Appraising Thucydides's Trap

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Allison's Book

Thucydides: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable"

Twelve of Sixteen Cases of Power Transition Ended in War

Use of Historical Analogy: Asking People to Imagine Contemporary China as a Replica of Athens (!) and Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany

Assuming People Don't Learn and History will Repeat Itself

Moreover, Asking Us to Suspend Disbelief that Developments since 450 BC – e.g., Nationalism, Nuclear Weapons, -- Don't Matter

Fighting Over What? Territorial Conquest Doesn't Pay; Rosecrance's Strategic vs. Trading States

When the Distribution of Benefits Corresponds to the Distribution of Capabilities, the Danger of War Is the Smallest

What Then Prevents Prompt and Adequate Distribution of Benefits, Including Status Recognition?

Analytic Problems

- **Monocausal Explanations Are Inherently Dubious**
- **Failure to Articulate Causal Mechanism: How Power Shifts at the Macro Level Affect Decision Processes at the Micro Level (e.g., Human Emotions)?**
- **Alternative Explanations for War Occurrence: Pull, Push and Misjudgment Even in Thucydides's Own Account**
- **Thus Multiple and Not Necessarily Mutually Exclusive Paths to War**
- **Threats of Idiosyncrasy and Irrelevance**
- **War Can Occur without Power Transition (e.g., China Fighting U.S. in Korea), and Peace Can Endure in the Wake of this Transition (e.g., Anglo-American case)**
- **Thus Power Transition Is Neither a Necessary Condition Nor a Sufficient One for War to Occur**

Biased Case Selection

- **Questionable Case Selection: E.g., Germany's Peaceful Overtaking of Britain and France, but Not China's Peaceful Overtaking of Russia and Japan**
- **Selective Attention Focusing on Only "Rising State" Challenging "Ruling State" But Not When Dominant Power Waging War on Declining Power (e.g., Spanish-American War, Opium War)**
- **Mischaracterization of Some Wars that Are Fought by Two Rising Powers, e.g., Russo-Japanese War**
- **And Overlooking War Started by Weaker State against Stronger One, e.g., Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor**
- **Or War Accepted by a Weaker State against a Stronger One, e.g., Korea, Vietnam**
- **Most Critically, Inattentive to Preventive Motivation: Dominant but Declining Power Starting War (e.g., Germany vs. Russia/USSR in both world wars)**
- **Treating Power Shifts Dyadically, thus Missing Their Multilateral Implications, e.g., Britain's "Smart Appeasement," Russia's Rise on German Trajectory**

Misconstruing Motivation

- **Greed and Fear, Cockiness and Insecurity**
- **States Are Forward-Looking: Windows of Opportunity and Windows of Vulnerability**
- **Prospect Theory: Loss Aversion**
- **Expected Utility: Postponement of Immediate Gratification**
- **Deng's Advice to Bide Time, Shun Leadership**
- **Transition Phase Is the Most Dangerous Time for A Rising but Still Weaker State**
- **China Has Fought to Forestall An Even Worse Situation (thus, Choosing of Lesser of Evils)**
- **China Can Cause Problem for the U.S. Without Having Caught Up**
- **War Happened Not Because Germany Had Wanted to Fight Britain but Because It Was Unable to Keep Britain on the Sideline!**
- **Obvious Implication for Taiwan Strait**

Misleading Even Dangerous Implications

- **Exaggerating China's Capabilities: Quantity vs. Quality**
- **Balance of Capabilities vs. Balance of Interests and Resolve**
- **Misrepresenting China's Intentions: Revisionism vs. Status-Quo Intentions**
- **Shuttling Logic: Stake in the Existing Order vs. Capability to Upend It**
- **Focusing on Just One Structural Condition (Power Shift) in A Dangerous Combination that Includes Armament Races, Alliance Entanglement, Territorial Disputes, Enduring Rivalries, Domestic Pressures and Incentives (e.g., Foreign Scapegoating, Iron-and-Rye Coalition)**
- **Mischaracterization of Regional Competition vs. Global Challenge**
- **Human Agency and Historical Contingency Given Short Shrift**
- **Danger of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**