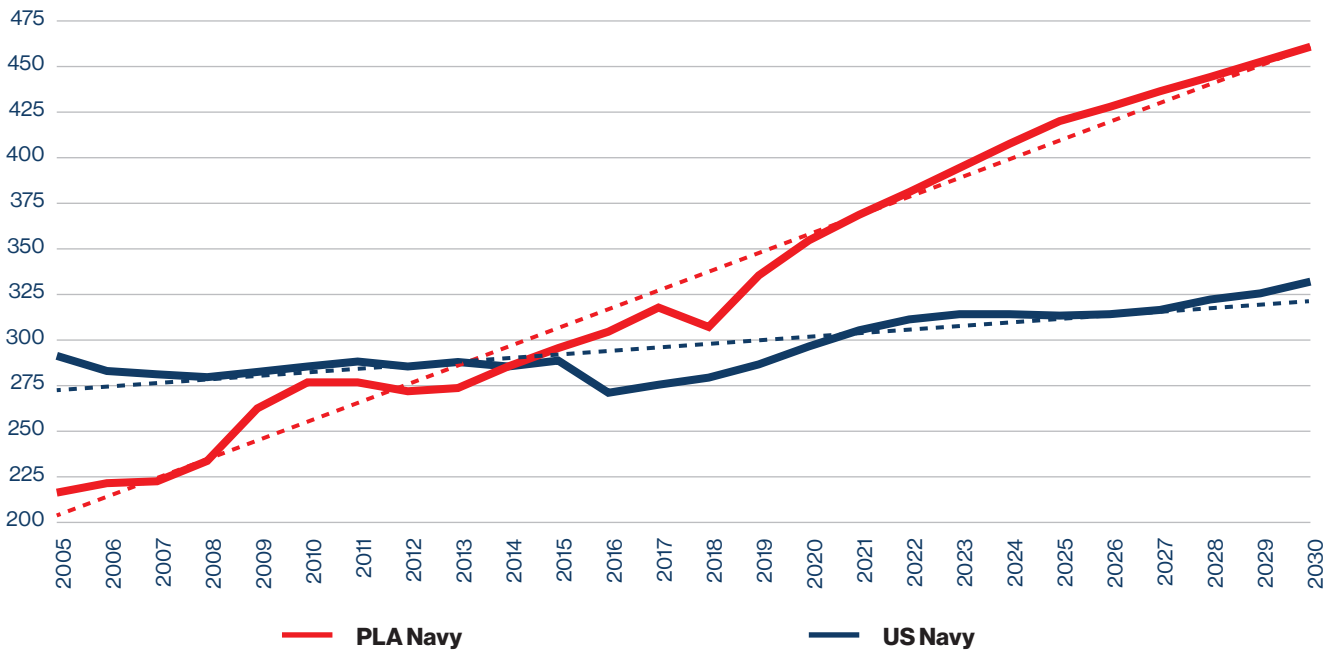
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war, when it had other conflicts on its plate, reflect an apprehension about its long-term security. Korea was a vital buffer.

And now? The US as a matter of declaratory policy is engaged in great power competition, to preserve its security order. This is apparent in its formal documents, such as the *National Security Strategy* of 2018, and landmark speeches in both the Trump and Biden administrations. To grasp what ‘Thucydides trap’ fear looks like in Washington, consider this graph, showing the course and likely trajectory of China’s naval expansion and the resulting imbalance, giving the US a reasonable fear of being overmatched in decades to come.²²

Total battle force ships, US Navy and Chinese PLA Navy

Totals past 2020 are estimates



China is a revisionist actor that is going well beyond what it would need to merely blunt America’s capabilities.

The gap between the red and blue lines, for our purposes, represents not only the estimated margin in naval size, but the established state’s fear of the future.

For its part, China is a revisionist actor that is going well beyond what it would need to merely blunt America’s capabilities. Its vigorous effort to bend iron at a large scale and rapid pace, and create a large blue water navy that can project power at sea and in the air well beyond its maritime-air approaches, suggests so. Its extravagant territorial demands (claiming, for instance, the South China Sea in its entirety, where it grabs and militarizes land) suggest so. Its demands for deference from smaller countries, from the Baltic states to Australia, suggests so, as does its threats and acts of punishment. Recall the Hong Kong national security law of 2020, whereby Beijing outlawed dissent over Hong Kong by anyone, anywhere. This is not the behavior of a state merely concerned to deny access or buffer itself from attack,

²² I am grateful to Thomas Shugart for his permission to reproduce this graph.

but the behavior of a would-be hierarch and regional hegemon with extra-regional reach. Or to reformulate it, it is a form of security-seeking that is substantively indistinct from hegemony-seeking. This is not a complaint but a cold observation.

