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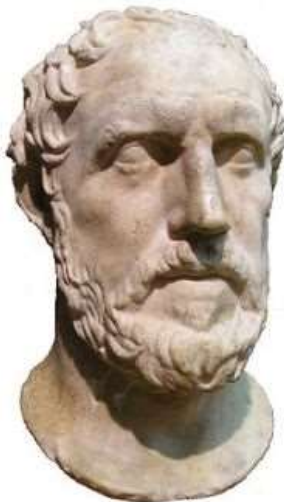
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What Thucydides teaches us

Can the concept of Thucydides' trap also be applied to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine? And what are the risks and consequences of what is happening in the East?



Thucydides

Many journalists pose as analysts, but often lack in strategic and historical knowledge. This leads them to judge events without conducting a correct strategic analysis.

Then there are many who fall in love with what they write, forgetting that analyzing must be a dry process and that they should aim to look at the facts in a strategically correct way. This often doesn't happen, to the point of misrepresenting reality and filling something that should be concise and clear with ideology and vagueness.

In the strategic field there are no absolute truths: if this were the case, everything would be predictable, but the presence of variables, that are not always evident, influence the results. It is therefore necessary to have the right degree of humility but, above all, to follow coherent logic.

In campo strategico non esistono verità assolute, se così fosse tutto sarebbe prevedibile, ma esistono variabili, non sempre evidenti, che condizionano i risultati.

That is why we have inherited Cicero's maxim about history as a teacher of life; in fact, it provides us with food for thought that helps us understand what, in most cases, seems obvious.

Many will have heard of the Thucydides trap. The term, coined by Graham Allison in 2012 at Harvard Kennedy's School for Science and International Affairs, has been used above all to study relations between USA and China.

I wondered if it was possible to speak of a Thucydides trap also for the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. The term represents a hypothesis that leads a rising power to oust the dominant power and the consequences deriving from the attempts of the former to prevent this from happening.

Anyone who wants to understand the why of what is under their eyes should look for the reasons that answer the question: "cui prodest?". Why Russia invaded Ukraine and why Ukraine strongly resisted the attack, exposing Russia military inefficiencies.

The first question can be answered: Ukraine has always represented a vital interest for the Russians. The current director of the CIA W. J. Burns knows it well: as US Ambassador in Moscow, he had reported to the Secretariat of State on how Ukraine was for Russia a red line not to be crossed.

Regarding the second point, we must honor the Ukrainian people who were able to resist the invasion

with great determination, demonstrating unexpected unity. Although independent for a few years, the national spirit seems to have been strong enough to unite the population and lead them to defend their freedom and decide their own future.

Going back to the Thucydides trap and to war, one should not speak of global domination as in the US-China case, but rather of a regional one. And which could be the rising state and which the ruling power? If we were limited to looking at just the two countries officially involved, there is no doubt that the rising state could be recognized in Ukraine and the decaying state in Russia.

But can Ukraine be considered a rising state, given the conditions of precariousness and poverty in which it is forced to live? Can Ukraine be seen as a regional power? I would rule out both possibilities and look at external actors in the conflict.

We all know that NATO and US in particular support Ukraine against Russia. We also know that tensions grew from 2008 until the outbreak of hostilities in February 2022.

If we look at USA and Europe as the main players, we should see them as decadent powers and Russia as an emerging power, and this seems rather difficult to prove. US interests are mainly concentrated on their rivalry with China, and Ukraine, while representing an important geopolitical opportunity, it hides pitfalls linked to a nuclear escalation that no one in Washington is willing to accept.

If, on the other hand, we wanted to consider Russia decadent and USA and Europe emerging, something would not add up, as all the variables confirm this hypothesis and a war would not have been necessary, Russia was already weakening by itself (just think of the negative demographic growth).

