

Thucydides and International Relations

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Thucydides is not only famous as one of the first historians. He is also, surprisingly, seen as an authority on modern international politics. Neville Morley explores why Thucydides is regularly cited in discussions of the current relationship between the United States and China.

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

This quote, a version of the concluding words of Thucydides’ introduction to his work (1.23), may be familiar as one of the explanations for the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. It’s not the most famous line in his work, but it contributes to his reputation as a historian who was not only dedicated to finding out the truth about past events but who also sought to understand them, identifying the underlying causes of the war. You might be surprised to learn that this line is now commonly cited, by journalists and politicians, as a way of understanding the current relationship between the United States of America and China.

According to some academics who specialise in International Relations, the study of global politics and how states interact with one another, there have been at least sixteen cases in the last five hundred years when an ‘established’ power has been confronted by a ‘rising’ power that seemed to threaten its position, and in twelve of these cases the result was war. England and the Dutch in the 17th century, France and Britain in the time of Napoleon, Britain and Germany in the first half of the 20th century... But the archetype of this dangerous dynamic was Athens and Sparta, and the idea that ‘rising’ and ‘established’ powers may end up in violent confrontation is named after the man who first recognised it: the Thucydides Trap. The concept has become highly influential: American commentators warn their fellow countrymen to heed the warning of Thucydides, the Chinese leader tells business leaders that, with international cooperation, Thucydides’ Trap can be avoided, and strategists in other Asian countries speculate that Thucydides might have lessons for them too.

While plenty of journalists write about the Thucydides Trap as if it is an established fact, the idea is controversial among scholars. Historians have raised doubts about many of the alleged case studies – for example, the origins of the two World Wars were clearly much more complicated than a straightforward rivalry between Britain and Germany. Experts on contemporary global politics point

to the fact that the economies of the USA and China are closely integrated, making all-out conflict less likely – not to mention the fact that, unlike Athens and Sparta and most of the other historical conflicts, both sides have nuclear weapons as an added deterrent.

Ancient historians have also been skeptical of the idea. The version of Thucydides' words at 1.23 quoted above is not the best translation of what he actually wrote; he did indeed say that Athens becoming great made the Spartans fearful, but then suggested that this "compelled them to war" - implying that they felt they had no choice, even if actually they did – rather than "made war inevitable". While Thucydides did claim that this rivalry was "the truest cause of the war, though the one least discussed", immediately after this statement he offered a detailed account of the sequence of events that actually led to war, emphasising the choices made on both sides which could have gone differently, and showing how the Spartans had to be prodded into action by their Corinthian allies. Even if Athenian ambition and Spartan fear provided the essential context for these decisions, they were anything other than inevitable.

What the current popularity of the 'Thucydides Trap' really tells us is not that Thucydides actually offers a perfect guide to modern global politics, but that there are plenty of people in the field of International Relations who believe that he does.

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Thucydides has been seen as an authority on global politics for over a century. In the run-up to the First World War, and throughout the conflict, both sides evoked Thucydides to help explain current events. Germans portrayed Britain as the aggressive, imperialist naval power of Athens, while British writers argued that the Germans followed the same brutal *Realpolitik* – the philosophy that only practical considerations count in politics, not ethics or morality – that is seen in Thucydides' Melian Dialogue, when the Athenians claimed that issues of justice are relevant only between those of equal power. Both sides quoted Thucydides' version of Pericles' Funeral Oration as the perfect expression of the values they were fighting for (including adverts in newspapers and posters on London transport to support conscription).

In the aftermath of the conflict, a group of British scholars sought to develop a new academic discipline, the study of contemporary international politics, that would help prevent future wars. They were trained as classicists and of course familiar with Thucydides, who offered an inspiring example of how historical study might be useful in understanding and predicting different aspects of

war and state policy. Their efforts to defend peace through the new League of Nations were unsuccessful, but their advocacy of Thucydides bore fruit; after WWII, he was seen as one of the founding inspirations of the new discipline of International Relations, especially in the United States. The conflict between liberal, democratic Athens and authoritarian Sparta offered a useful analogy to the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union – even if some occasionally argued that Americans were more like the virtuous, freedom-loving Spartans than the aggressive, imperialistic Athenians. The idea that all states are motivated by fear, honour and interest, as stated by several different characters in Thucydides' account, was accepted as a fundamental principle of inter-state relations.