And we know now about China's own documented intentions. Beijing decided to displace US hegemony *before* the US intensively embarked on its effort to counter its rise. As Rush Doshi shows, Beijing's revisionist challenge was not primarily a reaction to US militarized provocation in Asia, but was an earlier, conscious choice to overturn the existing order in wake of the Global Financial Crisis.²³ As far as we can tell, China indeed still acts with this calculus in mind.²⁴ While action-reaction is inherent to competition, and is well-underway with all the instability that comes with it, the issue here is the deepest source of the contest. The best explanation looks first to the material power shift.

After all, China decided to take a run at pre-eminence at a time when the US was still preoccupied with wars in the Middle East as well as economic meltdown. In the hour when China was shifting from its patient 'hide and bide' posture to a bid for primacy, Washington's approach to Asia was not to get into Beijing's face. It was to encourage China's growth in the wishful expectation that it would rise economically without challenging the strategic order.²⁵ This was three years before the US decided to make its 'Asia pivot' concrete with a 60 to 40 naval rebalance. It was four years before China turned down Washington's invitation to join the Trans Pacific Partnership.

In other words, in contrast to suggestions that the cold war is due to something else - a big misunderstanding, a security dilemma or ulterior domestic motives - the party that did most to initiate the contest, China, is pursuing a grand strategy that is not primarily reactive to provocation. US behavior, from 'regime change' wars to alliance enlargement, may help feed its logic. China finds US behavior intimidatory, provocative and insulting, and like the Athenians, even as its power and confidence rise, so does its fear. But while action-reaction is a likely catalyst, is not the *taproot* of the problem. What occasioned the major shift in Beijing's posture was not the US ramping up to contain it, but a prior sense of power. It calculated over 2008-9 that the gap between the superpower and China had shrunk and that it was time to act and construct a new Sino-centric order. Its efforts to penetrate economies through intellectual property theft and infrastructure ownership is not just geared to wealth, but to obtain coercive influence, acquire the benefits of the technological cutting-edge, and generate the wealth to arm itself. Its exertion in international institutions is supposed to entrench it diplomatically as a new pole of power. Its naval build-up, accelerating expansion of its nuclear arsenal and its missile inventory with ever-further reach is all part of an effort to shift the balance, overawe neighbors and drive the US out of its hemisphere.

So it is hard to refute the proposition that, due primarily to a power shift, two major rivals in Asia are now engaged in a security competition. They say they are, they are doing what we would expect them to, and both are targeting one another's components of power. While both powers are not single-mindedly pursuing competition, they are doing enough to satisfy a reasonable threshold. The US targets Beijing's capabilities that threaten its command of the commons, while China targets US air, naval and space power.

23 Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp.159-183

24 As a RAND study judges, China regards US in decline and itself as reaching ascendancy, rather than fearing it has reached its peak. Asha Clark, Derek Grossman, and Timothy R. Heath, *China's Quest for Global Primacy* (2021).

25 Nina Silove, "The Pivot Before the Pivot: US Strategy to Preserve the Balance of Power in Asia" *International Security* 40:4 (2016), pp.45-88.

While countries did not desire things to unfold this way, shifting material tectonic forces conditioned their choices.

The shift towards balancing in itself is significant. Washington's reluctance and postponing of confrontation refutes the argument that the US military-industrial complex is a primary driver of Washington's behavior. The incentives and lobbying of arms firms are a constant, and a constant cannot explain a change. As for the suggestion that this crisis is born of self-fulfilling pessimism, to the contrary, earlier rhetoric from Washington and its allies was more harmonious about peaceful partnerships, mutual accommodation and friendly stakeholders. In the West, it was once a widespread refrain that countries did not have to choose between their strategic alignments and trading relationships. If self-fulfilling rhetoric is a principal driver, why was this more benign and consensual vision not more influential in shaping the region? The region has just conducted a live social science experiment in the proposition that politics in Asia is socially constructed. What is happening now is *not* how any of the participants initially wanted it. China would rather Asia accede to its dominance without a struggle. The US would rather China get rich while deferring to its hegemonic order. And countries in the middle would prefer not to face hard choices. The turn of events against efforts to construct a more benign neighbourhood suggests that while countries did not desire things to unfold this way, shifting material tectonic forces conditioned their choices.

