



# The Perils of Hubris? A Tragic Reading of “Thucydides’ Trap” and China-US Relations

Biao Zhang<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 24 January 2019

© Journal of Chinese Political Science/Association of Chinese Political Studies 2019

## Abstract

In the last few years, Graham Allison’s “Thucydides’ Trap” has stimulated much discussion within International Relations (IR). Most IR scholars understand Thucydides’ Trap as a shorthand for power transition theory, and view it as highly inadequate for analyzing China-US relations. This article seeks to offer an alternative, tragic, understanding of Thucydides’ Trap that may have more purchase on the analysis of the dynamic of China-US relations. It first argues that while Thucydides’ Trap shares power transition theory’s focus on the shifting balance of power, it is also different from the latter in its emphasis on the emotional implications of changes in the balance of power. This article then explores a tragic understanding of Thucydides’ Trap. Economic success often encourages a rising power to display ambition, confidence and enhanced sense of self (what Allison calls “rising power syndrome”), which leads to loosened restraint, overextension, and strategic blunder; meanwhile, its assertive and ambitious moves spark a ruling power’s fear, insecurity and even paranoia (what Allison calls “ruling power syndrome”), which prompts it to take “preventive” actions in response to the rising power’s assertiveness. This article finally looks at China-US relations through this tragic lens. It suggests that this tragic understanding of Thucydides’ Trap can illuminate the emotional aspect of China-US relations, and also argues that the Thucydides Trap Research Project should henceforth develop an emotional line of inquiry into interaction between the great powers.

**Keywords** Thucydides’ trap · Tragedy · Hubris · Fear · Power transition · China-US relations

---

✉ Biao Zhang  
biaozhang@cupl.edu.cn

<sup>1</sup> School of Political Science and Public Administration, China University of Political Science and Law, No.27 Fuxue Road, Beijing, People’s Republic of China

## Introduction

In the last few years, the notion of “Thucydides’ Trap” (TT) has stimulated much discussion among scholars of International Relations (IR). IR scholars’ receptions of TT have mainly been critical,<sup>1</sup> and a substantial part of their criticism has focused on the idea of power transition. First, many IR scholars view TT as synonymous with Power Transition Theory (PTT). They suggest that TT is a shorthand for what IR theorists call PTT, and thus TT establishes nothing more than wars are likely when a rapidly rising power catches up or surpasses a ruling power in material capability.<sup>2</sup> Jonathan DiCicco writes that TT “echoes key elements” of PTT and asserts that Allison’s position “more closely resembles Organski’s than it does Thucydides” [18]. David Welch argues that Allison’ TT “pithily captures the core idea of A.F.K. Organski’s power transition theory” [80]. T.J. Pempel considers that power transition theory is “popularized as the ‘Thucydides Trap’” [57]. Peter Harris, meanwhile, contends that “states involved in a power shift seem destined for conflict – locked into what Graham Allison calls ‘Thucydides’ Trap’” ([34], 241).

Furthermore, many IR scholars argue that applying TT to China-US relations is unhelpful and politically dangerous, because it leads scholars to focus exclusively on change in “the material balance” between a rising challenger (China) and a ruling state (the US). Pempel states that Allison understands China-US relations primarily in terms of “the material balance between two pivotal nation-states” [57]. Alan Alexandroff and Arthur Stein argue that TT is not a good lens for illuminating China-US relations because it leads scholars to understand bilateral relations only in terms of material capability. Applying TT to China-US relations will ignore the importance of immaterial, agential factors such as human creativity and imagination [1]. In this respect, TT constricts analysis of China-US relations to material power.

In this article, I seek to challenge this power-transition understanding and evaluation of TT. While I agree that TT does share with PTT a common focus on the importance of the material balance, TT is considerably different in many other important respects. Unlike PTT, TT highlights the emotional changes induced by the shifting balance of material capability: feelings, sentiments and emotional effects are more dangerous than the very change in the balance of material capability itself. I suggest that looking at China-US relations through the lens of this emotionally-understood TT enables IR scholars (and policy-makers alike) to recognize the “emotional stress” emerging between rising and ruling powers. TT is

