

# THE REQUIRED READING FOR A NEW TRANS-ATLANTIC GRAND STRATEGY: THUCYDIDES' TRAP OR TOCQUEVILLE'S TREATISE?

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## OF MYTHS AND STRATEGIES IN THE EMERGING WORLD ORDER

The greatest danger in constructing false enemy images based on anachronistic historical analogies is that of adopting the wrong strategy at the wrong time, at the wrong place, against the wrong opponent – and in the process downgrading or even ignoring the real critical threat lurking in the background (Kaplan, 2017: 34-36). Yet this is exactly the mistake perpetrated by those realist academic authors and policy-makers who have devised the mytho-historical story of Thucydides' Trap (Wolin, 2001: 511-12). This narrative draws on the growing rivalry and ensuing devastating wars between the ancient Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta and their respective allies, in the fifth century B.C.. It derives its name from Thucydides, a historian who lived in that period and recounted this conflict in his famous work entitled *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* (Kagan, 2005). Realist analysts deploy Thucydides' Trap as a template for the current Chinese-American relationship and as justification for its portrayal as the latest in a long line of rivalries between a declining hegemonic power and a rising opponent challenging the established world order (Mastro, 2019). The best-known exponent of this representation of the Thucydides Trap is U.S. foreign policy analyst and rational choice specialist Graham Allison, who formulated it as a perennial rule of geopolitical dynamics, exemplified by the classic Anglo-German rivalry

preceding the First World War:

“When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, alarm bells should sound danger ahead. China and the United States are currently on a collision course for war – unless both parties take the difficult and painful actions to avert it” (Allison, 2017a: vii)

Yet the United States of America of 2020 is not the United Kingdom of 1900 and, most importantly, today's People's Republic of China is neither Imperial Germany nor the U.S.A. of that same era (Kissinger, 2011: 514-530). In fact, contemporary China bears more similarities to the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century (Pei, 2016). The Russia of 1901 was a highly militarised multi-ethnic autocratic empire ruled by a Russian-chauvinist aristocratic oligarchy, with a human geography characterised by a growing number of rapidly industrializing modern urban islands immersed in a vast hinterland of technologically backward rural provinces. Most importantly, it was just a few years away from internal upheaval and eventual collapse as a result of unsustainable political stasis at home and a tragically misguided armed conflict abroad (Figes, 2017: 213-252). The Chinese Communist Party's leadership is well aware of this and bears no illusions about the actual resilience of the People's Republic of China's political system or its current capacity to take on the might of the United States in a direct military confrontation (McGregor, 2010). This is why the book that for

some years now has become essential reading among top Chinese Communist Party members is not Thucydides' *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, but rather Alexis de Tocqueville's much more relevant *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Huang, 2013). This article will first investigate why Tocqueville's work has recently become so popular with Beijing's ruling political elite, then explain why Thucydides' narrative continues to inform grand strategists' thinking across the Trans-Atlantic Community, and finally conclude by highlighting the real lessons leaders in Washington D.C., Brussels and Beijing would be well advised to draw out from these two authors' intersecting historical insights.

## DECODING TOCQUEVILLE'S TIMELY TREATISE

French author and politician Alexis de Tocqueville had famously foretold as a young man, in his celebrated *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, that "two great nations [...] have suddenly placed themselves in the front rank among the nations" of the world – America, embodying Freedom and Russia, embodying Servitude and that each of them "seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe" (Tocqueville, 1990: 412-13). Two decades later, near the end of his life, after retiring from the political scene following the 2 December 1851 coup that led to the instauration of the Second French Empire by Napoleon III, Tocqueville revisited this theme of a dialectical clash between Freedom and Servitude from a rather different perspective. He cogently reflected on the failures of the French *Ancien Régime* and the forces leading to the revolutionary upheaval of 1789 that resulted in catastrophic consequences for its entire

ruling aristocracy and for its centralised, hierarchical, corrupt and ineffective monarchy (Tocqueville, 1983). Sheldon Wolin shows, in his major work on *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, how the Frenchman again observed presciently – for both his era and ours – in his "late masterpiece" that "under despotism where 'men's imagination' is preoccupied with money rather than public affairs, 'men tremble at the very idea of revolutions'" (Wolin, 2001: 4, 529). Wolin thus argues that Tocqueville hereby introduced the emancipatory concept of civic "resistance" to an authoritarian-driven "scramble for wealth" that "drains the citizenry of all common passion, all mutual need, all necessity of acting in concert, all occasion for common action; it walls them, so to speak, into private life" (Wolin, 2001: 530).