It should also be emphasized that, according to many commentators, what is happening on the eastern borders is against European interests. In fact, war contributes to increase insecurity by superimposing itself on the numerous conflicts of the recent past which have caused chaos and disorder on the southern and south-eastern European borders. It is therefore everyday evidence that Europe is surrounded by operating theatres in turmoil and has to deal with uncontrolled tensions of both land and sea nature. And this cannot be something that Europeans aspire to.

However, there is a state in Eastern Europe that could be evaluated as a possible protagonist of the Thucydides trap: Poland. In this case it would be the

regional power on the rise, while Russia would be clearly in decline. That assumption could stand. Poland, in fact, year after year - following its entry into Europe - has carved out a power that is absolutely superior to its geopolitical limits. Today, the country politicians make no secret of Polish interests. At Macron's words on European strategic autonomy, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki declared that old Europe has failed and that Poland is the leader of the new Europe. He then added, as reported by Limes, that: "The White Eagle Army will have to become the strongest in Europe, thanks above all to US support and help".

Behind this there could be other interests linked to the desire to present itself as a financial hub for the reconstruction of Ukraine, as indicated by Finance Minister Artur Sobon.

The Polish will could be moved by historical memory aimed at reconstructing an area of influence, similar to the one indicated in the figure, which extended almost to the Black Sea. An interest of this type could be justified by the Polish vulnerability due to its geographical position, placed at the center of Western dynamics of German origin and Eastern dynamics of Russian origin.



Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1618. Behind the current geopolitical situation. (from <https://www.artistiticesi-ineuropa.ch/ita/polonia-ita.html>)

Poland would have an interest in a confrontation with Russia in order to place itself at the head of a large area of influence that brings together both the states of the former Warsaw Pact and the former states belonging to the USSR. It has also been said that Polish ambitions are not hidden, but clearly highlighted by the political leadership.

What better opportunity than to use Ukraine as a means to achieve the ends indicated above?

After discussing and trying to apply the concepts related to the Thucydides trap, we found it interesting to look at the Peloponnesian Wars (especially the Athenian conquest of the island of Melos) as it helps us to better understand two important points of the war in Ukraine: the use of violence in defiance of the often avoidable individual suffering (and of the laws) and the concept of neutrality (a political will aimed at keeping the state «... out of any conflict, not adhering to military alliances and not hosting on the national territory foreign military bases.») Thucydides clarifies for us what the relationship between strong and weak and the value of neutrality can become.

The Athenian ambassadors arrive in Melos, an island in the Aegean, with an ultimatum with a modern flavor: "... either with Athens at war against Sparta or if, strong in their right, the Melians do not wish to accept, they will have slavery" (Tuc. V, 86).

Melo is a colony founded by the Spartans who, geographically placed between the two alliances, would like to be able to enjoy its right to choose a neutral path in order not to fight against one or the other. In summary, the Melians would like to remain neutral, but Athens is not of this opinion, because it is supported - in its will - by a superior military power.

The Athenians do not believe in the Meli (they believe that neutrality would have favored the Spartans) and affirm that the force of arms is the only weight in relations between states.



Melos island and Classical Greece
(from: On the Origins of War di Donald Kagan)

“On both sides, it is necessary to resolutely do what is within the possibilities of each one and which results from an exact assessment of reality. For you know as well as we do that, in human reasonings, justice is taken

into account when necessity impends with equal force on both sides; otherwise, the stronger exercise their power and the weaker adapt to it" (Tuc. V, 89).

The attempt of the Melians to remain neutral in the dispute between the two Greek city-states does not please the Athenians who refuse the request because:

"... your friendship harms us more than open hostility: that, in fact, in the eyes of our subjects, would be manifest proof of weakness, while your hatred would be testimony to our power" (Tuc. V, 95).

Thucydides tells us that in relations between states, without an adequate force, not only it is not possible to remain neutral, but one is doomed to slavery and lack of freedom.

Returning to Ukraine, it was preferred a Ukraine aligned to the West and not equidistant between Russia and NATO, as geography and history might have advised and as Zelensky himself had promised during the electoral campaign.

