



US Imperialism and its Legacies in East Asia: Thucydides Trap or Thrasymachus Paradox?

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Received: 27 September 2023 / Accepted: 31 January 2024
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Abstract

The US presence in East Asia is not simply a result of the victory over Japan in WW2, but a legacy of the US takeover of the Spanish overseas empire in 1898. Today, the threat of war between China and the US has little to do with Allison's Thucydides trap, which is based on a misreading of Thucydides' work: It originates from what in China is seen as a US imperial presence that mirrors Western interference in Chinese affairs during the so-called "century of humiliation." China is an authoritarian state with regional hegemonic ambitions, yet the West has been endorsing other authoritarian states, even absolute monarchies, that fit its geopolitical interests. Notwithstanding the purported US support of "freedom" and "democracy," the US in East Asia has been carrying out a foreign policy that, as an extension of misinterpretations of the Monroe Doctrine, is a legacy of empire. This legacy is too often overlooked, while overseas interests are justified on the basis of security concerns. Thucydides is relevant, but to compare the American and Athenian empires and their demise, not to drag China into US geopolitical discourse, when focus should have long been on Russia. Anti-colonial theory shows how interstate relations, in particular in the East Asian context, are not defined by Thucydides trap, but Thrasymachus paradox.

Keywords US-Chinese relations · Thucydides trap · East Asia · Cross-strait relations · Imperialism

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1 Introduction

So far as we are good friends of the South American peoples, so far as we are friends of our kinsmen over the seas on the continent of Europe, so far as our intentions in South America are honestly humane and philanthropic, we have no need whatever of the Monroe Doctrine any longer. On the side of our common humanity, all our interests are substantially identical. On the other hand, so far as we purpose to exploit the continent for our own selfish interests, so far as we aim at the extension of our power, so far as we purpose to force our forms of civilization and our government upon peoples whom we deem our “inferiors,” our new Monroe Doctrine rests upon no grounds of justice or right, it has no place with the Golden Rule, it is not synonymous with human freedom, it depends upon might, and it doubtless tends to provoke jealousy, if not hostility and war (Dole 1905).

Had they focused on Asia, these words could have been written in the twenty-first century. In fact, they were written at the start of the twentieth. In spring 1905, Reverend Charles Dole criticized on *The Atlantic* the persistence of the Monroe Doctrine among US policymakers and intelligentsia. The doctrine, whereby the American continent was to belong to Americans, so to speak, without any European interference, was an anachronistic legacy of the first half of the nineteenth century (Dole 1905). Yet, then as now, it was reinterpreted and utilized to extend US interests overseas.¹ Why only “America for Americans” and not “Asia for Asians,” given the long history of European interference over Asian affairs? Why this double standard?

US security concerns in East Asia are anachronistic: not only are they the result of the US victory in the Second World War, but, more importantly, they are a legacy of the establishment of the American overseas empire in the aftermath of the Spanish–American War of 1898 (Hobson 1902), a turning point in history that “gave the United States the influence in world politics which her strength deserved,” as a Stanford professor endorsing US overseas presence, Payson Treat (1918, 203), put it in the aftermath of the First World War. Even Lenin (1917, 19) identified the Spanish–American War as a watershed in international affairs when he wrote that “during the last fifteen to twenty years, especially since the Spanish–American War (1898) and the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), the economic and also the political literature of the two hemispheres have more and more often adopted the term ‘imperialism’ in order to describe the present era.” The US presence in East Asia was established on imperialist bases, at the height of the Western partition of the globe. In any case, the US presence in the region today, which US policymakers and observers claim to be a guarantor to regional security, might be seen as detrimental to the preservation of peace in East Asia. Possibly, Chinese interests in the South China Sea and the Spratly Islands dispute are heightened by Washington’s role as guarantor of the

¹ In the US, today’s debates between containment realists and restrainers revolving around the “threat to US hegemony over the Americas” (Motin 2022a, 32) could be interpreted as a legacy of the Monroe Doctrine.

preservation of “freedom” of navigation in the South China Sea (Hu 2021), perceived by China as a neo-colonial interference. In 1918, Payson Treat (1918, 202) argued that “unlike the Americas, Asia possessed no state then strong enough to enunciate a Far Eastern Monroe Doctrine,” an absence that in his, and the majority of his contemporaries’ view, legitimized Western encroachments in East Asia.² A century later the context is different.

And Chinese ambitions over Taiwan, while based on primordialist nationalist narratives aimed at legitimizing illegitimate claims, that were first contradictorily put forward by Chiang Kai-shek (Hughes 1997), face the paradoxical nature of US rhetoric and practice.³ The US have indeed contributed to the independence of Taiwan (and South Korea), yet not necessarily in the name of “freedom” and “democracy,” since it supported those countries’ integrity even when, until a few decades ago, they were ruled by harsh military regimes. The East Asian context, then, can be taken as exemplifying the paradoxes of US foreign policy. The parallel with Thucydides is always relevant, yet Graham Allison (2015, 2017) misuses Thucydides as a result of his Americano-centric perspective steeped in the messianic understanding of the legitimacy of US world hegemony, which he believes to be still in place.⁴ The Greek historian Thucydides, the father of political history, notably recounted the clash between Sparta and Athens in the 431–404 BC period, which coincided with the apogee of Athenian power under Pericles and its subsequent downfall. The conflict between the two hegemonic city-states in Greece has been taken by Allison as a relevant parallel for present-day US–Chinese relations, with several scholars, journalists, and policymakers following his cue.⁵

This interdisciplinary article shows the flaws at the basis of the so-called Thucydides trap, which is informed by Eurocentric perspectives exemplified by Huntington’s conviction that Western ideas of “individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, separation of church and state” are uniquely Western, that they are intertwined with each other (when they are not), and that they “differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations.” (Huntington 1993, 40) Human rights, concerns over individual dignity, and forms of Rule of Law, for example, are not inherently Western, contrary to what Huntington and most Western observers believe, including Allison (2017, 133–153), who still relied on Huntington’s essentialist understandings of cultures

² Payson Treat’s statement overlooked the rise of Japan as an industrial and military power, a process that had been ongoing for about half a century. Between 1870 and 1913, Japan’s GDP even overtook that of Britain and France (Kindelberger 1996; Komiya 1990). Even Lenin (1917) already considered Japan to be one of the “two or three powerful world plunderers armed to the teeth” together with the US and Britain. For a recent comparative history of the establishment of the Japanese colonial empire, see Nikolaos Mavropoulos (2022).

