

Rethink of the Realist Tradition - the “Thucydides Trap” Argument

March 2020

Thucydides, who lived in ancient Greece around 2500 years ago, is the author of *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which recorded the conflicts between two Greek city-states Sparta and Athens. Thucydides’s work set the foundation of the realist tradition.

It is assumed that the most well-known argument in Thucydides’s masterpiece should be that the root cause of the great conflict between Athens and Sparta was the rising of Athens and the fear this caused in Sparta.

In other words, Athens and Sparta were caught in a security dilemma or security trap, which, as many have thought, made the war inevitable. Some also name the security trap as “Thucydides Trap”.

Then to argue for the inevitability of the war between the two Greek city-states, some observers have intended to use a scenario of “Prisoner’s Dilemma” to depict the security dilemma faced by the two Greek powers.

Here is a possible scenario of “Prisoner’s Dilemma” - two criminal suspects jointly committed a crime, were arrested and put into two different cells of the same prison by the police. To make a fair charge, the police need to get enough information from them. The amount of information uncovered would directly lead to three possible results: If the two suspects all stay in silence, both of them would possibly get a lighter punishment; if one of them stays in silence while the other uncovers the criminal information, the one keeping in silence would be more heavily charged; if both of them choose to uncover their deeds, they would get the same degree of punishment. What is most likely to happen, under the pre-condition that there is no chance of communication between the two suspects, should be that both of them would attempt to cheat on the other in order to get a lighter punishment. Therefore, the two prisoners finally are trapped in a security dilemma, and this kind of dilemma cannot be overcome.

By connecting the scenario of “Prisoner’s Dilemma” to the security situation faced by two states, an ultimate conflict between two states, as many may have maintained, would be inevitable.

The purpose of this analysis is to rethink of the “Thucydides Trap” argument by assessing whether it is appropriate to put an analogy between two states and two prisoners in terms of the dilemma faced by the two different groups; then it will try to understand the “Thucydides Trap” argument in today’s world to examine whether and how it could be

possible for state actors to surpass it.

To answer the above questions well, this piece assumes that the starting point is to re-check briefly of what had happened 2500 years ago during the Peloponnesian War among the Greek city-states, through which, to see whether there could be any limits and deflections in Thucydides's assessment on the root cause of war.

The Issue of "Fear" & the Root Cause of War

Thucydides argued that the rising of Athens and the fear it caused in Sparta made the conflict between them inevitable. This assessment would respectably propose a view that if there was a fear within Sparta by then, the same fear also existed inside Athens, as both powers wanted to maintain a balance of power among the Greek city-states, and both were afraid of losing that balance. A typical example to show how Athens was fearful of losing the balance was of its final decision to join the Corcyra's side against Corinth.¹ From Athens's perspective, if it failed to check Corinth and let the Corinthians take over Corcyra's navy, the balance of power could risk turning into a situation against the Athenian power itself.²

Besides that, according to Donald Kagan's argument cited from Nye's book *Understanding International Conflicts*, Sparta was more fearful of war and of a slave revolt than of the growing Athenian power, as 90% of Sparta's population were slaves, and a revolt within Sparta had recently taken place in the year of 464 B.C.³

Thus, Thucydides's argument on the root cause of war didn't seem to be adequate. There should be more than just fear behind the conflicts between Athens and Sparta.

To better understand the cause of the Peloponnesian War, a list of historical events, which had briefly recorded the rising and breaking down of Athens, are worth noticing here.⁴

* After around half a century of war between Greece and Persia, in 449 B.C., Athens and Sparta and other Greek city-states jointly defeated the Persian power. Then Athens had enjoyed a long period of relatively peaceful time for developing itself; with the growing strength of it, Athens and a number of Greek city-states formed the Delian League; around the same period, Sparta and other series of city-states surrounding Sparta established a defensive alliance;