Wolin proceeds to highlight the little-known fact that Tocqueville also provided despotic regimes with the conceptual tools enabling them to avoid or at least disarm the explosive transformative power of revolutionary movements by explaining that there were two "ideological elements still capable of holding class-ridden societies together [...] the myths of religion and nationalism" (Wolin, 2001: 534). Tocqueville thus clearly gave to understand despots and revolutionaries alike that in the emerging modernising world, the coveted prize for all those aiming to wield sovereign power over fragmented societies displaying high levels of socio-economic divisions and inequalities was "the immense central power" of the bureaucratic-administrative state; but that this prize could be acquired and held onto only by establishing and maintaining an ideological monopoly over the unifying and mobilizing cultural myths embodied in the notions of Faith and Fatherland (Wolin, 2001: 535). He spelled out his deepest insight – and greatest fear – in his tragic forecast that democratic governments,

like that of the United States, and despotic ones, like that of Second Empire France (1852-1870), were both experiencing, as they sought to retain control of the ever-expanding might of the modern state's bureaucratic-administrative apparatus, mirror-image political processes inexorably moving, from opposite directions, towards the same destination – an end-point that would prove to be fatal to both individual and civic freedoms. These processes, driven by similar dialectical dynamics between the unifying force of cultural myths and the legitimating power of popular mass movements, forced democratic governments to increasingly appeal to religion and nationalism and despotic regimes to periodically deploy procedurally democratic mass plebiscites. The ultimate outcome for both would be “the product of a new time” consisting in different emanations of the same type of rule, unique to modernity – that of an all-powerful central state deployed in service of the mythical notions of Faith and Fatherland by an ideology of “democratic despotism”, which “in Tocqueville’s formulation signifies simultaneously the conquest of democracy and the mimicry of it” (Wolin, 2001: 569).

The central thesis underlying Wolin’s entire study on Tocqueville therefore holds that the celebrated French author outlined the deep dialectical cleavages between the notions of civil society and market economy, public duty and private interest, liberty and equality, democracy and despotism, resistance and repression, revolution and archaism, Faith and Fatherland to explain their complex dynamic interplay in any organised attempt to capture or retain a modern polity’s main levers of power ensconced in the institutional structures of the centralised state (Wolin, 2001 : 552-66). In doing so,

Tocqueville provided his readers with a Cassandra-like visionary forecast of how European and global history would continue to dramatically oscillate between the opposite poles of Freedom and Servitude, both domestically, within states, and internationally, across states, for the foreseeable future – and eventually move beyond them with the ultimate rise of various forms of democratic despotism vehiculating different articulations of the mythological construct of sovereignty (Tocqueville, 2009). Whereas in democratic polities democratic despotism would emerge primarily from the destruction of public civic diversity in the name of liberal individual equality within the state so as to achieve a mythical individualistic sovereignty, in despotic ones it would result mainly from the repression of private individual differences for the sake of equal collective liberty between states in order to bring about an equally mythical collectivist sovereignty (Wolin, 2001: 568-72).

The deeply-rooted insecurities and self-doubts of the Communist China regime about its long-term viability outlined previously are thus stoked by Russia’s tragic historical precedent as well as by Tocqueville’s insightful analysis of late eighteenth century pre-revolutionary France (Shirk, 2007). These insecurities and doubts are the main causes of the Chinese leaders’ constant fear of an imminent and irreversible loss of control over a growing number of highly-visible critical Chinese intellectuals active at home and abroad, mirroring the final stage of the collapse of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev’s rule, from 1989 to 1991 (Nakazawa, 2020). They fuel the Chinese authorities’ growing anxiety over loyalty to the Chinese state and the ruling Party of increasingly restless and discontented distinct cultural communities across the vast multi-ethnic Chinese Empire (Terrill, 2003). They explain the Chinese Communist Party’s renewed

strict authoritarian and harshly repressive policies at home over the past decade, justified by alleged wars against internal terrorism and corruption (Yu and Graham-Harrison, 2020; Shepherd, 2019). They also undergird its refusal to entertain even the most reasonable demands for autonomy from the embattled people of Hong Kong, desperately rising up to defend their rights, freedoms and rule of law guaranteed to be respected at least until 2047 by the *One Country, Two Systems* principle enshrined in the 1985 *Sino-British Joint Declaration* (Lian, 2020; Ramzy, 2019). Finally, they are instrumental in triggering the Chinese government's repeated military threats against any attempt by Taiwan to assert any measure of independence as a sovereign nation, in violation of the Chinese Communist Party's unilateral *One China* doctrine (Baker, 2020; Detsch, 2020).