<sup>1</sup> Neville Morley provides probably the best review of the current state of the discussion in his online essay [52]. It is unnecessary to deal with all the criticism here but understanding the main criticism will help IR scholars grasp the main topics of debate. These criticisms relate to two main issues. (a) Allison claims that historical experience since 1500 confirms that the transference of power from ruling powers to rising powers often leads to competition and conflict between the two parties ([4], 244-86). Twelve out of sixteen TT cases ended in war. But Allison’s historical cases are very selective and Eurocentric, and exclude important cases such as 1970s Japan [27, 39, 42]; in addition, Allison’s use of historical analogy also appears to be incoherent in many cases [67]. (b) His claim that the central idea was first formulated more than two thousand years ago by Thucydides in *History* relies too much on a single sentence (“the growth of Athenian power” and “Spartan fear”), and does not consider Thucydides’ own nuanced account of how various factors (including domestic structure national character, personality of leaders, language and rhetoric) contributed to the outbreak of war [80]. This suggests Thucydides’ Trap is essentially “Allison’s Trap” [42].

<sup>2</sup> In fact, long before Allison coined the term “Thucydides’ Trap”, IR scholars had already come to view Thucydides as a power transition theorist [41, 45].

ultimately a warning against the feelings and attitudes that rising and ruling powers tend to display.

My arguments proceed through four stages. In the next section, I argue that TT differs from PTT in its emphasis on the emotional basis of action. Allison repeatedly argues in his book that TT means not only the “structural stress” caused by the transference of power from a ruling power to a rising power, but also the emotions and feelings – such as hubris, ambition, resentment, frustration, fear, and paranoia – that rising and ruling powers tend to display when confronting each other. TT, in short, warns of the danger of power transition *and* the danger of emotion.

In the following section, I develop the theme that Allison opens up for discussion in his “Thucydides’ Trap” but which remains largely underexplored – “rising power syndrome” and “ruling power syndrome”. I then use the work of tragic authors – mainly the tragic reading of Thucydides by Richard Ned Lebow et al. and the tragic reading of human condition by Herbert Butterfield – to elaborate them [6, 8, 46]. The tragic understanding describes how, as the capabilities of rising powers rapidly grow, they tend to develop ambition, confidence, and an enhanced sense of themselves that encourages them to pursue audaciously expansionist policies and embrace risky courses of action; this provokes the fear on the part of the ruling power, which results in reprisals and the two are then driven towards conflict.

In the fourth section, I apply this tragic lens to China-US relations.<sup>3</sup> I suggest that a tragically-understood TT can help IR scholars understand the evolution of China-US relations since the end of the Cold War, especially the growing confrontations in recent years. China’s rising power syndrome has contributed to the recent upsurge in confrontation between China and the US. There are signs that China has developed an enhanced opinion of itself, and that its ambition and confidence are growing. These feelings have emboldened it to launch the One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI), push for change both within and outside existing international institutions, and take a confrontational policy towards the US in the trade dispute. Accordingly, the US has also exhibited ruling power syndrome. The fear that it will be matched and surpassed also raises suspicion of China and generates hostility towards it.

In the fifth section, I conclude that a tragic reading of TT, which focuses on how rising power syndrome and ruling power syndrome lead to tension and conflict, is most useful for illuminating contemporary China-US relations. I suggest that a focus on emotion can be a more productive line of inquiry for the Thucydides Trap Project to explore in the future.

## Allison’s “Thucydides’ Trap”: The Problems with the Power-Transition Understanding

IR scholars often understand TT as a mini-PTT. To be sure, TT and PTT do share a common focus on “the material balance”. Allison describes TT as the tension caused by

<sup>3</sup> Although I speak of “China” and “US” in this article, they are not always unified entities. They can, for example, be disaggregated into various elements. Yet, I still make use of “China” and “US” because the analysis of their relations requires a focus on their authoritative foreign policy decisions. Furthermore, when applying the tragic lens to China-US relations, my discussion is also informed by Fettweis’ *Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory and Hubris in US Foreign Policy* [24].

the shifting balance of power between a rising power and a ruling state: the change in balance of material capability results in the “structural stress” between a rising and ruling power ([4], iv, xv, xvi, 29). The rapidly shifting balance of material capability does *not* make war inevitable, but it does create considerable tension – or what Allison calls “discombobulation” – between the two ([4], xvi). In this sense, Allison’s TT resembles PTT in that both assume that war is most likely when the material capabilities of the two sides approach parity.