* In the year of 461 B. C., the first Peloponnesian War was erupted, caused mainly by the growing tension between Athens and other city-states within the Delian League, as Athens had pressed them to pay taxes in exchange for receiving Athens's protection;

* In 445 B.C., the war between Athens and others was ended and followed with a 30-year truce;

* In 431 B.C., Athens ignored Sparta's warning and broke the truce made previously, then the second Peloponnesian War was broken out;

* In 421 B.C., another truce was signed between Athens and Sparta;

* In 413 B.C., Athens took its most serious adventure to attack Sicily, which had close linkages with Sparta; a conflict was unleashed between Athens and Sparta, and it was ended with a huge defeat of Athens; after that Athens had never re-gained its strength;

* After the defeat of Athens in 413 B.C., other series of conflicts had been followed between Sparta and Athens; Athens had suffered more defeats;

* In 404 B.C., Athens was forced by Sparta to sue for peace; the Athenian power was broken down.

From the above list of reviews, it is not difficult to see that the cause of war was more of a subjective matter than of an objective issue. After having enjoyed a certain period of peaceful growth, Athens became the most powerful empire among the Greek city-states. It was not forced by others to go to war. Obviously most of the conflicts had been initially launched by Athens, and for a number of occasions, it had broken the truce signed with other city-states.

Nye well assessed the cause of war between Sparta and Athens from three layers – the precipitating cause, the domestic situation and policies taken, and the external structure. While agreeing with some of his points, this analytical piece would intend to understand this issue from the subjective and objective perspectives, and also like to assume an alternative view that the subjective choice made by Athens had played a key role, compared to other number of factors including the domestic situation and the external environment, in leading to the eruption of war. In other words, the war, in the case between Sparta and Athens, was decided more by internal subjective choice than by external objective situation.

The subjectivity of the war firstly lied in the aggressive and imperial ambition of the Athenian empire as well as in the pride of the Athenians in their social system, which made Athens not fearful of taking adventures toward war. They believed that they were bound to prevail in the conflict with Spartans. As Nye wrote, “The Athenian mood was one of imperial greatness, with pride and patriotism about their city and their social system, and optimism about how they would prevail in the war.”⁵

Secondly, the subjective nature of the conflict was also contributed by the leadership of Athens. Pericles, the Athenian emperor, favoured a war, and was mostly ready to take risks for war, as he believed that the war with Sparta was inevitable.

Thirdly, the subjectivity of the war can be illustrated by the fact that, even by the time when the external situation wasn't in Athens's advantage, it still didn't stop it taking further adventures against others. For instance, before the outbreak of the second Peloponnesian War, the balance of power structure among the Greek city-states seemed to have gradually turned into a challenging situation against Athens, mostly resulted by Athens's improper handling of its relations with other smaller city-states. They got irritated by Athens's aggressive policies, and some of them including Megara and Potidaea joined the Spartans' side after the war erupted. Unfortunately, even when the external situation wasn't in favour of Athens, instead of adjusting its position, it decided to take adventures.

Athens could have more choices apart from having gone to war. Nevertheless, it still had decided to take the most dangerous approach on a number of occasions. Therefore, the war was more of a matter subjectively chosen by Athens, than of an objective matter, under which, Athens was forced by the external balance of power structure to go to war.

There was a claim made by the Athenians to the Melians amid the Peloponnesian War that “the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept,”⁶ which could probably have told the whole story behind the root cause of the Peloponnesian War.

“Prisoner’s Dilemma”, Two Prisoners, and Two States

Some especially those holding a realist proposition may tend to use the security dilemma faced by two prisoners to depict the difficult situation encountered by two states. This assessment would assume that this kind of analogy could be misleading to statesmen and policy-makers, and it is not appropriate to put such an analogy between the two groups given the different nature and characteristics between state actors and individuals.

