

[August Handgrenade](#)

Blog Post published by John T Kuehn on Tuesday, July 30, 2019

Thucydides Trap: Whose Trap?

Graham Allison, among others, has proposed something known as the Thucydides Trap--which relates to a species of historical determinism based on the classic history of the Peloponnesian War by the Greek historian Thucydides (who might be regarded as the father of analytical history as well as military history).

Quoting Allison from his book *Destined for 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 difficult and painful actions to avert it. As a rapidly ascending China challenges America's accustomed predominance, these two nations risk falling into a deadly trap first identified by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides. Writing about a war that devastated two leading city-states of classical Greece two and a half millennia ago, he explained: 'It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.' That primal insight describes a perilous historical pattern. Reviewing the record of the past five hundred years, the Thucydides's Trap Project...at Harvard has found sixteen cases in which a major nation's rise has disrupted the position of a dominant state...Our research finds that twelve of these rivalries ended in war and four did not-not a comforting ratio for the twenty-first century's most important geopolitical contest." (pages vii-viii)

Of course contingency goes by the wayside in this view--as it always does with inevitability. My own view is that this sort of thinking itself can be an intellectual and conceptual "trap" of sorts for precisely this reason of inevitability. Also, how many of the cases examined involved one of the party being behind two great oceans with NOT enemies on land contiguous to their borders? Using ops analysis and reasearch methods to solve the largest challenges of all is a road, it seems to me, fraught with error.

I am interested to hear the opinions of the H-WAR crowd on this issue. Full caveat, I am no Panda-hugger either, as my friends and colleagues will attest.

Best, John T. Kuehn, Platte City/Fort Leavenworth

Posted in:

[Hand Grenade of the Week](#)