

Ancient Predictions, Modern Tensions: The Unnerving Relevance of the Peloponnesian War

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Abstract

The relative decline of the U.S. and the ascendance of China in the global order led to a tectonic shift in the balance of power. From the Thucydidean perspective what makes war more likely than peace is the growing entitlement of the rising power and the insecurity this engenders in the established power. One may agree or disagree with Alison's Thucydides trap, as few scholars have discarded it as self-professed prophecy. However, ongoing Sino-American rivalry in Indo-Pacific, with Taiwan as the major flashpoint, makes this historical analogy relevant. Another relevant factor is the alliance entrapment. The contest of competitive credibility led Sparta and Athens to a strategic disaster (Nye). In the likelihood of a war, it will be as consequential as the Peloponnesian war. Whichever side wins, the region will lose.

About the Author

Dr. Mansi is currently the MoFA Taiwan fellow (2023) at National Chengchi University, Taiwan. She is also the recipient of the Ministry of Education (MoE) Taiwan Short Term Research Award fellowship (2022) at post-Doc level. She is also the recipient of Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute fellowship.

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Dr. Mansi is an interdisciplinary researcher. Her current area of research includes the geo-politics of the Indo-Pacific Region with particular focus on the

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Indian Ocean. At present she is working on the evolving power dynamics in the IOR and India-Taiwan ties. She has delivered various lectures at National and International level. She has also participated in various national and international conferences/seminars/workshops and has chaired sessions in panel presentations. Her Op-ed articles have been published in Taipei Times (Taiwan), Taiwan Center for Security Studies (Taiwan), Commonwealth magazine (Taiwan), Firstpost (India), Strategic Perspective (United Service Institution of India), Nepal Institute for International Cooperation and Engagement (NIICE).

The research articles and book chapter has been published with the USI Journal, Policy Futures in Education (Sage publication), Nation-Building, Education and Culture in India and Canada: Advances in Indo-Canadian Humanities and Social Sciences Research (Springer Singapore), and Assonance. Apart from that she has conducted and published interviews of imminent personalities in Translation Today (CIIL, Mysore) and BELTA journal Bangladesh.

Is Indo-Pacific Turning into Modern Peloponnesian?

The Greek historian Thucydides who chronicled the Peloponnesian War between the then-established power Sparta and the emerging power Athens and their allies around 5 BCE, has come to be revered not just in academia but also the military circles since the last decade. As per Professor Donal Kagan, the renowned Thucydides scholar, more people are studying the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta than at any time since it concluded in 404BC. The historiography of Thucydides has become much established in the realist perspective of I.R. and foreign policy circles of the West to interpret the US-China relations in the 21st century. Harvard Professor and power transition theorist Graham Allison coined the “Thucydides trap” in 2012 to describe the potential trends of Sino-U.S. relations (Allison 2012). The much-recognised thesis of “History of Peloponnesian War”; it was the rise of Athens and the fear that it

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inspired in Sparta which made the War inevitable- is being seen at the core of the structural conflict between the hegemon (U.S.) and rising power (China).

This concept finds mention in the speeches of leaders from both sides, although disapprovingly. They deny that there exists any such thing between the U.S. and China. However, the escalation of tensions between two countries, following situation in Taiwan strait, COVID 19 pandemics and ensuing trade and tech war represent all time lowest ebb in the bilateral relations. Not just that, the world clearly seems to be divided into two blocks; rule-based democratic liberal world order led by the U.S. (the established power) vs. the rest which is championed by communist China (the rising power), and the emerging China-Russia dyad following Ukraine war. It gives a gloomy feel of the new Cold War (Cold War 2.0), the only difference being that the division of the world this time is not along ideological fault lines per se but a complex web of conflicting and competing interests.