In accordance with the “Prisoner’s Dilemma” logic, the situation faced by two prisoners would only lead to a deadlock, and there would be no further way out for them. If statesmen are misguided by this type of logic, they would tend to believe in the inevitability of a conflict, and then a real war, as what had happened in history on a number of occasions, would most likely come to them. Once decision-makers believe in the inevitability of war, very likely they would give up their efforts to seek other means to solve the problem, and then the only major concern left to them should be the preparedness for war as well as the timing of war.

In reality, the dilemma faced by two prisoners, in contrast to the situation encountered by two states, should be much more difficult for the prisoners to overcome, if this issue can be analysed from a relative perspective.

The case for two individual prisoners is of a matter relating to domestic politics, while the relationship between two states is of an issue dealt with by international politics. In the domain of domestic politics, there is the law and government above the individuals, while in the arena of international politics, the international system is anarchy, there is no authoritarian government above the states. The difference remained between domestic politics and international politics in terms of their functions would directly lead to different results when thinking of the security dilemma faced by states and by individuals.

For the two individuals, they are certainly not allowed to challenge the law to negotiate with the police about the nature of the crime or about how many years they could possibly be staying in prison. These issues should be decided by the law. Besides that, there is a precondition that it is impossible for the two prisoners to communicate with each other in any means. Under these circumstances, the choices faced by them could include three possibilities: telling the truth to the police, lying, or keeping silent - telling the truth here also means prisoners’ attempt to cheat on each other, since both of them generally

don't trust that the other would stay in silence. Lying most likely cannot work, as it is impossible for the two prisoners, without any communication, to lie the same to the police. Staying silent is also unlikely, as already pointed, the two prisoners have basically no trust to each other. Thus, the only choice left for them is to tell the truth.

In the case of a security dilemma encountered by two states, international anarchy could be an important factor for having affected problem-solving among states, since under the anarchic system, states may perceive each other more from pessimistic perspectives and tend to be suspicious of others' intentions, as realists generally believed.

However, anarchy doesn't mean completely fragmentation and disorder. At both regional and international levels, besides states, there are international law, norms, rules and mechanisms, as well as a variety of transnational organizations, groups, and agencies having been joining in the process of improving the international system. With the growing role of this range of actors in regional and international affairs, the negative effects of anarchy have been relatively reduced. The anarchic international system with the participation of non-states actors has provided states with alternative channels or platforms to handle the security dilemmas met by them.

Once two states are trapped in a security dilemma, they should have more choices than prisoners. They should have more freedoms and leeway to help get them out of the deadlock. For instance, one of the two states could choose to directly approach the other one through diplomatic or non-diplomatic channels; or they could get a third party involved to play a mediating role. Over all, the most noticeable advantage for states, in contrast to prisoners, in facing a security trap is that states can communicate with each other, and have the rights and capacity to negotiate in any ways as far as they would like to make an effort to do so.

In addition, individuals compared to states are in much more vulnerable positions in both physical and mental terms. For example, if one of the two states cheated on the other, another one could in response deploy a number of means – retaliating by playing “tit for tat” games, suing the issue to international law, getting a third party to mediate, or applying any other political and economic means. Apart from that, states can afford to make small mistakes in line with their capabilities. As far as they are able to correct the mistakes and shift their actions and policies to the right direction as quickly as they can, more severe consequences can be avoided, and resilience can be restored after all. However, the timing and chances for making further mistakes by prisoners, once they are taken into prison, should be very limited, unless they would want to bear more severe punishments.

Therefore, the security dilemma for two prisoners should be something which is very hard for them to surpass, while the security dilemma for two states should be an issue that can be handled and overcome by state actors. It is not appropriate to take the security dilemma encountered by states and by prisoners to a parallel position to understand. Statesmen and policy-makers should avoid being misled by the “Prisoner's Dilemma” logic.

Understanding the “Thucydides Trap” Argument in the New Era

This session is to examine how states could overcome the “Thucydides Trap” in today’s world. This can be assessed from both the objective and subjective perspectives.