Above all, the Chinese political elite's accurate perception of its own vulnerability as China's ruling oligarchy is the primary underlying reason of the Chinese leadership's deployment of a virulent hyper-nationalist stance imbued with Chinese Communist characteristics, not only within its borders but especially in the international arena (Ward, 2019). This is evidenced by China's vast military build-up, its unjustifiable territorial ambitions in the South China Sea and its expansionist policies even further afield, across the Eurasian landmass and surrounding oceans – as exemplified by President Xi Jin Ping's flag-bearer strategy of *One Belt, One Road* (Chatzky and McBRide, 2020). In short, it is first and foremost their fear of socio-economic paralysis and political-institutional collapse rather than their desire of global hegemony that is pushing China's leaders to foolishly practice this *fuite en avant* and to adopt the radical nationalist rhetoric, repressive

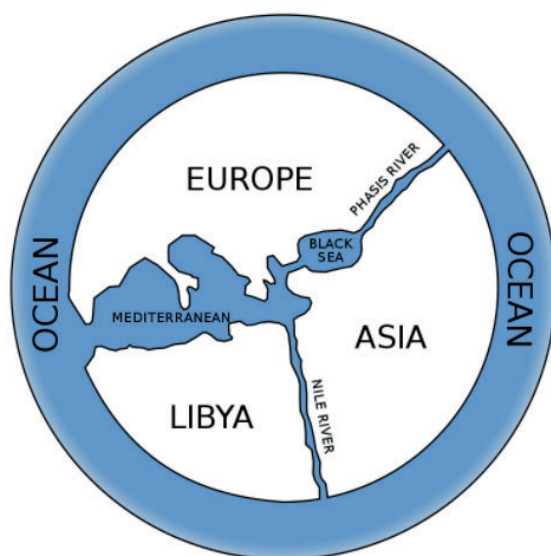
authoritarian policies, and aggressively expansionist aims they are so flagrantly exhibiting today (London, 2020). Their paranoid quest for internal secrecy has resulted in an outright refusal to interact and cooperate in an open, honest, transparent and responsible manner with the outside world – and in particular with the Trans-Atlantic Community (Ching, 2020). It also constitutes one of the main causes of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis that has upended the world's political, economic and social life-cycles over the past six months and has directly led to untold hardship, suffering and death for millions and millions of members of the global civil society (Shih, 2020). Predicting, like Allison and the realist school of international relations, an almost inevitable military confrontation between China and the U.S.A. in the short-to-medium term only serves to fuel the Chinese rulers' internal insecurities and external paranoia and could contribute to precipitating a global military conflict between the world's two great powers - a clash that would necessarily endanger the very future of the international community as a whole (Lee, 2011).

### DISCOVERING THE REAL THUCYDIDES' TRAP

Drawing and applying the wrong lessons from Thucydides' analysis of the Peloponnesian wars about the nature of the threats the Trans-Atlantic Community faces today thus carries with it the significant risk of transforming Allison's qualified prediction that China and the U.S.A. "are currently on a collision course for war" into a virtually self-fulfilling prophecy – whilst at the same time missing the real warning the old Greek historian embedded within his narrative for future generations (Allison, 2017b). It is therefore critical to distinguish realist analysts' erroneous portrayal of the Thucydides' Trap as a timeless warning about the high likelihood of

conflict between hegemonic and rising powers, from the real trap that led to Athens' defeat and downfall – a mostly overlooked story that actually constitutes Thucydides' true message to his discerning readers across the ages and that bears retelling here (Bagby, 1994).

Figure 1: Circular map of Anaximander (c. 610-546 BC) displaying the Greek world centred on the Aegean sea and comprised between the pillars of Hercules and the river Phasis.