The whole “Thucydides trap” concept has been criticised by various scholars and academicians based on its validity and applicability in the present context. For some scholars, it is nothing more than a “self-prophetic Thucydides trap or zero-sum brinkmanship proliferated by hawkish scholars like Graham Allison” (Michael et al., 2020), who has been labelled as a “harbinger of the impending ‘U.S.–China apocalypse’” (Kouskouvelis, 2017; Waldron, 2017). Furthermore, ‘Thucydides trap’ has been said to be a “Eurocentric concept,” and therefore, “an impractical analytical tool, which does little towards providing a meaningful examination of China’s tradition of peaceful diplomacy” (Michael et al., 2020). It has further been referred to as a “horrible dictu” which implies the option of preemptive war (Helle, 2017). This thesis is said to be based on “fundamentally flawed assumptions” that all cases of great power competition share a similar structure (Vuving 2020). The advent of nuclear weapons and its ‘overkill effect’ has eliminated the structural cause of War between great powers (ibid).

Whatever be the line of argument, Thucydides cannot be discounted. In the words of Bruce Clark, “Greek historian is more subtle than he is given credit for.”

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Thucydides has been applauded as a skilled historian with a sophisticated theoretical understanding of War (Murray 2013). His analysis “helps to clarify not only the events of the war but also fundamental, theoretical truths about the nature and consequences of human conflict, truths as relevant today as they were late in the fifth century B.C” (ibid).

One may question whether there is a potential flaw in making a simple analogy between the Athens-Sparta confrontation of 5th BCE and the Sino-U.S. rivalry today? Or can the world take a cue from this analogy and work to avoid the potential conflict? What role does the other small and medium power play to keep the conflict at bay?

Indo-Pacific: The evolving power dynamics

In the last decade, the most significant geopolitical developments in Asia have been to redefine Asia-Pacific as Indo-Pacific. The term Indo-Pacific has gained prominence as a geostrategic construct in the foreign and security policies of various countries like the U.S., India, Australia, Japan, France, the UK, and ASEAN. However, China doesn't agree with this new nomenclature and perceives it as a “ploy to shift China from the center of the things and downgrade its importance by inviting in yet another substantial power, India” (Medcalf 2018). Notwithstanding this disagreement, Indo-Pacific has emerged as a new geopolitical nomenclature and strategic frame of reference to replace the previously dominant “Asia-Pacific” construct.

This change from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific is far from a simple matter of semantics. It is based on “specific political intentions and interests” (Heiduk and Wacker 2020) of dominant players of this region. Hence it is not value-neutral; instead, it is connotative. It is a “purposeful and political attempt by the region's predominant democratic powers” (Reeves 2020) like the US, India, Australia, and Japan to form “a geospatial redesign” in order “to recognize and to deepen trans-regional ties between the Indian and Pacific Ocean areas and to deal more effectively with China's ‘rise’ in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa” (ibid).

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Referring to this region, Yi and Qinghai (2014) underscore that “as a geographic concept, Indo-Pacific is embedded with the features of geoeconomics, geopolitics, and geostrategy.” Various factors like the power shift, India’s rising stature in Asia, growing significance of Indian Ocean, rebalancing/pivot to Asia strategy of the U.S., along with regional countries participation contribute to this new reality. Hemmings (2018) says a sort of “Great Game 2.0” is in development in Indo-Pacific, and the “stakes are impressive.” The growing rivalry between the United States and China is gaining prominence in this region, putting it at the centre of major power play. From a Thucydidean perspective, the rising power and established power rivalry make War more likely than peace. However, any war tends to result from a confluence of factors, and both structural conditions and human agency play a role in their outbreak (Steve Chan 2018). It brings forth a second key factor in the Peloponnesian War: the alliance entrapment of both parties. The alliance politics of Athens and Sparta forced them to get involved in reinforcing its credibility among its allies. Sparta fearing a decline of its influence, rushed to its ally Corinth’s defence prompting Athens to back its ally Corfu. In terms of Joseph Nye, this contest of competitive credibility led Sparta and Athens to a strategic disaster.

Alliance politics is as pertinent today as it was 2500 years ago, and there has been an emergence of a new kind of alliance-building- a retreat from multilateralism. Several new bi and mini-lateral alliances are being sought. New security relationships developed over the past decade to strategically deal with the region suggests material changes that were unforeseeable decades ago. These alliances include the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral, the India-Japan-US-Australia Quadrilateral (Quad), India-France-Australia, India-Australia-Indonesia.