From the objective perspective, the world today is not the one that Thucydides had ever lived. When Thucydides wrote *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the author’s thinking was constrained by history, geography, and technology, as well as by the political, economic, and social progresses made by humans over the past centuries more broadly. Besides that, in modern times, numerous changes and advancement in a wide variety of sectors have occurred, and they have set the preconditions to make states feel more difficult to go to war.

People living in Thucydides’s days and even in the recent past centuries were no need to deal with non-security challenges such as climate change, natural disaster, pollution and so on, as faced by humans living in today’s world. People and the societies by then were separated by borders and had limited interactions. There were no issues related to terrorism, drug trafficking, and other kind of trans-border crimes.

However, starting from the second half of last century, with the development of information technology, as well as with the invention of other series of advanced technologies in various industries, the world has gradually turned into a more globalized society. People and countries have never been as closely connected as they are today.

Nuclear weapons, international rules, norms, and mechanisms, the established regional and international organizations and institutions, and the growing participation of non-state actors in international affairs have played tremendous parts in restraining states from taking extreme actions under difficult situations.

From the subjective perspective, the issue of whether being able to avoid or overcome the security trap very much depends on the subjective thinking of and the actions taken by decision-makers. The most crucial issue for them is to avoid being further misguided by the “Prisoner’s Dilemma” logic, as already suggested in the previous session of this analysis.

In retrospect of what had happened in history, in most cases wars had been subjectively chosen by states, rather than the other way around that states had been chosen by wars. There might be exceptional cases beyond such claim – A state could be forced into war. It decides to get into war because of being attacked in the first place, and going to war is acted as a matter of self-defence. If this is the case, the state is chosen by war.

The final point this analysis would like to make is that in case two states fail to surpass a security dilemma and a war between them is unleashed, states should avoid once again being dragged into the same logic by linking the war with the “Thucydides Trap” argument. There is a necessity for them to see that going to war is indicative of states having subjectively given up other means to help get themselves out of the security dilemma. After all, it is still of a subjective and epistemological issue for policy-makers.

Conclusion

The first session of this piece, after having assessed the “Thucydides Trap” argument, reached a point that the security trap argument was inadequate in interpreting the root cause of war between Sparta and Athens, as it had obviously overestimated the role of the objective matter – the rising of Athens and the fear it caused in Sparta – in deciding the outbreak of the war, while having underestimated Athens’s subjective choice in sparking the conflict. The second session on the “Prisoner’s Dilemma” logic made a point that the security dilemma encountered by state actors and by prisoners cannot be put into a parallel position to understand, given the different nature and severity of the security situation faced by the two groups. Then a concluding point made by the second session was that the security trap can be very hard for prisoners to overcome, yet it could be surpassed by states. The final session re-affirmed the points made by the previous two sessions, as well as analysed how the series of objective and subjective factors in today’s world have actually set higher preconditions for preventing states from going to extreme.

The advancement of military technologies decides that the nature of wars in today’s world is much more catastrophic than that in the previous centuries. Even a small scale conflict between two states could generate a disastrous impact on a great number of people and the societies they live. The issues related to poverty, refugee crisis, disease transmission, and crimes, as well as other range of social, economic, and political problems in some countries nowadays often cannot be separated from various small conflicts among relevant states. Thus, how to help state actors, in particular the great powers, overcome the possible security traps in the future should be a crucial subject for statesmen, intellectuals, and practitioners to study.

Notes

1. Corcyra and Corinth were city-states in ancient Greece.
2. See Nye Joseph (2000). *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History* (Third Edition), P13, LONGMAN: An imprint of Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
3. Ibid. P17, also see Kagan Donald (1969). *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, NY: Cornell University Press.
4. Information related to the list of historical events having recorded the conflicts among the Greek city-states is from Nye, *Understanding International Conflicts*.
5. Ibid. P14.
6. See Nye, *Understanding International Conflicts*, Also see Thucydides (1972). *History of the Peloponnesian War*, P55, London: Penguin.