The real Thucydides trap

Greek historian is more subtle than he is given credit for, argues Bruce Clark

Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian, did not suffer from false modesty. His work, he insisted, was intended not to win the praise of his contemporaries but as a 'possession for all time' whose lessons would never lose their value for analysts of human society or military affairs.

Nearly 25 centuries on, the great chronicler of war between Athens, Sparta and their respective empires is apparently being vindicated.

Professor Donald Kagan, the world's best-known Thucydides scholar, has said that more people are studying the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta than at any time since it concluded in 404BC. In recent years, moreover, the Greek author's name has become as firmly established in China's foreign policy discourse as it was in the liberal-arts curriculum and military science manuals of the West.

In at least three major speeches, President Xi Jinping has mentioned and, albeit with slightly diminishing confidence, rejected the 'Thucydides trap', which has come to mean the notion that conflict between China and the United States is inevitable.

'There is no such thing as the Thucydides trap,' he stated firmly in Seattle in 2015.

Then in January 2017, soon after Donald Trump had been elected, President Xi declared that the trap could be escaped 'as long as we maintain communication and treat each other with sincerity.'

Eight months later, he gave a warning that 'we must all strive to avoid the Thucydides trap' with its false implication that great powers are doomed to vie for global hegemony. China, he added, 'lacks the genes' for such a competition.

In September 2019, it was the turn of his foreign minister Wang Yi to note disapprovingly that 'some people are using every means to depict China as a major adversary, marketing the prophecy that the relationship is doomed to fall into the Thucydides trap'. But the minister's message was not complacent; his country's relations with America could either sail through 'calm seas' or else cascade into 'churning waters and raging waves' depending on how they were handled.

If the Greek historian had erred, it was only in seeing conflict as pre-ordained: that was the Chinese official's implication.

By this time, there had been a corresponding shift in American geopolitical discourse, at least since the national defence strategy unveiled in January 2018. It acknowledged that 'great-power competition' – in other words, vying with China and Russia – had become a determining factor in American foreign policy.

What all those Chinese pronouncements have in mind is the thinking developed by Graham Allison, a Harvard professor of political science. Since 2012, he has been refining the theory that rising powers tend to come into conflict with those whose strength is long established. He has demonstrated how this happened in 12 out of 16 cases, including that of post-Victorian Britain and Imperial Germany.

His starting point is one short line in Thucydides' magisterial tome whose English translation runs to nearly 200,000 words: 'What made the war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.'

But as many Greek history buffs would insist, that sentence is hardly Thucydides at his best. In fact, Professor Kagan believes that on this point, Thucydides is simply wrong: Athens and Sparta could have coexisted if their differences had been handled better.

Athens rise to power

Nor does that single formula apply well to the Sino-American competition of today. It invites us to imagine the United States as Sparta, the totalitarian hegemon, and China as Athens, the cheeky upstart. But American strategists, and before them British ones, always identified their country with Athens, and there are good reasons for that.

To recall the history in a nutshell: when the fifth century BC dawned, Sparta was clearly the dominant power among Greek city-states, by virtue of its formidable army, and Athens a relative minnow. In 490, the young Athenian democracy astonished the Greek world by defeating a Persian invasion, without Spartan help, at Marathon. A decade later, after a crash naval construction programme, Athenian ships showed their prowess at the battle of Salamis in warding off a second Persian invasion, this time in uneasy alliance with Sparta.

Over the next 50 years, relations between Athens and Sparta fluctuated between tense coexistence and outright conflict. Athens emerged as the hub of an alliance of more than 150 small islands and cities

Thucydides, the Athenian historian whose warning about demagogues taking control of democratic institutions is still relevant today