Despite this common focus on material balance, TT is also different from PTT in several aspects. Among these differences,<sup>4</sup> the most relevant to our discussion here is TT’s emphasis on emotion and the irrationality of behavior. PTT assumes that states make rational calculation of power and interest. It assumes that a rising power will become dissatisfied with the status quo when calculating that the existing order cannot offer them “the best chance of obtaining the goals they have in mind” ([55], 362-7). It assumes that a dissatisfied rising power will challenge a ruling power when it estimates that the expected benefits of a war are larger than the benefits of keeping the status quo, or has reason to believe that they can rival or surpass in power the dominant nations ([55], 362-7). This assumption of rationality is not only evident in PTT, but is also evidenced in other similar theories espoused by Robert Gilpin and John Mearsheimer [19, 29, 47, 48].

TT, however, highlights the role of emotions. It does not attribute the cause of war to a rising and ruling power’s rational calculation, but to their emotions produced by the shifting balance of material capability. First, Allison discusses “rising power syndrome” and “ruling power syndrome” ([4], 43). With the growth of power, a rising power tends to display a wide range of feelings. These feelings include “ambition”, “enhanced sense of itself, its interests, and its entitlement to recognition and respect”, “hubris”, “resentment”, “[a] sense of urgency, anxiety”, and “self-confidence” ([4], 39-40, 43-4, 49-52, 68, 161, 211, 269, 304). These feelings generally fall into two patterns. One is the positive emotions that cause them to accentuate their own positive attributes. An inflated sense of itself, i.e. exaggerated feelings of self-importance, leads actors to pursue policies that are arrogant and unilateral; self-confidence, i.e. the belief in their own ability to control events, predisposes them to overestimate their capability and take risky actions. The other is the negative emotions that cause rising powers to focus on the bad aspects of others. Resentment, the feeling that their way to status has been blocked by others and they have been cheated out of a rightful due, drives a rising power to take provocative actions against a ruling power. Allison’s rising power syndrome is a mixture of “good feelings” and “bad feelings”.

A ruling power, when confronted by a rising power that threatens to displace it, usually displays an “enlarged sense of fear and insecurity” or “exaggerated fears, insecurities, and dread of changes in the status quo” that “fester into paranoia” ([4], 40, 44, 50). A ruling power tends to worry about its deteriorating position, and be afraid of the consequence of a relative decline. This feeling of insecurity “fuel[s]

<sup>4</sup> For instance, PTT assumes that a rising power can either be satisfied or dissatisfied with the status quo. TT, by contrast, seems to assume that a rising power will necessarily be dissatisfied with the status quo. Furthermore, PTT applies only to the post-industrial era. TT, in contrast, claims almost trans-historical and universal validity. Finally, PTT has been examined by a large number of samples. TT, however, only relates to a handful of cases.

misperceptions and exaggerate[s] dangers”, which prompt the ruling power to over-stress threat and overreact to a certain situation ([4], 39).

Second, Allison briefly discusses the importance of the three motivations – interest, fear and honor – and argues that these emotions (especially fear and honor) are crucial for understanding how TT can “trap” actors into bloody conflict.<sup>5</sup> He stresses that “the lenses through which we see them [shifting balance of power] are influenced by emotions”. Ruling power’s fears often fuel exaggerate dangers; furthermore, honor, defined as “sense of itself, its convictions about the recognition and respect it is due, and its pride”, encourages risk-taking and assertive behavior ([4], 39).

Third, while the rapid growth of a state may create “the dynamic of rise challenging rule”, it is mainly the emotions “fueling this dynamic” that leads to war ([4], 39, 211). For Allison, it is the rising power’s hubris, resentment, ambition and the ruling power’s fear and insecurity that drive the dynamic of rising and ruling powers towards war. Indeed, in Allison’s earlier versions of TT, he insists that the emotions are no less important than changes in balance of power [2]. In his essay published in *The Atlantic* (the most widely-cited version before the book), Allison writes that “Thucydides identified *two key drivers* of this dynamic: the rising power’s growing entitlement, sense of its importance, and demand for greater say and sway, on the one hand, and the fear, insecurity, and determination to defend the status quo this engenders in the established power, on the other” ([3], emphasis added).

Thus, while both TT and PTT share a common focus on “the material balance”, TT provides a very emotional account of how this dynamic is played out. Allison’s TT is something different from PTT. It focuses on the emotional implications of differentiated rate of growth and highlights the limits of rationality by emphasizing the importance of emotion and feeling along with their impacts on the actor when they experience a shifting balance of power [40]. The shifting balance of power induces certain emotional changes that are more important than the change in balance of power *per se*. It is these feelings rather than the material conditions that “trap” a rising and ruling power into military conflict. Realizing this crucial difference enables IR scholars shift their focus away from “the material balance” to the emotions generated by the material balance.