³ I write “illegitimate claims” as Ernest Renan’s (1882) “daily plebiscite” in Taiwan has been quite clear.

⁴ On messianic beliefs in the US ecumenical mission, see Kissinger (1994).

⁵ “Thucydides trap” has been taken as a fact across scholarly literature. Consider, for example, Yoder (2019), Zhang (2019), and Han, Cook and Ohle (2019), who, notwithstanding their insights, still resort to Allison’s invention.

and the supposed incompatibility in values between civilizations, in particular the Chinese and the Western.

The present discussion offers views that may well be unorthodox to a US or Western audience, as it is steeped in the idea that the “humanitarian” turn in Western politics chimed with the demise of European colonial empires, something that can be found in William Du Bois’ and Frantz Fanon’s unsparing criticism of Western inconsistencies. The paper unravels the inconsistencies at the basis of Thucydides trap understood as an imperial legacy through a discursive analysis that includes early twentieth-century political observers and anti-colonial theory from Lenin to Arrighi. The great issue with a significant part of international relations theory is that it is Eurocentric and does away with this anti-imperial legacy. To build new theory that takes into account historical facts rather than being ideologically entrenched, as liberal and hegemonic Realism is, which Blagden and Porter (2021) call “primacy realism”, entails taking stock of such anti-colonial tradition.⁶ To dismiss such tradition, as most works found in reputed outlets do, implies perpetuating self-delusional tropes that neglect the contradictions inherent to Western political and intellectual life.⁷

The second part of the paper analyzes Thucydides trap drawing on Werner Jaeger and Leo Strauss. The choice of these two scholars is not arbitrary; not only were they both completely dismissed in recent discussions of Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War—when they are among the most reputable twentieth-century scholars of Classical Antiquity—but they offer fundamental clues for arguing that Allison’s notion is but an invention that abuses the ancient Greek historian and the Greek context. As a matter of fact, as the section shows, Allison relied on an inaccurate translation of Thucydides’ key sentence that he used to formulate his theory; and Allison’s version, on which critics and endorses rely, distorts the picture offered by Thucydides. The section does not read as a mere book review: it puts forward an interpretation of Thucydides that first is not based on inaccurate translations and secondly shows how Thucydides trap is rooted in the notion of great power competition and, as such, may well fuel conflict. To his own admission, Allison (2017, 297) “adapted [Crawley’s translation of Thucydides] to more modern English syntax.”⁸ Yet in doing so, he distorted the original meaning to make the ancient Greek context fit his interpretation of present-day geopolitics, when he changed Crawley’s translation from “the growth of the power of Athens” into “the rise of Athens” (Allison 2015).⁹

⁶ I am grateful to Dylan Motin for his helpful insights on theoretical questions concerning Realism.

⁷ It needs to be clarified that my comments concerning Western imperial legacies in East Asia are not applicable to the current Eastern European or Middle Eastern contexts, where the US and the West face criminal regimes, like Russia or Iran, and terrorist organizations like ISIS, Hezbollah, and Hamas.

⁸ While James Lee (2019) rightly points to the question of translation, he appears to argue that it is Crawley’s translation that is problematic: it is actually Allison’s adaptation that distorts the Greek context. Misenheimer (2019, 51) states that Allison has used various versions which do not correspond “precisely with any of the major published English translations, but [...] are close to Crawley and substantially sound.” They may be close, yet Allison’s adaptation significantly distorts the picture.

⁹ For Crawley’s original translation see *The History of the Peloponnesian War* published in London in 1874 (Thucydides 1874, 15).

The aim of this contribution is to shake up long ingrained positions about US and Western goodwill, which, it needs to be stressed, do not legitimize in any case the wrongdoings of dictatorial regimes like Russia, Iran, or North Korea. For the common misconception is that to underscore the paradoxes inherent to the West, among which the impossible coexistence between political liberalism and imperialism stands out, implies a rejection of political liberalism and support of anti-Western regimes: far from it. To emphasize the inconsistencies of Western discourse and foreign policy, which is apparent in the US encroachments in East Asia, entails truly espousing political liberalism, not just its bombastic rhetoric of democracy and human rights, which in the African, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian contexts has been seriously undermined by historical events.

This article relies on historical elements that are often overlooked in analyses of contemporary foreign affairs. It aims to be a contribution to non-Eurocentric understandings of world affairs, which in the West are often interpreted from perspectives that consider contingent geopolitical, strategic, and economic state interests and are dismissive of older political theory. This essay calls for a paradigmatic shift, a need recently stressed also by Yilmaz and Sun (2022): it urges to step away from the notion of great power competition in foreign affairs. It strives for great power cooperation, as utopian as that may be given the persistence of entrenched ideological convictions on both sides of the geopolitical spectrum, and notwithstanding Lenin's (1917, 173) criticism of such "'pious wishes' for peace," due to the inextricable relationship between finance capitalism, "state interests," and imperialism (Hobson 1902).

Not only selection bias undermines the validity of Thucydides trap—as Allison and his teams missed other rivalries of the highwater of imperialism which did not result in conflict, the "Great Game," which ended with the 1907 Convention between Russia and Britain, and the fight over Africa's hegemony between Britain and France, which culminated in the Fashoda Incident of 1898—but as a notion, Thucydides trap does not even exist in Thucydides' work.¹⁰ Thucydides trap is but a subtle invention premised on legitimizing supposed state interests and justifying the current US–Chinese rivalry.