Above all, IR theorists focused on the Melian Dialogue, the passage in Thucydides' history where he dramatised the exchange between the over-bearing Athenians and the neutral city of Melos, which the Athenians insisted should surrender to them or be massacred. Thucydides, these scholars argued, had in this passage developed the perfect expression of the ideas of Realism, two and a half thousand years before this became a key theory for modern analysis. There is no international system of justice, claim the Athenians, but only power and weakness: "The strong do as they wish, and the weak endure what they have to". The only rational way to behave is, as the Athenians say, to recognise one's own interests and pursue them ruthlessly; any hesitation will just be taken as a sign of weakness, and anyone else would do the same if they had the power. Yes, it's all very Voldemort – but for some IR theorists, it is the foundation of their entire theory of how the world works.

A Possession for All Time?

From the perspective of a classicist or ancient historian, these readings can seem very strange. Why should we imagine that Thucydides agreed with the words that he put into the mouths of the Athenians in this dialogue – especially when, in the broader context of his narrative of the war, it is precisely this attitude that 'might makes right' that then led Athens into the catastrophic error of launching an attack on Sicily? Might Thucydides not have sympathised rather with the Melians, willing to die to preserve their freedom? Or regarded the attitudes of both sides as equally irrational and problematic? The crucial point is that, far from offering an explicit theory of inter-state relations, Thucydides dramatised the confrontation of two opposing views of the world – and left it to his readers to decide between them.

What the IR theorists get right is that Thucydides did indeed intend his account to offer something useful to the reader, knowledge and ideas that could be applied to the present. It was intended to be “a possession for all time” (1.22) rather than a bit of momentary entertainment; accurate knowledge of the past was valuable because future events would tend to resemble those of the present and future, because of the ‘human thing’ - often translated as ‘human nature’, but the Greek is a lot fuzzier than that. We can understand Thucydides’ willingness to put words into the mouths of his characters – the Melian Dialogue is simply the most extreme example of fictitious speeches in the work – as part of his technique to get his readers thinking about past events and how they might relate to the present.

What Thucydides didn’t do is offer the sort of general principles or laws of international politics that some modern readers are looking for (and which they sometimes believe they have found in his narrative). He did not somehow invent modern IR theory 2500 years in advance – just as he did not actually invent modern critical historiography. Both disciplines today look to him as an inspiration – and both try to claim him as their exclusive possession, reading him in their own terms. Thucydides resists such readings. Rather than an objective historical account, he offers a cunningly constructed narrative, vivid character portraits and invented speeches to prompt his readers to think about the causes and consequences of events. Rather than simple laws of predictable human behaviour, he depicts the complexity of decision-making and the multiple layers of causation and chance that actually shape the outbreak of wars and the course of other events.

Thucydides does not tell us how the relationship between China and the USA will play out - but perhaps he offers a useful caution against being too confident in our expectations about future developments (just as the Plague arrived in the second year of the Peloponnesian War to upset everyone’s assumptions!). Conversely, International Relations theory doesn’t tell us how to interpret Thucydides or the events he described, but it raises questions that we should think about: Was the Greek world dominated by the harsh calculations of Realpolitik, or were most states (maybe not the Athenians) bound by shared values and norms of civilised behaviour? Should we understand events in terms of the bipolar confrontation of Athens and Sparta, or as a complicated, multipolar system in which many different states pursued their own interests? How far was the outbreak of war actually inevitable sooner or later? Thucydides prompts IR theorists to be more historical – and encourages historians to think properly about the connections between past and present, so that history can become a true ‘possession for ever’.

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