## Allison’s “Thucydides’ Trap”: What is the Tragic Understanding?

In this section I explore a different, tragic, understanding of TT that can elaborate the emotional issues identified by Allison. By tragic understanding, I mean an understanding of TT as a warning against the danger that a rising and ruling power will tend to display certain feelings such as pride, ambition or confidence (the rising power) or fear, insecurity or paranoia (the ruling power) when they experience a rapidly shifting balance of material power, feelings that can easily “trap” two sides into conflict. Patrick Porter’s understanding of TT, for instance, embodies this tragic sense when he suggests that the real lesson Thucydides teaches (for the US and China) is how the growth of

<sup>5</sup> Allison’s discussion rests on a conventional (some critics would say superficial) understanding that equates the three motivations articulated by the Athenians in one of their speeches (at Sparta) with Thucydides’ own view of human nature. But Thucydides scholars argue that this is not the case: the three universal motivations articulated by the Athenians are considered to justify their imperial expansion, a justification that Thucydides himself criticizes throughout *History* [26, 79].

Athenian power generates “a lust for power” and a “loosening restraint” [64]. Jonathan Kirshner shows a similar understanding when he observes that “the Athenians did indeed fall victim into a terrible trap...[but] it was the trap of hubris” ([42], 15). This tragic understanding elaborates Allison’s discussion of “rising power syndrome” and “ruling power syndrome” by bringing the emotional issues into sharper focus.

First, a tragic understanding of TT relies on the tragic reading of *History of the Peloponnesian War* (hereafter *History*) that originates in Thucydides scholarship. F.M. Cornford’s *Thucydides Mythistoricus* and John Finley’s *Essays on Thucydides* argue that Thucydides follows Aeschylus or Euripides in writing *History* as an Ancient Greek tragedy [16, 25]. An Ancient Greek tragedy depicts how a protagonist (i.e. “tragic hero”) acting at the climax of power and prestige is led by a character flaw (e.g. arrogance, pride or ambition) to act with folly, ultimately resulting in retribution and his downfall. By analogy, those who regard Thucydides as a tragedian read his *History* as an account of how Athens, emerging as one of the most powerful countries in the aftermath of the Persian War, is led by arrogance of power and overreaching ambition to pursue an expansionist policy that provokes the Athens-Sparta war and culminates in its own defeat. IR scholars have imported this reading to the discipline. David Bedford and Thom Workman argue that Thucydides’ historiography of the Peloponnesian War shows how the growth of Athenian power leads it to pursue increasing imperial expansion, and to lose reasoned moderation in the conduct of its foreign policy and actions towards other city states [6]. Richard Lebow views Thucydides as the “last of the great tragedians” rather than the first power transition theorist: *History* is intended as a tragedy that warns against the danger that power and success will seduce actors and lead them to overestimate their capabilities and overstretch themselves ([45], 20; [46]).

Furthermore, a tragic understanding of TT would also pay attention to a key emotion that the tragic reading of *History* by Cornford et al. overlooks: fear.<sup>6</sup> Thucydides’ narrative provides abundant evidence of how actors tend to respond to others out of the worst expectation, because they can only experience their own feelings and cannot see inside of the other party’s mind or be assured of their intentions. These examples include, for instance, that the Spartans noticed that the Athenians started to encroach on their allies [40, 54]. The more aggressive the other party appears to be, the more fear and insecurity will resonate. Herbert Butterfield, who considers tragedy to be central to understanding great-power conflict as Thucydides does ([20], 10), once called this the “tragedy of the absolute human predicament” ([8], 20).

Second, a tragic reading of TT shows how feelings generated by the changing balance of power can lead to conflict. Growing power and success often lead actors to exhibit certain feelings. These include an enhanced sense of self (Allison’s “exaggerated self-importance” or “enhanced sense of self, importance, entitlement to recognition and respect”), ambition (Allison’s “ambition”), and confidence (Allison’s “self-confidence” that encourages “risking taking” and “unrealistic expectations about what is possible”). These prompt actors to pursue expansionist and adventurous policies that lead to overextension and loosening restraint. When the actors overstretch themselves, their

<sup>6</sup> When scholars such as Cornford and Lebow undertake a tragic reading of *History*, they focus exclusively on the feelings of the Athenians, without giving much attention to what the Spartans feel. My tragic understanding of Thucydides Trap is somehow larger because it focuses on the feelings of both the Athenians and Spartans.

policies also spark fear in the other party (Allison’s “fear and insecurity” and even “paranoia”). Fear sparks increasing suspicion of and hostility towards the rising power. Concerned that the assertive actors’ aims are unlimited, ruling powers will take “preventive” measures to ensure that their position will not be threatened.