Therefore, it is important to unravel the inconsistencies at the basis of hegemonic realism and neoconservatism, which, to paraphrase Dole's (1905) words, are based on states' aim to extend power and influence, and dismiss outright anti-colonial insights. Similarly, more recently, Matthew Specter (2022) defined Realism as "a symptom of the racialized hierarchies of an unequal world system," explaining that "key categories of the realist worldview—the national interest, spheres of influence—were forged [in the 1880s] by Western imperial powers who treated their self-serving constructs as objective facts." Sticking to certain strands of Realism means to perpetuate outdated notions, anachronisms that are meant to fuel antagonism rather than interstate peace. That Huntington and Allison write that conflict can be avoided only through dialogue is therefore paradoxical. It should be taken as proof

¹⁰ Motin (2022b) analyzed major bilateral wars across ancient history showing how the Greek context was not even bilateral.

that their theories are inconsistent at the core. If states shall cling to their petty interests, with their spheres of influence (with the present-day fashionable euphemism, “soft power”), which are but the interests of their economic and political classes, then conflict, or at least competition (which is in any case conducive to conflict), is very much likely.¹¹ In this regard, as Lenin (1917, 115) showed, “to substitute the question of the form of the struggle and agreements (today peaceful, tomorrow warlike, the next day warlike again) for the question of the substance of the struggle and agreements between capitalist associations is to sink to the role of a sophist.”

1.1 The Contradictions of Empire

Amid lingering Eurocentric biases, territorial disputes in which mainland China is involved are often described in ways that stigmatize China as the bullying party. It has been argued that China has been carrying out policies of forced assimilation in Tibet and Xinjiang (Crowe 2013; Smith Finley 2019; Tobin 2022), yet the question here is the role of China on its eastern and southeastern seaboard. And incidentally, the century-long oppression of Kurds and long-standing authoritarianism of Turkey, with its endorsement of Hamas, do not prevent Ankara from remaining officially an ally of the West. Or the exclusionary nationalism of Modi did not prevent President Biden from recently praising Indian democracy under the populist leader. Are Chinese territorial claims intensified by the perceived threat of an American presence in East Asia which may well be considered part of US attempts to retain its world hegemonic status? That the US, for example, have an Indo-Pacific policy in itself implies imperialism: this is not an anti-Western concoction. Even Fukuyama (2004) bluntly agreed on the fact that the US is an empire. The very notion of *Pax americana*, as the *Pax romana*, *Pax mongolica*, or *Pax britannica*, implies empire.

Fukuyama’s (2004) words, pervaded by typical Eurocentric tones, say it all: “Our ‘empire’ may be a transitional one grounded in democracy and human rights, but our interests dictate that we learn how better to teach other people to govern themselves.” Fukuyama’s works are notably steeped in the messianic role of the US, while dismissing what Jakob Burckhardt (1873, 86) argued a century and a half ago, namely that “power is of its nature evil, whoever wields it.” The history of the American involvement in East Asia (and beyond) proves that the US are indeed an empire, but not one necessarily concerned with human rights or democracy. If the US had really supported democracy in the region, it would not have helped France in its attempt to regain its Indochinese colonies, it would have endorsed the unification of Vietnam, which was supposed to take place in 1956 through national elections, as per the Geneva Conference of 1954, it would not

¹¹ The notion that state interests are but the vested interests of certain classes within the nation can be found in Marxism and John Hobson but also in the elite theories of Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels, which share in the idea that “the state is identified with the ruling class.” (Michels 1915, 398) According to Mosca (1923, 53), “in reality the dominion of an organized minority, obeying a single impulse, over the unorganized majority is inevitable.” Therefore, we need to look at the choices of economic and political elites.

have supported Suharto's ruthless military dictatorship in Indonesia and would not have backed Marcos (and hosted him in exile), who, notably, was not an upholder of human rights and democracy. Frantz Fanon's (1963, 311) words well summarize the paradoxical nature of Western rhetoric, Huntington's and Fukuyama's included:

Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. Look at them today swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration.

The alleged US support of human rights and democracy, which is tied to "US efforts to maintain free passage" or "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea, as the CNN (Watson et al. 2018) put it in an engaging yet biased interactive report—"Washington is leading a coalition of other nations to regularly conduct freedom of navigation operations in the sea to demonstrate the right of passage through international waters"—is not different from the role played by imperial Britain in the region in the nineteenth century. And the similar British role is intertwined with China's "century of humiliation," a fact that US policymakers overlook or ignore outright. As early as the nineteenth century, "Western powers under ["liberal"] British hegemony [...] [had] impose[d] upon China and the non-Western world a condition of political vassalage that utterly contradicted Western ideas of international equality and national sovereignty" (Arrighi et al. 1999, 239). Most Western observers still believe "that the Opium War was not really about opium, but about a general interest in diplomatic equality and commercial opportunity, [which] became standard in Western historiography (Arrighi et al. 1999, 228)." Allison's (2017, 133–136) work is marred by the same misconception, which shows the persistence of ideology or flawed conventional narratives even among influential scholars. Kant (1795, 139) already understood "the inhospitable behavior of the civilized nations, especially the commercial states of our continent [that is Europe]," in terms similar to those put by Arrighi. As Kant (1795, 139–141) put it, "the injustice which they exhibit on visiting foreign lands and races—this being equivalent in their eyes to conquest—is such as to fills with horror. [...] China and Japan (Nipon) which had made an attempt at receiving guests of this kind, have now taken a prudent step."

The creation of the British empire, as the American, was not fortuitous. Even Ernest Gellner (1983, 42–43) dismissed not just anti-colonial theory but simple historical facts at the basis of imperial expansionism when he wrote that.