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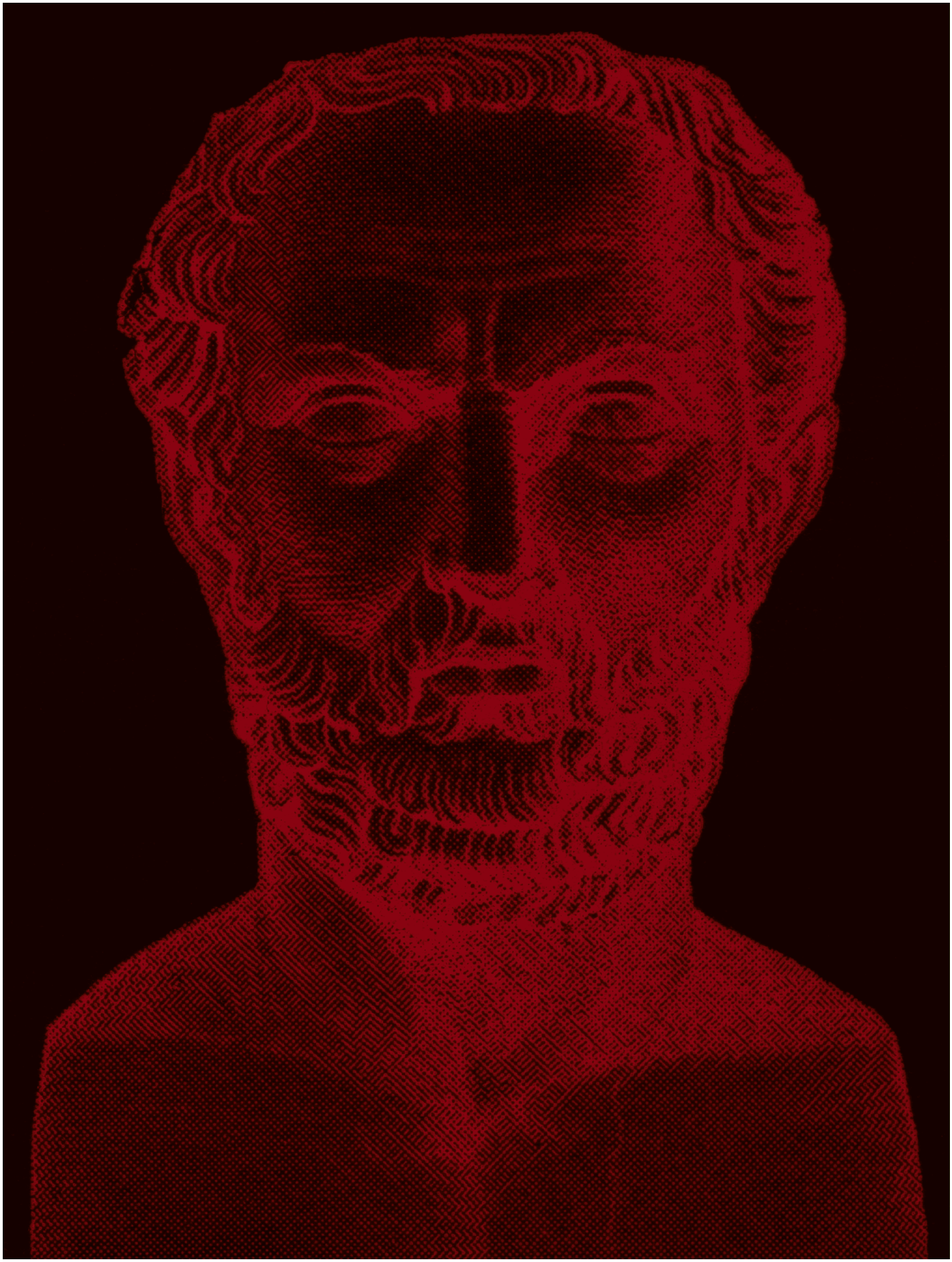

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Democracy awry: Athenian troops retreat from Syracuse in 415BC

which supposedly had the common purpose of deterring and punishing Persia but in fact served as an instrument of Athenian power.

It is easy to see why the masters of Cold-War America, like those of Victorian Britain, instinctively compared themselves with Athens, the jewel in the crown of classical Greece, and the source of its greatest cultural products, from drama to sculpture.

They saw in Athens a society that was intellectually curious, commercially vibrant and commendably confident of its right to project power over a wide swath of the known world. They liked the fact that Athens was law-governed and democratic in its domestic affairs but prepared to act ruthlessly in defence of its external interests.

Whatever the reality, the self-image of Athens as 'mother of the free' is brilliantly elaborated in the funeral oration which Thucydides ascribes to Pericles.

'Far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbour for doing what he likes … but all this ease in our private relations does not make us indifferent to the law as citizens.'

In contrast to its totalitarian enemies, Pericles says, Athens relished the exchange of goods, people and ideas with other parts of the world. Its brand of liberty was an inspiration to its admirers and a provocation to its foes. The speech writers of George W Bush were consciously or unconsciously invoking Thucydides when the president declared, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks, that America's enemies 'hate our freedoms'.

This subliminally Periclean rhetoric goes back to the early years of the Cold War, when American strategists were fascinated by the parallels between their own bipolar world and the stand-off between Athens, Sparta and their respective empires during the 50 years between Salamis and the

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inter-Greek war. George Marshall, the American secretary of state, said in 1947 that he doubted whether it was possible to think 'with full wisdom' about the world unless one made a decent study of Thucydides. Five years later, as Nato was taking shape, another American diplomat, Louis Halle, made the comparison more explicit: 'Our country finds herself, like Athens after the Peloponnesian wars, called on to assume the leadership of the free world …' Every well-educated listener knew what he meant, except that it would have made more sense to speak of Athens *before* those hostilities.

