

Thucydides' Trap

“It was the rise of Athens and the fear this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable” (Thucydides).

Written over 2400 years ago by the Greek historian Thucydides to describe the onset of the Peloponnesian War, the fear that the rise of a new power will inevitably spell war with the existing hegemon lives on. With tensions between the US and China showing no signs of subsiding, the fear of Thucydides' trap increases. In this episode of EPIS Basics, we attempt to understand the mechanisms underlying Thucydides' trap and whether it is possible to escape it.

What Sets and Springs Thucydides' Trap?

Reading the introductory quote, the reader will find that security concerns play a substantial role in escalating tensions. Both the hegemon and its challenger perceived the other as a security threat. However, Thucydides eventually goes beyond these security concerns, stipulating that “fear, honour, and interest” were the three strongest motives that set Thucydides' trap.

If fear, honour and interest set Thucydides' trap, what springs it? Naturally, a panoply of flashpoints can act as catalysts for armed great power conflicts. A recurrent flashpoint throughout history regards the involvement of allies. The Peloponnesian war was preceded by a conflict between Sparta's ally Corinth and Athen's ally Kerkyra (Corfu). Despite Athens and Sparta being uninterested in war, both feared showing weakness in backing down, eventually spelling war. A similar picture is presented at the onset of the First World War. In the future, a war between China and the US over Taiwan would constitute a tragic continuation of this theme.

Escaping Thucydides' Trap

Despite the daunting prophecy of Thucydides' trap, it is not deterministic. On the one hand, the historical overview of Table 1 shows that 12 of 16 instances of great power competition led to war. On the other hand, history also provides reassurance that war is not inevitable. Interestingly, over 500 years, two of the four instances in which great power competition did not lead to war occurred in the past 70 years. The reasons behind this trend are multifaceted. Realists will highlight the benefits of nuclear weapons in establishing a balance of threats. In contrast, liberal international relations scholars might emphasize the increase in trade as well as democratic and international institutions as a source of stability. However, the means of diplomacy reach beyond the frameworks of international relations theories. Creative solutions across the entire array of diplomacy will be needed to prevent future great power war. As politicians, scholars, or interested readers, it is up to us to devise novel solutions to the old problem posed by Thucydides' trap and prevent great power wars in the 21st century.

Table 1

500 Years of Great Power Competition

When?	Who?	Outcome	When?	Who?	Outcome
Late 15 th Century	Portugal vs. Spain	No War	Mid-19 th Century	France vs. Germany	War
Beginning 16 th Century	France vs. Habsburg	War	Late 19 th /Early 20 th Century	China & Russia vs. Japan	War
16 th /17 th Century	Habsburg vs. Ottoman Empire	War	Early 20 th Century	UK, France, & Russia vs. Germany	War
Beginning 17 th Century	Habsburg vs. Sweden	War	Early 20 th Century	UK vs. US	No War
Late 17 th Century	Dutch Republic vs. England	War	Mid-20 th Century	Soviet Union, France, & UK vs. Germany	War

Late 17 th /Mid-18 th Century	France vs. GB	War	Mid-20 th Century	US vs. Japan	War
Late 18 th /Early 19 th Century	UK vs. France	War	1940s-1980s	US vs. Soviet Union	No War
Mid-19 th Century	France & UK vs. Russia	War	1990s-Present	UK & France vs. Germany	No War

Note. This table was created based on case files from Harvard's Thucydides' Trap Project.