The European conquest of the world [...] was eventually carried out and completed by nations increasingly oriented toward industry and trade, not by a militaristic machine [...]. It was achieved without any total preoccupation with the process on the part of the conqueror nations. The point made about the English that they acquired their Empire in a state of absence of mind can to some extent be generalized. (The English also, most laudably, lost the Empire with a similar lack of attention.)

But as Hannah Arendt (1951, xviii) put it, “it has often been said that the British acquired their empire in a fit of absent-mindedness, as consequence of automatic trends, yielding to what seemed possible and what was tempting, rather than as a result of deliberate policy. If this is true, then, the road to hell may just as well be paved with no intentions as with the proverbial good ones.” In short, empire is a choice.

There is no liberal democracy when there is empire, which is the exact opposite of what also Huntington (1993, 29) would claim, namely that “the efforts of the West to promote its value of democracy and liberalism as universal values, to maintain its military dominance and to advance its economic interests engender counter-acting responses from other civilizations.” Yet, it is exactly military dominance that is problematic (although it is not an issue for neorealists) and is based on past centuries of colonial exploitation. As Du Bois (1917, 439–440) put it in ways that also bind this point to East Asia, the “century of humiliation,” and the rise of Asian powers, the

degrading of men by men is old as mankind and the invention of no one race or people; [...] it has been left, however, to Europe and to modern days to discover the eternal world-wide mark of meanness—color. Such is the silent revolution that has gripped modern European culture in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its zenith came in Boxer times: White supremacy was all but world-wide: Africa was dead India conquered, Japan isolated and China prostrate, while white America whetted its sword for mongrel Mexico and mulatto South America, lynching her own Negroes the while. Temporary halt in this program was made by little Japan, (440) and the white world immediately sensed the peril of such “yellow” presumption. What sort of a world would this be if yellow men must be treated “white”? Immediately the eventual overthrow of Japan became a subject of deep thought and intrigue from St. Petersburg to San Francisco.

What if we change the rise of Japan and accompanying Western fears with current anxieties about China’s rise? In the Asian context, the backlash against supposed imperial interference is understandable, given the imperial legacies in the region. These legacies show that it is Thrasymachus paradox found in Plato (1930, 47), whereby “the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger,” that better describes US overseas interference, if we are to stick to catchy notions from Ancient Greece, or provide more suitable parallels taken from that context.¹²

1.2 Monroe and Southeast Asia

While reinterpretations of Monroe’s doctrine of “America for Americans” informed later US meddling throughout Latin America, with the Spanish-American War

¹² Plato’s original reads as follows: “φρμηὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ εἶναι τὸ δίκαιον οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος ἔυμφέρον.”

Monroe's principle was later expanded to the whole Pacific rim. In 1898 the US found itself with an overseas empire and, consequently, became a colonial power, as succinctly shown by Dole (1905). This uncomfortable historical fact, which also Lenin (1917) emphasized in his *Imperialism*, today is often overlooked by those who hold very different views on the nature of US foreign policy. The Filipino people, who had thought to have found a foreign ally in their struggle for independence from their Spanish colonizer, soon found themselves in the grips of a new and more powerful foreign state.¹³ The century-long US presence in the South China Sea was thus initiated as an imperial power. And it was as a colonial power that it pursued its foreign policy in the region, changing the official intent according to the global geopolitical context of the time. As Dole put it in 1905,

so far as it is good for the United States to govern the Philippine Islands for the betterment of their people, the same argument holds in favor of any reasonable method, for example, through purchase or by the final consent of the people, for the extension of German law and political institutions into ill-governed South American states.

After the defeat of Japan with the end of the Second World War and the final loss of the Philippines in 1946, the new justification was notably the policy of containment against Communism. It was in view of this principle that the US intervened in Vietnam in the name of "freedom" and "democracy," in its attempt to help France reconquer its Indochinese colony, when the unification of Vietnam through democratic elections to be held in 1956 would have led to Ho Chi Minh's victory, and actively supported the Indonesian government in its thirty-year colonial oppression of East Timor. Historical facts defy Wimmer and Feinstein's (2010, 776) description of post-1945 United States as the "champion of decolonization and self-determination," a description that is informed by perceptions steeped in the loftiness of US overseas endeavors. The establishment of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), which as an Asian NATO involved the Philippines and Thailand in the fight against Communism, strengthened the US in the region notwithstanding the loss of its Filipino colony. In any case, then as now, the US possessed Guam and the Mariana Islands, as well as various "independent" states like the Marshall Islands, which are nothing but modern-day overseas colonial outposts, key to US geopolitical strategic interests.

It is in light of these facts that the American presence can well be seen as a legacy of empire, a legacy that Chinese authorities cannot accept given the negative implications that Western meddling in East Asia has had. The narrative of the "century of humiliation," while definitely a tool for regime legitimation, needs to be understood as an historical fact. This is not to legitimize Chinese claims over Taiwan, which

¹³ As Lenin put it, "in the United States, the imperialist war waged against Spain in 1898 stirred up the opposition of the 'anti-imperialists', [...] who declared this war to be 'criminal', regarded the annexation of foreign territories as a violation of the Constitution, [and] declared that the treatment of Aguinaldo, leader of the Filipinos (the Americans promised him the independence of his country, but later landed troops and annexed it), was 'jingo treachery'."

are not justifiable in any way. Already Renan (1882, 20) famously showed that “if anyone has the right to be consulted in such an affair [that is a nation’s existence], it is the inhabitant. A nation never has any real interest in annexing or holding on to a country against its will.” And to base politics and the national principle on “ethnographic analysis is to surrender it to a chimera. (Renan 1882, 14).” Further, Renan (1882, 13) wondered “upon what criterion [...] should one base th[e] national right,” stating that “several confidently assert that is derived from race.” Yet has he put it, this “primordial right [...] [whereby] an ethnographic principle is substituted for a national one [...] if it were to become dominant, would destroy European civilization,” as it did a few decades later. We may add, it may destroy Asian civilization.