The Mediterranean city-states system of ancient Greece is often portrayed by realists as a useful foil for our contemporary global community of nation-states (Monten, 2006). They superficially compare the military stand-off between the Athenian and Spartan coalitions to which this evolving system of politics eventually led and the ensuing Peloponnesian wars spanning three decades with the increasingly tense current relations between a hegemonic United States and the rising power and ambitions of the People's Republic of China. They also use it as a template for the Anglo-Spanish rivalry of the sixteenth century, the Anglo-French conflicts spanning the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Anglo-German power

struggle between 1890 and 1945, as well as the Cold War pitting the U.S.A. against the U.S.S.R. during the second half of the twentieth century (Kennedy, 1988). In doing so, realists boldly claim that both the ancient regional Greek city-states system and our modern international community of sovereign nation-states can best be understood as constituting two similar historic emanations of a timeless and universal paradigm of an anarchic international socio-political environment where individual states constitute the basic units of analysis of their respective orders (Walker, 1993; Kuhn, 1970). According to them, these units always seek security, survival, and power maximization based on a rational-choice theory unfolding within primarily zero-sum game action frameworks, where strong states inevitably impose their will on the weak and accordingly shape the rules of the entire system in their favour (Gray, 1999: 55; Waltz, 2001).

The realists' misrepresentation of the perennial validity of these alleged principles of power politics governing relations between asymmetric adversaries reaches its paroxysm with their misreading of a key passage in Thucydides' book detailing a critical episode of the Peloponnesian wars, famously known today as the Melian Dialogue (Taylor, 2018). This passage, recounting the events leading to Athens' destruction in 416 B.C. of the small island of Melos, a minor Spartan ally, is today mythically embedded at the conceptual core of the realist doctrine, which its proponents attempt to substantiate by quoting what has perhaps become the most famous passage of Thucydides' entire work – namely the Athenians' reply to the Melians' plea for justice, conceived as their city's right to preserve its autonomy and honour (Kagan 2005, 247-48):

“You understand as well as we do that in the human sphere judgements about justice are relevant only between those with an equal power to enforce it, and that the possibilities are defined by what the strong do and the weak accept” (Thucydides, 2013: V-89: 380).

In doing so, realists conveniently fail to specify that Thucydides also states that the key drivers of the Peloponnesian wars were the principles of honour, fear, and self-interest characterising the decisions and actions of all Greek city-states, Athens and Sparta included. To focus primarily on the latter two principles and only pay lip-service to the first one is to greatly misunderstand both the constitutional structure and the moral ethos of ancient Greece. Christian Reus-Smit argues, in his seminal work entitled *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations*, that the concept of honour constituted the core of the three normative components of this complex society – namely, its defining belief about the moral purpose of the state, its dominant organizing principle of sovereignty, and its foundational systemic norm of procedural justice (Reus-Smit, 1999: 6). He goes on to demonstrate that each of these three normative components of the ancient Greek system of polities is radically different from those of the realist doctrine developed in the second half of the twentieth century for our international system of sovereign nation-states. Reus-Smit argues that the moral purpose of the Greek *polis* was to develop and maintain a legitimate moral authority based on principles of deliberation and persuasion, its organising principle of sovereignty was defined by the acceptance of conflict resolution by means of third-party arbitration, and its norm of procedural justice

required its members to strictly follow the rules and values of this system in their interactions with each other so as to maintain both legitimacy and moral authority at home and abroad (Reus-Smit, 1999: 62). These three normative principles were encapsulated in the concept of honour, to which Thucydides gives precedence over both fear and self-interest in his narrative of the Peloponnesian wars and which the modern doctrine of realism cannot adequately explain or account for.

Above all, realists profoundly misread the very purpose pursued by Thucydides in recounting the Melian dialogue, as well as the lesson this tragic event is supposed to teach us today. Far from setting out the generally accepted rules and standards of rational behaviour and power maximization of the ancient Greek city-states, the Melian dialogue represents a vivid illustration of the decline of moral authority of Athens, whose wanton obliteration of Melos was harshly judged by friend and foe alike. As ancient Greek tragedian Euripides dramatically implies in his remarkably current play, *Trojan Women*, Athens' destruction of this city, among a number of other city-states, resulted practically in the gradual collapse of its legitimacy as the undisputed leader of the Delian League – the once-dominant maritime coalition it had formed and led for almost three-quarters of a century, between 478 B.C. and 404 B.C. – and justified ethically its ultimate defeat at the hands of Sparta and its allies (Tritle, 2010: 139). For the Greek historian, the Peloponnesian wars as a whole therefore illustrate the decline and fall of the ancient Greek city-states system, not its apogee. The consequences of these wars for all Greek city-states were best summed up in the evaluation of this historical period by Justin, a Roman writer who likely lived in the second century A.D.:

“The states of Greece, which each had wished to rule alone, all squandered sovereignty. Indeed, hastening without moderation to destroy one another in mutual ruin, they did not realize, until they were all crushed, that every one of them lost in the end” (Buckler, 2003: 527).

