

Financial Times August 21, 2012 Thucydides's trap has been sprung in the Pacific By Graham Allison

China's increasingly aggressive posture towards the South China Sea and the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea is less important in itself than as a sign of things to come. For six decades after the second world war, an American "Pax Pacifica" has provided the security and economic framework within which Asian countries have produced the most rapid economic growth in history. However, having emerged as a great power that will overtake the US in the next decade to become the largest economy in the world, it is not surprising that China will demand revisions to the rules established by others.

The defining question about global order in the decades ahead will be: can China and the US escape Thucydides's trap? The historian's metaphor reminds us of the dangers two parties face when a rising power rivals a ruling power – as Athens did in 5th century BC and Germany did at the end of the 19th century. Most such challenges have ended in war. Peaceful cases required huge adjustments in the attitudes and actions of the governments and the societies of both countries involved.

Classical Athens was the centre of civilisation. Philosophy, history, drama, architecture, democracy – all beyond anything previously imagined. This dramatic rise shocked Sparta, the established land power on the Peloponnese. Fear compelled its leaders to respond. Threat and counter-threat produced competition, then confrontation and finally conflict. At the end of 30 years of war, both states had been destroyed.

Thucydides wrote of these events: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable." Note the two crucial variables: rise and fear.

The rapid emergence of any new power disturbs the status quo. In the 21st century, as Harvard University's Commission on American National Interests has observed about China, "a diva of such proportions cannot enter the stage without effect".

Never has a nation moved so far, so fast, up the international rankings on all dimensions of power. In a generation, a state whose gross domestic product was smaller than Spain's has become the second-largest economy in the world.

If we were betting on the basis of history, the answer to the question about Thucydides's trap appears obvious. In 11 of 15 cases since 1500 where a rising power emerged to challenge a ruling power, war occurred. Think about Germany after unification as it overtook Britain as Europe's largest economy. In 1914 and in 1939, its aggression and the UK's response produced world wars.

Uncomfortable as China's rise is for the US, there is nothing unnatural about an increasingly powerful China demanding more say and greater sway in relations among

nations. Americans, particularly those who lecture Chinese about being “more like us”, should reflect on our own history.

As the US emerged as the dominant power in the western hemisphere in about 1890, how did it behave? Future president Theodore Roosevelt personified a nation supremely confident that the next 100 years would be an American century. In the years before the first world war the US liberated Cuba, threatened Britain and Germany with war to force them to accept US positions on disputes in Venezuela and Canada, backed an insurrection that split Columbia to create a new state of Panama – which immediately gave the US concessions to build the Panama Canal – and attempted to overthrow the government of Mexico, which was supported by the UK and financed by London bankers. In the half century that followed, US military forces intervened in “our hemisphere” on more than 30 separate occasions to settle economic or territorial disputes on terms favourable to Americans, or oust leaders we judged unacceptable.

To recognise powerful structural factors is not to argue that leaders are prisoners of the iron laws of history. It is rather to help us appreciate the magnitude of the challenge. If leaders in China and the US perform no better than their predecessors in classical Greece, or Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, historians of the 21st century will cite Thucydides in explaining the catastrophe that follows. The fact that war would be devastating for both nations is relevant but not decisive. Recall the first world war, in which all the combatants lost what they treasured most.

In light of the risks of such an outcome, leaders in both China and the US must begin talking to each other much more candidly about likely confrontations and flash points. Even more difficult and painful, both must begin making substantial adjustments to accommodate the irreducible requirements of the other.

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