The current leaders of both countries once rhetorically resisted the force of necessity that leads to competition. In 2015, Xi Jinping repudiated the notion of systemic pressures, stressing agency and the danger of self-defeating behavior: "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."²⁶ Six years later, he adopted the logic of power-usurpation. "During a two-hour phone call with Biden in February...Xi Jinping touted China's plans to eclipse the US as the world's most powerful nation."²⁷ Biden once downplayed China's rise as a national security concern: "China is going to eat our lunch? Come on man...They're not competition for us."²⁸ He now openly accepts "extreme competition", warning that because of its infrastructure spending, it could "eat our lunch."²⁹

In China, the logic of a Thucydides trap can appeal to security elites. For instance, General Xu Qiliang, vice president of China's Central Military Commission and the country's top military officer, remarked: "In the face of the Thucydides trap & border problems, the military must speed up increasing its capacity...[We] must make breakthroughs in combat methods and ability, and lay a sound foundation for military modernisation..." He said China was already rising in economic power, saying the country's GDP was equivalent to more than 70 per cent of the US' economy. "This means we are already standing on the key position of a new chapter towards strength," he said.³⁰ To be sure, this was in the context of trying to shape policy and bid for resources. But Beijing in its choices has followed his recommendations. That it evidently now appeals to a high-level audience in China tells against claims of Eurocentrism. Thucydides may not have lived in Asia, but Xu Qiliang does.

26 Speech on China-US relations at a welcoming dinner in Seattle, the US, Sept. 22, 2015, cited in Carrie Gracie, "Collision Course? Rise of China a Stress for the US" *BBC News* 26 September 2015, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-34368249>, accessed 10 June 2021.

27 Ken Thomas, Andrew Restuccia, "Biden Seeks Allies Support in Confronting Putin, China" *Wall Street Journal* 9 June 2021.

28 Adam Edelman, "Biden's Comments Downplaying China threat to US fire up pols on both sides" *NBC News* 2 May 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/biden-s-comments-downplaying-china-threat-u-s-fires-pols-n1001236> accessed 10 June 2021.

29 David Brunnstrom, Alexandra Alper, Yew Lun Tian, "China Will Eat our Lunch", Biden Warns after clashing with Xi on Most Fronts", *Reuters* 11 February 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-idUSKBN2A-B06A>, accessed 10 June 2021.

30 Jun Mai, "China's military must spend more' to meet US war threat", *South China Morning Post* 8 March 2021.

Both rivals are also bidding to shape a favourable balance via third parties. It is here that the argument becomes more contentious. The go-to observation of sceptics is that middle and small Asian powers are averse to power struggle, and that therefore there is no 'trap' created by anarchic pressures in the region. The states still spend relatively little of their GDP on defense and are nervous about over-committing to either side.

This argument increasingly appears premature. While we are not yet seeing relative allocations of resources comparable with the Cold War, we observe increasing "target" and "granular" balancing, whereby fearful states focus their preparations on those components of an adversary's power they deem threatening.³¹ They got here reluctantly and after tarrying. That is not to say that all are balancing optimally. For instance, there are question marks about Taiwan's investment in major war combat systems when other defensive countermeasures would frustrate amphibious invasion more efficiently. But the measures of many states remain significant. Firstly because in the covid-era of economic contraction and the contemporary era where states expect much more from their states than before, these are not cheap investments. And secondly, because forming effective balancing coalitions is harder over the distances within Asia.

Overall, the claim that power transition crises are a Eurocentric construct is also at odds with the intensifying competition playing out before our eyes. Across a spectrum of areas, from legal tribunals to fishing standoffs, territorial disputes to hard military build-ups, reluctant states are steadily doing more to counterbalance, whether in building a balancing archipelago or seeking more independent capability, while on guard from getting too committed. There are efforts at both internal and external balancing, for instance in the form of the rebooted Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the Philippines' litigation against China before the Hague Tribunal, and most recently in the form of AUKUS, a defense understanding which looks to turn Australia into a bulwark of containment. Even some countries more inclined to hedge, like the Philippines, harden in attitudes the more they grow concerned about tensions in the South China Sea, now returning to joint US military exercises in 2022 after Duterte's dalliance with Beijing.³²

Consider missile proliferation, one of the most consequential developments that a fixation on overall defence/GDP investment loses sight of. While states in the first island chain remain hesitant to accede to Washington's request that they host US intermediate range ballistic missiles³³, having once stood back, nations across the region are now "following in the footsteps of powerhouses China and the US" by "building arsenals of advanced long-range missiles." "Before the decade is out, Asia will be bristling with conventional missiles that fly farther and faster, hit harder, and are more sophisticated than ever before - a stark and dangerous change from recent years."³⁴ North Korea's proliferation is part of the picture, but China is increasingly a driving force of missile programmes. China's growth and its reach is a central motive. Even South Korea, with Pyongyang as an obvious priority, pursues systems (like its Hyunmoo-4 with an 800-kilometre range) with a reach beyond what is necessary to counter North Korea.