In any case, the US presence in East Asia can indeed be seen as a continuation of the “century of humiliation.” To understand the preposterous nature of US security concerns in East Asia and its moral claims as guarantor of world destinies, which confirm Thrasymachus paradox, let us imagine what would happen if China claimed that it were the guarantor of the freedom of navigation in the Caribbean. And we have already seen what happened when Cuba, the Taiwan of the Caribbean, defied the will of its mighty neighbor. Such ideological blindness has recently found some semblance of intellectual legitimacy through Allison’s Thucydides trap. As classicist Neville Morley (2020, x) bluntly stated, showing the reasons for the widespread (and often inaccurate) use of Thucydides,

Thucydides is someone who needs only to be referred to by name, whether in conversation, [or] in writing [...], to bring to mind a set of powerful and complex ideas that carry cultural weight and authority. His work is an immortal classic, transcending its historical context and offering its readers a deep understanding of the world. This is a name that has the power to persuade—even, in fact, to persuade people who may not actually have read the whole of the History, or in some cases any of it, and to persuade them of things that Thucydides never actually said.¹⁴

1.3 Thucydides Trap Reconsidered

Allison’s Thucydides trap, as Adam Tooze (2021) rightly put it, “trivializes the significance of China’s modern ascent.” Yet, there is more to it. It does not consider the destabilizing role of the US in East Asia, which is apparent if one compares the US to Athens—a self-explanatory comparison to any scholar of antiquity—instead of Sparta. What Allison and his team do is decontextualize one single sentence from Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War and apply it in unhistorical ways throughout history. And the Peloponnesian War, while rightly taken as emblematic for modern geopolitics, teaches us much more than Americano-centric perspectives do. Firstly,

¹⁴ As Morley (2013) showed, Thucydides has proved fashionable particularly among US policymakers and army ranks. Previously, Laurie Johnson Bagby (1994) underscored the misinterpretations surrounding Thucydides, whereby realist scholars took pains to turn the Greek historian into an early realist using his work selectively to make their case.

the classic parallel during the Cold War was that Sparta was to Athens what the Soviet Union was to the US, a militaristic state fighting against democracy.¹⁵ Thucydides trap, in its focus on geopolitics and security, “offers a monocausal explanation of war,” as Steve Chan (2020, 19) observed, and does not take into account issues of ideology, cultural hegemony, and political elites’ decision making, but only looks at interstate relations from the realist perspective of state interests. This very limited approach does show one thing: that US state interests are premised on Washington’s attempts to retain its world hegemony, or a semblance of it. And that is the actual trap. US policymakers are engulfed in the same conundrum of their long-standing foe, Russia (while of course present Russia, as a rogue state, is much more of a destabilizing factor to world stability).¹⁶ Both countries, in their own different ways, have yet to come to terms with the end of the Cold War. The US victory over Soviet Russia was very brief, as the Spartan victory over Athens. Both wars resulted in the demise of the contenders and the rise of other powers that had a limited role in the conflicts, from Thebes and Macedonia to modern China. This could be one of the relevant parallels with Thucydides and ancient Greece.

At the same time, though, notwithstanding his nuanced appraisal of Allison’s shortcomings, Chan’s (2019, 2020) criticism is based on Allison’s same misunderstanding of Thucydides’ work and the ancient Greek context. Chan (2020, 2) appears to suggest that Thucydides is not that relevant as a parallel for US–China relations. He wonders “how helpful an analogy based on what happened some 2500 years ago can be in informing current international relations,” suggesting that.

Seductive analogies [may] mislead rather than illuminate. For example, ancient Sparta was an agrarian society ruled by an oligarchy, whereas ancient Athens was a (limited) democracy with thriving foreign commerce. Do people seriously contend that they represent valid analogs to contemporary United States and China, respectively?

Yet, Chan seems to miss the key point at the basis of Thucydides, for which he is rightly considered the father of political history (Jaeger 1939) (a fact that is often forgotten, given the antiquarian nature of many historical works, already lamented by Burckhardt (1873), Nietzsche (1874), and Toynbee (1934), that go against Thucydides’ purpose of historiographical enquiries): his aim was to write a history that may be “useful [to] those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it[. . .] hav[ing] written [his] work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.” (Thucydides 2006, 80) And as Leo Strauss (1964, 157) argued, “by studying the Peloponnesian war Thucydides grasps the limits of all human things. By studying this singular event against the background of the ancient things he grasps the nature of all human things. It is for this reason that his work is a possession for all time.”

¹⁵ For the history of these analogies see Stephen Hodkinson (2012).

¹⁶ Chaudet, Parmentier and Pélodidas (2009) pointed to the persistence of Cold War categories among American neoconservatives and Russian neo-Eurasianists.

Incidentally, Athenian democracy was not “limited” nor is it correct to say that “Athens was a democracy, at least according to the standards of its time,” as Chan (2020, 19) put it, as it was the original democracy. That its citizenry was limited to a few thousand individuals, while the majority of the population lived under slavery, does not rule out that it was democratic, as the United States before the official abolition of slavery were by all means a democracy. As Toynbee (1954, 538) showed, it was the American “representative system in which the people’s control over the government was exercised at one remove [that] would, no doubt, have seemed an anemic dilution of Democracy to citizens of city–states like Florence or Athens, for whom Democracy had signified the direct participation of all the citizens in public affairs.”