### THUCYDIDES' AND TOCQUEVILLE'S CAUTIONARY TALES FOR THE TRANS-ATLANTIC COMMUNITY

Thus, if Thucydides actually meant to teach future generations a lesson with his narrative of Athens' fateful entanglement in a three-decades-long armed struggle with Sparta, the true morale of his history of the Peloponnesian wars surely is that this great city's eventual decline was primarily due to its leaders' misguided and short-sighted policies, resulting in the gradual abandonment of the legitimate moral authority of its internal democratic system of government, as well as in the eventual collapse of the Delian League – the institutional cornerstone of its external relations (Reus-Smit, 1999: 56-62). The Athenian leaders' catastrophic inability to develop over time a viable grand strategy – capable of achieving and sustaining this critical twin existential objective of legitimate and effective governance both internally within their democratic *polis*, and externally across their voluntary alliance network, perhaps most tragically exemplified by the well-documented life and sudden death in the middle of a plague epidemic of Athens' great strategist, Pericles (c. 495-429 B.C.) – resulted in their morally indefensible and militarily ineffective deployment of external military aggression to mask the creeping decay of their entire system of governance (Kagan, 1991: 228-45). Wolin argues that Thucydides' rendition of this fatal Athenian strategic blunder, constituting in effect

the real Thucydides' Trap, remarkably shares with Tocqueville's study of France's *Ancien Régime* and of the Great Revolution that dismantled it a similar mytho-historical methodological approach “examining the forms of greatness and exposing their tragic character [...] where excess of virtue and vice, power and weakness rather than moderation, prevails” (Wolin, 2001: 509). It is this dilemma, highlighted by both Thucydides and Tocqueville, that our own strategic thinkers must urgently endeavour to address today and which they must now try to devise a realistic, comprehensive and sustainable solution for – rather than vainly continue to concoct outdated and ineffective realist solutions for manufactured geo-strategic crises (Palmer, 2020).

The United States of America and its allies in Europe and across the world therefore commit a strategic error of historic proportions by concentrating their economic, diplomatic, intelligence, and military resources against a rising China allegedly bidding for global hegemony (Kissinger, 2011: 522-530; Rettman, 2020). Meanwhile they fail to seriously focus on the real and imminent threat to the very survival of the Trans-Atlantic Community and to the values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law it has valiantly striven to uphold for over three-quarters of a century (Sayle, 2019). This paramount threat consists in their own leaders' dramatic failure to reform both their domestic political systems and the supranational governance structures of the Trans-Atlantic Community, resulting in a glaring inability to meet the pressingly insistent demands for participation, prosperity, pluralism and peace of their increasingly disillusioned and angry citizens (Paris, 2020; Cave, Albeck-Ripka and Magra, 2020).

By becoming ensnared in this actual Thucydides Trap due to their mirror-image failures to creatively chart a strategically sustainable course forward at a critical moment of structural bifurcation in the history of the twenty-first century, the entrenched political elites governing China, the U.S.A. and the European Union show that they have much more in common than their current policy-makers, academic strategic thinkers and media opinion-shapers care to imagine or are willing to concede, as they all head, via entirely different paths, towards the same endpoint already forecast by Alexis de Tocqueville almost two centuries ago – namely, that of democratic despotism (Wallerstein, 1995: 248-51; Zakaria 2003). To avoid this outcome, the Washington and Brussels governing elites would therefore do well to urgently follow their Beijing counterparts' example in two critical respects, and to adopt an entirely different course of action in another. First, they should start soon – before it's too late! – to read up on Tocqueville's insightful and relevant history of the events leading up to the 1789 French Revolution, that dramatically altered the future course of France, of Europe and of the entire world and laid the foundations of the international order we still live in today. Second, they should cease to stubbornly misrepresent in a culturally deterministic and historically anachronistic manner the core message of Thucydides' classic narrative of an ancient war fought twenty-five centuries ago by long-vanished Greek city-states dwelling "like ants or frogs about a [Mediterranean] pond" (Reus-Smit, 2019; Welch, 2003). Finally, unlike China's current rulers, who ruthlessly enforce repressive principles of democratic despotism deeply embedded in aggressive hyper-nationalist rhetoric, responsible politicians in Europe and North

America should heed their own citizens' urgent demands for transformative systemic institutional renewal both within and across their nation-states and thus facilitate the emergence throughout the Trans-Atlantic Community of a democratic, accountable, effective and legitimate system of multi-level governance capable of rising up both morally and practically to the critical challenges we face in the 21st century as a global civil society.

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