As a way of understanding any situation where two or more constellations of states are in chronic competition, the writing of Thucydides certainly offers some illumination. Still, the comparison between Athens and Nato is not entirely flattering to the latter. In some ways, the Athenian empire was more comparable to the Warsaw Pact, or even the Soviet Union, in the way it enforced discipline in its own ranks.

In 471, the island of Naxos tried seceding from the Athenian-led alliance and was duly besieged and stripped of its own defences. An apogee of Athenian ruthlessness came in 427 with the bloody suppression of an attempt by the leaders of Mytilene, capital of the powerful island of Lesbos, to switch sides.

One striking parallel with modern times lies in the way each of the Greek blocs propagated a political ideology which it tried to impose on other places whenever the opportunity arose. Athens spawned mini-democracies, Sparta mini-oligarchies. That could serve a convenient ideological purpose. When Athens imposed its power on distant places, it could claim to be doing so in the name of democracy.

Other useful lessons from Thucydides have to do with the micro-dynamics of competition between alliances. As in modern times, the two hegemons often faced petty local disputes between their respective proteges and they had to make calculations as to how aggressively to pursue their own camp's interest. As in modern times, they developed methods of carefully calibrated intervention.

Thus in 435BC, Athens found itself pondering how forcefully to help Corcyra – modern Corfu – in its uprising against its parent city Corinth, which was a linchpin of the Spartan-led alliance. One option was to use the 'overwhelming force' of the Athenian navy to support the island. Instead,

> 'Nato sees the relationship between strong defence and robust democracy as a virtuous circle'

the Athenians voted to send a limited force of ten triremes, with instructions only to intervene if the island looked in danger of being overwhelmed.

In modern terms, this is the equivalent of America offering 'non-lethal assistance' to Ukraine in the hope of deterring, but not enraging, the Russians.

Time and again, the strategists of Athens and Sparta faced local skirmishes which could easily develop into a generalized conflict. The modern question of how much help to give 'our son of a bitch' against 'their son of a bitch' was very familiar to ancient Greek decision-makers. They had to factor in that small allies could act mischievously to provoke and escalate a small-time squabble; and the possibility that any show of weakness, even in a petty quarrel in a remote pace, could give heart to the imperial rival. Clearly, those Athenian and Spartan decision makers didn't always make the right call, and this was sometimes because they grossly misread one another's intentions. But the sort of fine-grained calculus they found themselves making is instantly recognizable in the State Department or the Pentagon.

Nato's virtuous circle

Wading a little deeper into the weeds of Thucydidean thought, the Greek author sheds helpful light on one of the arguments that post-Cold War Nato has made as a way of justifying its continued relevance. This has to do with the relationship between military effectiveness and democracy. As today's Atlantic alliance presents itself, it is not merely a mutual defence pact, but a partnership of democratic states.

As it scrutinizes potential future members and partners, Nato encourages them not only to upgrade their arsenals but to burnish their democratic credentials by, for example, making sure that their militaries are subject to civilian control. Nato sees the relationship between strong defence and robust democracy as a virtuous circle.

Thucydides has a lot to say about this matter, and his arguments are so densely woven that his modern interpreters are divided over whether he was, ultimately, an admirer or a critic of democracy. In fact, he addresses the question from two diametrically opposing angles, both of which have contemporary resonance.

In describing the first ten years of the inter-Greek war (431-421BC), he presents Athens as a place where democracy and the city itself proved astonishingly resilient in the face of disasters, including a plague which claimed the lives of perhaps a third of the population. Athens was able to recover and fight Sparta to a draw, and its endurance apparently reflected what modern political scientists call the democratic advantage: the fact that open societies, even in adversity, can foster innovative thinking, meritocracy and risk-taking. To that extent, Nato's new philosophy gets a boost.

But in his incomplete decription of the final phase of the war, Thucydides paints a much darker picture. On one hand, the outer forms of Athenian democracy proved relatively robust, despite two violent but short-lived interruptions. But on the other, in an embittered, war-weary climate, impeccably democratic procedures could lead to disastrous decisions, egged on by demagogues. These included the despatch in 415BC of a huge expeditionary force from Athens to Sicily where it was virtually wiped out.

The details of the Greek historian's argument don't matter so much as the fact that he was wrestling in an intelligent way with some problems that are very familiar today. The historian's 'democratic advantage' argument – an insight developed by Stanford Professor Josiah Ober – is an attractive one for western policymakers but it is not obviously true. In an all-out conflict, totalitarian regimes and vertical power structures also have some advantages which western policymakers can easily underestimate. As for the warning that Thucydides gives us about demagogues taking control of democratic institutions, every 21st century reader will be able to suggest modern examples of populism and its abuses.

There arelots of reasons to go on reading Thucydides, and they are all more interesting than his rather clumsy pronouncement about the inevitability of war. Perhaps the real Thucydides trap lies in reducing his vast work to a single, heavy-handed line.

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