Focusing mainly on Allison’s misinterpretation of Thucydides, Chan suggests that the two contexts are completely different. Obviously, they are, as any historical scenario is rooted in its own context. Yet, Thucydides wrote his work as a *ktema es aiei*, a possession forever, and we may still draw on his work, irrespective of Chan’s (2020, 32) caveat that “we do not have enough information to determine whether Athens had approached Sparta’s power or had even overtaken Sparta—and if so, when these events took place,” since this is based on a misinterpretation of Thucydides’ text. And as Thucydides believed, “the history of individuals and nations repeats itself because human nature does not change (Jaeger 1939, 389).” The parallels between present-day geopolitics and Thucydides’ Greece are endless. As a scholar of classical Greece and a keen observer of his own time, Jakob Burckhardt (1873, 17) showed that historians need to “study the *recurrent, constant* and *typical* as echoing in us and intelligible through us.”

Similarly to Allison, Chan (2020, 16–17) holds that according to Thucydides “the danger of a great-power war increases when a rising power overtakes an incumbent hegemon,” based on Thucydides’ early mistranslated sentence “the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta made war inevitable.”¹⁷ The parallel with Thucydides, both Allison’s and Chan’s, is based on a single sentence that, to add insult to injury, is decontextualized from Thucydides’ insights, Greek history, and the dynamics of the Peloponnesian War. Athens was not a rising power, even according to Thucydides. It is reasonable to think that the wording “the rise of Athens” is a result of a wrong translation from the original Greek, since Allison (2017, 297) himself stated that he had “adapted [translations] to more modern English syntax,” a misleading practice that inevitably incurs in the loss of the original meaning.¹⁸ Sparta’s fear was that Athens may become too powerful.¹⁹ In the words of one

¹⁷ The original Greek for the supposed “rise” is *μεγάλους γιγνομένουσ*, which refers to Athens growing ever more, not to a simple rise. Tooze (2021) does nothing but repeat this inaccurate translation when he writes that “the ancient historian saw war with Sparta as an inevitable consequence of Athens’s growing power.” Thucydides argued this only if we rely on Allison’s flawed adaptation of the English translation.

¹⁸ The key sentence by Thucydides that Allison used to come up with his Thucydides trap is different in the translation he had worked on.

¹⁹ Chan, too, points to these facts relying on Donald Kagan’s work, yet he does not push forth the relevance of Thucydides, as he does not engage directly with his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Similarly, Allison too resorts to Kagan, possibly due to the similar political allegiances, evidence of which may be given by Kagan’s (1995) own *On the Origins of War*, which Allison’s *Destined for War* mirrors.

of the greatest classicists of the twentieth century, Werner Jaeger (1943, 3), it was “the victory over Persia [at the beginning of the fifth century B.C.], in which she had been the leader and the champion of the Greeks, [that] had allowed [Athens] to aspire to hegemony over them.” Thucydides realizes “that the power of Athens was the true cause of the war,” describing, as Jaeger (1939, 393) shows, “that phase of the process which preceded the outbreak of war—the growth of the Athenian power during the fifty years after the defeat of Persia.” As Chan observed, Thucydides trap does not subsist; yet, the sentence taken by Allison and Chan himself as emblematic is misinterpreted. “The Athenians’ growing power and the fear they caused [by this growth] to the Lacedaemonians [that is the Spartans]” (Thucydides 1967, 81) was not the rise of a subaltern power but the growth of an already mighty power: Sparta “feared the growth of the power of the Athenians, seeing most of Hellas [that is Greece] already subject to them (Thucydides 1967, 122).”

Allison’s (2017, 40) conclusion that “the shifting balance of power led both sides to conclude that violence was the least bad option available,” is but another distorted oversimplification that does away with the fact that there was no shifting balance of power and that, as shown by the speeches found in Thucydides as well as Jaeger’s and Strauss’ commentaries, political leaders, in particular at Sparta, dreaded conflict. As to “who was responsible for the war [...] [Thucydides’] answer is that the Athenians forced the Spartans into war (Strauss 1964, 151).” According to Thucydides, “the Spartans were [...] impelled to declare war [...] by their own fear of a still greater extension of Athenian power in Greece (Jaeger a 1945, 395).” Consequently, the parallel with the US world hegemony threatened by a rising China is based on the misinterpretation of one single sentence from Thucydides; if we are to apply Thucydides to present-day geopolitics, the US would be still Athens, while China would be better represented by Sparta, both of which were weary of the extension of the rival’s empire, which in the Athenian and US case was and is based on thalassocracy, that is maritime hegemony. The problem with geopolitical interpretations of Thucydides is that “Thucydides can be turned into a coiner of folkish wisdom only by ignoring most of his history” (Morley 2020, 142), as the notion of Thucydides trap as well as its discontents do. Allison’s interpretative flaws do not imply that Thucydides’ work is not a relevant benchmark. For the analysis of “the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes [that is the Greeks], but of a large part of the barbarian world—almost of mankind” (Thucydides 2006, 66), offers several other parallels that are more fitting to the US–China rivalry, but which have little to do with Allison’s invention of Thucydides trap. Ancient Greece was not a bipolar system either. Corinth was still a powerful city–state whose colonies, from Corcyra to Syracuse in Sicily, became the target of Athens (Musti 1995).

The American military presence in East Asia in the aftermath of the victory over imperial Japan and the establishment of military alliances with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, although these countries were ruled by authoritarian regimes, do recall Thucydides and ancient Greek geopolitical dynamics. The US regional alliances and military installations may remind of the Delian League which Athens established in the wake of its victory over Persia, as the US did with its victory over Nazi Germany and Japan. The Greek victory in the Persian wars, engineered by Athens, but to which also Sparta contributed (as Soviet Russia played

a fundamental role against Nazi Germany), served as a catalyst for the legitimization of the Athenian thalassocracy. The comparison between Athens and China, then, is not fitting: it is the eschatological view typical of US observers that considers world destinies tied to the US. American hegemonic power too is very recent and was established with the WW2 victory, as that of Athens with the Persian Wars. And the demise of Athens ensued a series of unsuccessful military expeditions, like the ill-famed Sicilian expedition pushed for by Alcibiades (which, incidentally, neither Allison nor Chan mentioned), which may in part recall the US debacle in Afghanistan, although the Soviet demise following the withdrawal from Afghanistan may appear to be a more suitable analogy. While the parallel may seem a trivialization, it is not. It shows the risks incurred by a power with universalistic claims based on the supposed superiority of its political and value systems, which present-day US and Pericles' Athens share.