However, the regional powers are divided in their approach to this “geospatial redesign.” These regional powers have been categorised as the proponent states and adapter states based on their approach to deal with China. On one hand, the proponent states like the U.S., India, Australia, and Japan, have developed the whole-of-government strategic approach to the region, like the Free and Open

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Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy of the US and Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) of India. The adapter states like ASEAN, France, and Germany, on the other hand, have embraced an alternative model of Indo-Pacific engagement based on 'inclusion' and 'stability.' The adapter states have their reservation vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific construct of proponent states, which they regard as marginalising and anti-China. Their concern is more pronounced with respect to the U.S. Free and Open Indo Pacific narrative, which views China as a revisionist power that the U.S. and its allies must contain. China perceives that the US-led alliance network exists to contain China itself and uselessly perpetuates Cold War tensions. In turn, China responds by forging its own alliance like Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. Both the U.S. and China have contributed to minilateral initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. The rise of these arrangements has its own challenges and opportunities, and it does impact the extant regional security architecture like the ASEAN-led multilateral order.

The interaction pattern between great power and rising power(s) will determine the dynamics of power play. Whatever these differing views and approaches of major/minor players of the region may be, the countries of this region are intertwined in a complex web of security and economic relations. The alliance system in this region is so complex and entangled that it is difficult to bifurcate the allegiance. Countries are mostly aligning with China for economic reasons and the U.S. for security reasons. These organisations have the presence of either China or the U.S. or both in some way or the other.

Can Taiwan Strait turn Indo-Pacific into the modern Peloponnese?

Rory Medcalf (2020) observes that “the Indo-Pacific, is unified by the quest to balance, dilute and absorb Chinese power, it is both a region and an idea — a metaphor for collective action, self-help combined with mutual help, it is a mental map which speaks of power, strategic imagination, and a world view. It is inherently a multipolar region because it is too large for hegemony”. The United

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States and its allies want to maintain a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon.

The meteoric rise of China caused structural stress by challenging the world order led by the U.S. as the sole superpower in the post-Cold War. The relative decline of the U.S. and the ascendance of China in the global order led to a tectonic shift in the balance of power. From the Thucydidean perspective what makes war more likely than peace is “the growing entitlement of the rising power (China’s), sense of its importance, and demand for greater say and sway, and the fear, insecurity, and determination to defend the status quo this engenders in the established power (the U.S.)”. Considering the growing entitlement of China in its immediate and extended neighbourhood in Indo-Pacific and the U.S. determination to maintain the status quo in the region, which has been under its dominance for the last seven decades, the historical analogy seems relevant.

The heightened tension in Taiwan Strait following the short trip by Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in 2022 brought the already troubled Sino-American relations on the verge of collapse. It also sent the ripples across the world. The possibility of invading Taiwan for eventual reunification with mainland China seemed, what many regarded as a remote scenario, a plausible one. After conducting almost, a week’s long unprecedented live military drills around Taiwan in retaliation to the Pelosi’s visit, China published its 3rd White Paper titled "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," to reiterate the fact that Taiwan is part of China and to demonstrate the resolve of the CPC for national reunification. The condescending tone of the white paper and the reiteration by Xi in his opening remarks of 20th Party Congress come as a warning to Taiwan and the United States that the mainland is now much stronger to solve the Taiwan problem, even by forceful means, if necessary, to fulfil the national rejuvenation, Xi’s Grand strategy. The PRC’s harassment of the island continues till date on a daily basis.

The Economist labelled the island “the most dangerous place on earth”, a tag till now reserved for the Korean peninsula. Taiwan has indeed become the major “flashpoint” between the US and China rivalry and the place “most likely to spark

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a war between the U.S. and China.” The countries in the region ramped up their military expenditure and started planning for a Taiwan contingency in the wake of PRC’s invasion of the island. If the US and China go to war over Taiwan issue, which is the most contentious issue in their bilateral relations, it has the potential to drag the entire region into conflict, if alliances are respected.

As per various projection, PRC can invade Taiwan sometime between 2027 to 2029, and if there is an actual invasion, it will be as consequential as the Peloponnesian war. War between the US and China over Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific has the potential to completely change the power dynamics in the region. Whichever side wins the war, the region will lose.

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