31 See Steven E. Lobell, "A Granular Theory of Balancing" *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (2018), pp.593-605.

32 Andreo Calonzo, "US, Philippines Eye Return to Full Military Drills in 2022", *Bloomberg* 14 October 2021.

33 Michael Martina, 'China Warns of Countermeasures If US Puts Missiles on Its "Doorstep"', *Reuters*, 6 August 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-usa-defenceidUSKCN1UW044>.

34 Josh Smith, "Analysis: Caught between China and the US, Asian countries stockpile powerful new missiles" *Reuters* 20 July 2021.

For its part, Japan officially acknowledged its pursuit of high speed missile systems is primarily China-driven.³⁵ Its re-militarization is complex but overall a significant case of reluctant balancing. Tokyo proposes a major increase to defense spending in 2022, and abandon sacrosanct principle of the 1 per cent GDP ceiling. As well as its defence budget rise, it is loosening restraints on its use of defense forces, continuing the incremental revisions begun by PM Shinzo Abe, who allowed Japanese troops to fight on foreign soil, ended a ban on military exports and reinterpreted the country's war-renouncing constitution to allow missile strikes on enemy territory. Opinion polls, too, suggest a hardening of attitudes, with majorities now more concerned about China's assertion than the dangers of North Korea's proliferation. True, there is domestic division over the scale and type of buildout, but clearly there is now sustained upward pressure.

Even amidst pandemic-driven budgetary pressures in 2020 and economic contraction, a number of states (like South Korea, Indonesia, and Vietnam)³⁶ are increasing investment from 2021 (though not Thailand). Indonesia's rise is modest, but it has fought skirmishes with China over fishing rights, and its military modernisation efforts are more extensive than needed for counter-piracy. Some countries like Singapore continue to walk a finer hedging line, and this will probably become harder. Importantly, *balancing* is not necessarily coupled with *alliance-formation* – some states are internally balancing without increasing their commitment to either side. The best explanation for this, again, is fear of an environment becoming more dangerously volatile because it is in flux.

Arguments that begin and end with the share of GDP are only crude aggregate measures that obscure significant real increases in defense budgets in a context (until recently) of rapid economic growth. It fails to consider concrete outputs or qualitative measures. China, for instance, is implementing an unprecedented naval and nuclear build-up even though the percentage share of GDP is modest, because the pie is so large.

Overall, something powerful is inducing these collaborative efforts and attracting coalition-building. The most plausible candidate is China's attempt to achieve primacy, and its recent turn to a more gloves-off, overbearing statecraft. States aren't naturally inclined to sharpen tensions. But Beijing's demands for deference, its trade war punishments, its intimidatory military posturing, its territorial encroachments (for instance, seizing land and building villages in Bhutan) are triggering counterbalancing efforts.³⁷ To China's neighbors, its behavior looks like something exceeding defensive security-seeking, namely a threatening aggrandizement. There remains a tension between preferences to balance and preferences to keep the peace, but thus far the tendencies are shifting towards the former. We should not mistake *delay* for a fixed aversion to eventual balancing under pressing circumstances. The effect on India here is instructive. While its nonalignment tradition dies hard, it tilted further towards the US after the recent Himalayas clash, and the US agreed to grant access to geospatial intelligence.³⁸

35 On Japan, see Tim Kelly, 'Japan Lists China as Bigger Threat Than Nuclear- Armed North Korea', *Reuters*, 27 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-defence-idUSKBN1WC051>; Tim Kelly and Ju-min Park, "With an eye on China, Japan's Ruling Party makes unprecedented defence spending pledge." *Reuters* 13 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/with-an-eye-china-japans-ruling-party-makes-unprecedented-defence-spending-2021-10-13/>

36 Jon Grevatt & Andrew MacDonald, "South Korea proposes 4.5% increase in 2022 defence budget" *Janes* 31 August 2021, https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/south-korea-proposes-45-increase-in-2022-defence-budget_19960

37 Hal Brands, "China's Arrogance is Uniting its Rivals", *Bloomberg* 8 April 2021.

38 The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) is discussed by Vikram J. Singh, "Spurred by China Rivalry, US, India Deepen Strategic Ties" *US Institute of Peace* 9 December 2020.