“The current US concern,” Lanxin Xiang (2021, 130) observed, “is over whether China may integrate into the existing (i.e., West-dominated) liberal world order or seek to destroy it.” Similarly, Tooze (2021) noted that “it is not clear that American politics can digest plurality other than from a position of dominance.” But the problem is that the US, while still the world’s most powerful state, is no longer the unchallenged hegemonic power (Harwit 2023), having lost also its ability to effectively influence its own creations, including the UN (Arrighi 1998; Lebow and Kelly 2001).²⁰ As Giovanni Arrighi (1996, 38) put it almost thirty years ago, for the West “the wisest course of action is to learn to live with the fact that, after 500 years of Western hegemony, economic leadership is now passing from Western to non-Western hands.” And US foreign policy mishaps premised on the enlargement and preservation of the “empire,” as for Athens 2,500 years ago, contributed to this transition.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan, which laid bare the inconclusive nature of the Western intervention, to future historians may well mark the official end of US world dominance, as Athens' ill-fated Sicilian expedition marked the turning point in the fortunes of the birthplace of democracy. As the US involvement in the Middle East and Afghanistan in the early 2000s has shown, the American presence in East Asia, including claims to being guarantor of the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the preservation of Taiwan's independence, is not based on lofty unselfish sentiments of a benign power defending the interests of the so-called Free World.²¹ They are the geopolitical concern of a declining power with hegemonic stakes in the region.

While it is unlikely that a world power recedes spontaneously from a key geopolitical context, it is nevertheless possible. US policymakers should become aware that their country's involvement in East Asia has been fraught with colonialism, whether in support of other empires (i.e., France), their own (in the Philippines), or

²⁰ Henry Kissinger (2012, 55) stated that “the rise of China is less the result of its increased military strength than of the United States' own declining competitive position.”

²¹ The Middle Eastern context and the nature of the US intervention twenty years ago are very different from the current scenario, in which the leaders and public opinion makers of Arab states, Turkey and Iran share an anti-Western revanchism tied to a deep opposition to Israel's existence.

neo-colonial nationalist states like Indonesia in East Timor and West Papua. And the US support of Taiwan, allegedly in the name of democracy, is just a recent rhetorical turn. US administrations supported Taiwan (and South Korea) even when, until the late 1980s, it was ruled by a military junta that was not that different from those ruling over Chile and Argentina in the same years.

Even Huntington appeared to point to the paradox of the US presence in East Asia. While his remarks were contradictory in several places, insofar as he also referred to “the emergence of China as the dominant power in East and Southeast Asia [which] would be contrary to American interests as they have been historically construed” (Huntington 1996, 312–313), which could be a reason for war between the US and China, he also stressed one fundamental point that made such US interests obsolete. The US intervention in a possible South China Sea conflict between China and Vietnam, justified “to uphold international law, repel aggression, protect freedom of the seas, maintain its access to South China Sea oil, and prevent the domination of East Asia by a single power” (Huntington 1996, 316), which in a way mirrors Thucydides trap, contravenes any attempt to avoid a war between great powers. For, according to Huntington (1996, 316), “the avoidance of major intercivilizational wars requires core states to refrain from intervening in conflicts in other civilizations,” which is a way to say that the US should refrain from meddling in East Asian affairs.

China’s “century of humiliation” is not empty rhetoric. Certainly, it is utilized as an irredentist weapon in the Taiwan dispute and in Hong Kong—incidentally, Taiwan was turned into a province of the Qing Empire only in 1885 (Hughes 1997), proving that Chinese nationalist primordialism does not have such a solid basis in the Taiwanese context—and as any irredentist claim carries with it eerie implications, that is wars of aggression. Yet, it is indeed based on historical facts that cannot be dismissed. And the US presence across East Asia is understandably seen as a legacy of that century and, as such, may well be considered an imperial legacy.²² US policymakers and army ranks may argue that US territories are close to the theater of operations. Yet the military bases are either a legacy of the takeover of the Spanish empire or of the occupation of Japanese territories. This presence shows how Thucydides is still relevant, but not to legitimize the claims of US policymakers, which seem to fit Arrighi’s (1998, 75) speculation that “the economic expansion of East Asia [may be] brought to a premature end by internal conflicts, mismanagement or US resistance to the loss of power and prestige [...] that the recentering of the global economy on East Asia entails.”

Thucydides’ famous “Melian dialogue, where he makes the Athenians expound the doctrine that Might is Right” (Jaeger 1939, 141), makes claims to a moral legitimation inconsistent. And the idea of power at all costs as the driving force of international affairs is mirrored in Plato’s Thrasymachus paradox, which transforms might into justice, thus possibly even going beyond the “might makes right” dictum exemplifying extreme realism, according to which “moral norms are illusory,

²² At the same time, notwithstanding different contexts, states in the region at the elite and popular level, from Japan and South Korea to Taiwan and Thailand, do sport a degree of support for the US.

[and] have not reality or no force in the relations among states” (Forde 2012, 178). The notion of power at all costs, with its corollary—spheres of influence and “soft power”—as the driving force of international politics is captured by Thucydides himself but also by Plato’s Thrasymachus paradox. This paradox, whereby “the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger” (Plato 1930, 47), figures also in other Platonic treatises. It becomes emblematic, though, in the words of Thrasymachus, one of the members of Socrates’ symposium at the basis of Plato’s Republic, “the most famous political work of Plato [...] and the most famous political work of all times.” (Strauss 1964, 62) According to Thrasymachus, “each form of government enacts the laws with a view to its own advantage [...] and by so legislating they proclaim that the just for their subjects is that which is for their—the rulers’—advantage and the man who deviates from this law they chastise as a lawbreaker and a wrongdoer.” (Plato 1930, 49) If we apply Thrasymachus’ words to interstate relations, the paradox whereby there is no justice but what the established powers decide it to be fits the neoconservative and hegemonic realist tenet according to which a hegemon imposes its norms and values. And in this respect, US overseas interests, justified by and in turn justifying, on some “moral” grounds, the US messianic role as guarantor of world destinies, is captured by ancient Greek thought.