Ukraine is at the center of conflicting interests of major powers and, for internal reasons, is not in a position to maintain itself equidistant. The internal division between a pro-Western community close to Poland and a pro-Eastern community close to Russia has led to chaos, uncertainty, two regime changes (in 2004 and 2014) and poverty for the population.

The reference to the Peloponnesian War is intentional: during the Cold War period this conflict was the most studied, as it is one of the few cases in history in which a maritime and democratic power was defeated in the war against an autocratic continental power. During the Cold War, United States saw itself in Athens, NATO was the Delian League while, in the opposite sector, Sparta was the Soviet Union and its allies the Warsaw Pact.

The episode related to the inhabitants of Melos has been taken up by some commentators in order to demonstrate that Russia behaved like Athens, while the poor Melis are compared to the Ukrainians. This appears to be an incorrect and distorted assessment. In fact, history gives us events that everyone interprets as they deem most useful for their own purposes and in this case comparing an autocratic and closed state like Russia to an open and democratic one like Athens really seems like a stretch.

Ambassador Giuseppe Scognamiglio also thinks so: in an essay published in EastWest he re-proposed the rivalry between Athens and Sparta as a reference to today's rivalry between Russia and USA. For Scognamiglio, just as the Athenians "ate on Sparta's

plate", USA "were in a hurry to close the game and also to close it quickly. They hastened an operation to encircle the former Soviet empire through NATO expansion."

For him, US and Russia risk falling into the Thucydides trap, but if that were the case, US should be seen as the falling power and Russia on the rise. Difficult to think so, but if it weren't so, why support a war which, deprived of these logics, seems to be perfectly useless for USA, above all because Russia is historically a European and Western state (always included in the European concert until the First World War), culturally, but above all because it sacrificed the power of the USSR to become one?

The strategic sense of destroying this bond and driving the Russians into China's arms is not easy to understand.

To conclude this brief analysis, an attempt was made to investigate whether the abused hypothesis of the Thucydides trap was applicable to the war in Ukraine. The analysis made us think of three different solutions:

- a victim role on the Ukrainian side;
- the presence of a single regional actor that could play an external leading role in the Russian-Ukrainian dispute: Poland;
- the evident US strategic error of placing itself as Russia's adversary in a dispute of this type.

The episode of the Meli people was inserted because, with the outbreak of hostilities, it was often used inaccurately. It speaks of neutrality and the use of force. It is difficult for anyone who is in the middle of a dispute, which sees the presence of protagonists who can be evaluated as great powers, to maintain an acceptable form of neutrality, unless they have a military force that invites the strongest to give up paying a high price for conquest.

The push towards taking a position in favor of one or the other is historically evident. The experiences gained in recent years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union have shown that wars break out very frequently and that neither the law nor the United Nations have managed to prevent this from happening.

When the Athenian ambassadors speak of a force that subverts the right of the Meli not to enter the dispute between opposing sides, they are expressing the will to affirm the role of power played by Athens. Athens, multicultural democracy, thalassocracy, beacon of freedom and hegemonic leader, represents a power that becomes imperialist in foreign policy and uses violence because, as Donald Kagan says in his *Peloponnesian War*: "Athens could not allow that its desires and authority could be challenged by a small Chalcidian island".

Athens uses a heavy hand because "... the policy of the light hand towards the undisciplined allies had been abandoned in favor of that of terror" and this had happened because, and it is always Kagan who tells us, Athens was not willing to give up three "... imperative necessities: prestige, fear (military credibility) and utility (the economic aspect)".

This could represent a new Thucydides trap for USA, in a match unbalanced in their favor in economic terms, but equal in terms of nuclear power. The desire to represent a point of reference for the entire West, to maintain a cultural and political authority at all costs could lead to a negative influence on national interests linked to prestige, credibility and the economy.

If this were the case, the ongoing clash would make no strategic sense, but would demonstrate that elements of another type are guiding the steps. And this does not represent anything positive for all of us.

Roberto Domini

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