This raises the wider dimension of time, and the effect of time horizons, in international politics, a subject that has recently attracted a sophisticated literature.³⁹ Recalling Thucydides' own portrayal, there was a lag between a material power shift, a bid for dominance, and the reaction of the established state. What bridged the gap between the material shift and the behavioral shift was the time it took for an altered power balance to affect the consciousness of actors. Humans tend to wish away unfavourable developments, telling themselves soothing stories about not having to choose, or globalization making power politics obsolete. Yet, time affords the growing challenger greater confidence, enlarged ambition and an impatient sense of entitlement, which gradually becomes hard to ignore by the *status quo* state, especially when third parties increase their requests for assistance. Thanks to the effect of time, the realities of the power shift impose themselves as the new template.

Arguably, targeted measures approximate enough to block China's expansionism, given the prevailing conditions. This is not contiguous, pre-nuclear continental Europe, prone to snap invasions. The revisionist power faces obstacles in a defense-dominant 'sea denial' environment so that it can't easily 'run the table' through direct conquest. It can, though, hope to overawe neighbors into compliance by shifting the balance, and its neighbors can realistically aim to obstruct its efforts to project naval power and control lines of communication.

3. Policy Implications

Power transition crises are real. European entrants into the theater, therefore, should only enter with clear eyes, and expect further intensification of the contest. As they pursue increased prestige, influence and wealth, they might assume that China, confronted with a robust international coalition, will back off quietly. It will not. It regards itself as the historically appointed restored Middle Kingdom, showing every sign of an impatient revisionist state that believes its hour has come. Participants must ask themselves how far they are willing to bleed, how the competition can be managed and how it might realistically and favourably unfold, and how to keep it 'cold'.

Out of this probable, hard reality, European participants face choices which contain their own trade-offs and dilemmas, which will be increasingly hard to duck. Heeding the advice here, they might choose to stay out, anticipating soberly that when the shooting starts, or when the competition intensifies dangerously, they aren't willing to bleed enough to commit. Better in that case to stand back, and be accused of a limited appetite for risky embroilment, than get involved just enough to prove it. In that case, there are other things they can do to assist more indirectly, such as shouldering more of the defense burden in the Euro-Atlantic, to free up an increasingly stretched US, or lend their economic weight to any campaign of sanctions proposed by Washington. Alternatively, they might choose to reassess their interests in the Indo-Pacific, and invest now to generate greater capabilities, then to align those capabilities with goals. This then raises a blunt question: are they willing to take a war with China? If not, projecting into the region, they could be a ship-sinking from scuttling away.

Or, turning this on its head, they might be drawn to hedge - or even bandwagon - with China, impressed by its growth trajectory, fearful of America's own internal political turmoil, and drawn to the investment gains dangled by Beijing. That may not lead their new patron to

³⁹ Joshua I. Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); David Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2017).

European participants face choices which contain their own trade-offs and dilemmas, which will be increasingly hard to duck.

demand a military presence in the Indo-Pacific. But it will lead to demands that they distance themselves more overtly from their traditional security provider, only to find that beneath the rhetoric of a rules-based order, Washington remains capable of ruthless power politics. As international politics becomes more stark and more openly competitive, it will not be feasible to drive both chariots at the same time.

That doesn't necessarily make competition unwise. To caution that a coalition build-up will increase intensification is not to counsel against it. The true choice is not between competition and some stable version of the present. Passing up competition will likely lead to a deterioration of another kind, with China pursuing hegemony unchallenged. Prudent competition would accept the risks of some intensification, but in the hope that a coalition would still exert blocking power to make expansion more difficult, and ultimately be able to achieve a stalemate, from which then to re-negotiate.

Neither does this analysis dictate the pursuit of unbridled power-maximization without limit. Thucydides' world – the “hard school of danger” – made limitation imperative. Chaos abroad and strife at home could feed off one another as states destroyed themselves. In that spirit, competition with Beijing requires careful management and long time horizons and the avoidance of an impatient, aggressive rollback programme; or an over-ideologized struggle aiming at regime change in Beijing; or a symmetric competition to engage aggressively wherever China is active; and avoiding encouraging a ‘now or never’ dynamic in the adversary's calculations. Pericles' warning still holds: “I fear more our own errors than the enemies' designs.”⁴⁰

40 Thuc. 1.144.



The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

HCSS

Lange Voorhout 1
2514 EA Hague

Follow us on social media:

@hcssnl

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies

Email: info@hcss.nl

Website: www.hcss.nl