2 Conclusion

While such observations may be seen as anti-Western rants, they are not. It is US and European foreign policy miscalculations and blunders—from the toppling down of democratically elected leaders in Iran and Chile, to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the bombing of Libya, whose ruthless dictator Gaddafi was awkwardly saluted as a model “Third World” ruler by Giddens (2006), and the EU fruitless intervention in the Sahel, to name but a few failures—often in the name of “freedom,” “democracy,” “human rights,” and “free market,” that give anti-Western dictatorial regimes like Russia and Iran justifications for their wrongdoings. Such foreign policy blunders, the result of US interventionism, have even triggered a “restraint” reaction among American progressives (Specter 2022). In any case, American hegemonic realism and neoconservatism have historically been detrimental to the establishment of the “perpetual peace” famously envisioned by Kant (1795, 112), who put that “no state shall violently interfere with the constitution and administration of another.” And had the US limited their condemnation of China to its mistreatment of the Uighurs and Tibetans—which nevertheless the West has sidelined, as David Crowe (2013, 1128) put it, after it “decided that economic ties to China were far more important than its human rights practices”—perhaps China might have taken a less ambivalent stance in the Russian invasion of Ukraine and forsaken Russia as a pariah state. That China has had an ambivalent role in the Russian invasion has led critics to inaccurately consider China as an ally of Russia, as Garcia and Modlin (2022) have pointed out, which has further exacerbated Western perceptions of China. In any case, the moral high ground of the West will not subsist as long as it remains friends with the petroregimes of the Gulf (Bsheer 2017), which are anything but liberal democracies.

Current Russian anti-Westernism and Middle Eastern criticisms of the West for its support of Israel should make US policymakers aware, even from a realist perspective, of the need to cultivate a collaborative relationship with China. Instead of yielding to a new world (dis)order characterized by the West against the Rest, as Huntington (1993, 1996) eerily prefigured, the new world order may well be defined by an East Asian and Western collaboration that would be strong enough to counter the destabilizing drives of dictatorial regimes like Russia and Iran. The future of international relations rests on this understanding between the US and China, to which on different occasions President Xi has appeared to be open.²³

The best course of action for Chinese policymakers to show the preposterous nature of the US presence in East Asia would be to forsake its claims over Taiwan, establish amicable relations with it, and eventually devise a mutual East Asian Monroe Doctrine. As Tongdong Bai (2020, 213) recently argued, “in the international arena, the Chinese government should realize that one of the biggest obstacles to its peaceful rise is the nationalist discourse that it has adopted. China should abandon the nationalist version of the nation-state model [...] and adopt the Confucian one instead.” If the US insisted in their presence in the region, then that may be seen as a further confirmation of the raging anti-China bias so popular among Western policymakers, from Biden and Sunak to German Foreign Minister Baerbock. In any case, as Arrighi (1998, 75) put it, showing the need for China to cooperate with other East Asian states and the US, “only a plurality of states acting in concert with one another has any chance of bringing into existence an East-Asian-based new world order. This plurality may well include the USA.”

If the West really wants an effective global governance, whereby regimes like the Russian get isolated by the international community, then it needs to truly abandon its imperial legacy, which is apparent in the East Asian context. It needs to be seen what will happen in the unlikely event that the US withdraws from East Asia.²⁴ It is possible, as it happened with the centuries-long “Romano-Iranian détente” that in Classical Antiquity Rome and Parthia, the successor state of the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire, achieved in what Toynbee (1954, 534) hoped would be the solution between the US and Soviet Union. It is unlikely, though, if Chinese policymakers do not compromise, especially on the Taiwan question, and if their US counterparts do not abandon their rhetoric and practice, which in the East Asian context is reminiscent of the paradoxes that Du Bois (1917, 445–446) unveiled at the time of the establishment of the US overseas colonies:

America, land of democracy, wanted to believe in the failure of democracy so far as darker peoples were concerned. Absolutely without excuse she established a caste system, rushed into preparation for war and conquered tropical

²³ On the US side, during the Carter administration, Brzezinski was convinced of the urgency of normalizing relations with China in view of the Russian threat (Tyler 1999). He still believed in the need for a US-Chinese rapprochement toward the end of his life (Dombey 2011; Brzezinski 2013).

²⁴ The US presence in East Asia was considered to be part of US traditional security interests and concerns by Huntington (1996) and Kissinger (2012), for example, who did not contemplate the colonial legacy discussed in this paper. For a different take that acknowledges the imperial legacies of the US from the Philippines to Iraq, see Julian Go (2011).

colonies. She stands today shoulder to shoulder with Europe in Europe's worst sins against civilization [and] she aspires to sit among the great nations who arbitrate the fate of "lesser breeds without the law."

In any case, Thucydides trap does not subsist. It is an invention originating from a misreading of the ancient Greek historian. That it now defines part of Western international relations theory shows the weak intellectual foundations of a significant part of Western geopolitical discourse as well as its ideological blindness rooted in an anti-China bias (as recently also shown by Winkler and Jerdén, 2023). It is not Thucydides trap, but Thrasymachus paradox that defines interstate relations and US attempts to retain a foothold in East Asia.

Funding Open access funding provided by Mahidol University. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Data availability The author confirms that the data generated or analyzed during this study are available within this article.

Declarations

Author contribution The author confirms sole responsibility for the study conception, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Code availability No code was utilized in this study.

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