Thus, the tragic understanding of TT would suggest that both parties are going to be “trapped” into conflict through several steps. In the first step, tragic actors acquire power and success. Fueled by both, they display an enhanced sense of self, i.e. a feeling of self-importance or the entitlement of doing something special ([46], 131). Ambition also follows. They become obsessed with status and the projection of power [64]. They also tend to overestimate their capacity and the prospect of achieving an outcome, believing in their ability to control events, and evidencing excessive optimism when projecting into the future.<sup>7</sup> In the second step, an enhanced sense of self, ambition and confidence has several effects on foreign policy. These feelings lead the actors to pursue ambitious, assertive, and bold policies. They are led to embrace risky courses of action. They are unable to identify the point where they should end ([6], 65). In the third step, the ambitious and assertive action provokes reprisals from the ruling power and brings the two parties into conflict, culminating in the rising power’s self-defeat. What is crucial here is that the ruling power is often motivated by fear, a feeling induced by the perceived threat.

Third, the tragic understanding of TT would suggest that there is a pattern of conduct that is rooted in the human condition that will repeat itself wherever and whenever a rapid change in balance of material power occurs. Power and success cause an actor to develop greater ambition and confidence, and these emotions drive the actor to pursue ambitious and audacious policies that result in overextension, and the other actor’s fear and insecurity in turn create reprisals ([46], 128).<sup>8</sup>

This tragic reading of TT elaborates why and how emotions produced by changes within the relative balance of power are important to the interaction between rising and ruling powers. First, the differentiated rate of growth does not only bring about changes in the distribution of material capability, it also induces actors to display certain emotions. Second, the tragic reading suggests that the cycle of success-ambition-overextension-fear-reprisal is trans-historical. Success gives rise to ambition and confidence, which encourages the actor to pursue audacious and assertive policies; these policies, in turn, invite counteraction driven by fear and insecurity. In contrast to the power-transition understanding of TT, which leads scholars to focus on “the material balance”, the tragic understanding of TT views emotions that have been induced by the rapidly shifting balance of power (for both rising and ruling powers) as very important to their (inter)action. The tragic understanding of TT can illuminate the emotional aspect of the interaction between a rising and ruling power.

## A Tragic Reading of China-US Relations

In this section, I apply this tragic understanding of TT to China-US relations. In contrast to the power-transition understanding and evaluation of TT, which claims that

<sup>7</sup> In the Athenian case, the Athenians display all these qualities after Athens emerges from the Persian War as one of the most powerful countries in Ancient Greece.

<sup>8</sup> This is the cycle of *hubris*, *ate*, *hamartia*, and *nemesis*.

TT leads analysts to focus on the balance of material power, I suggest that approaching China-US relations through the lens of the tragic reading of TT instead enables scholars to capture the problem of “emotional stress” between a rising and ruling power. The power shift induces certain emotions in the rising (China) and ruling (US) power that may intensify their tensions. Are China and the US falling into this tragic Thucydides’ Trap?

### The Growth of Chinese Power

Since the end of the Cold War, China’s power has grown at an astonishing rate. This is partly due to the Chinese strategy of “hiding your capacities” and “keeping a low-profile”, and partly due to the US policy of engaging China and encouraging the country to integrate into the US-led international order, including institutions such as the World Trade Organization.<sup>9</sup> As a result, China’s GDP annual growth rate averaged more than 9% between 1989 and 2018. By 2018, it had developed into the second largest economy in the world, with the largest foreign currency reserves and global economic presence.

There are, furthermore, signs that China is on course to overtake the US. For instance, contributions from banks such as Goldman Sachs, think tanks such as the Economic Intelligence Unit/Peterson Institute for International Economics and media such as *The Economist*, have all suggested that China will become the largest economy in the world between 2010 and 2030 ([44], 206). Indeed, in 2014, China surpassed the United States as the world’s largest trading nation [13]. In the same year, a World Bank research program announced that China has overtaken the US to become the world’s largest economy, when calculated on a purchasing power parity basis [72]. In 2017, a widely-cited report by a prominent Chinese government adviser suggested that China’s “economic power” surpassed the US in 2013; he also calculated that China’s “comprehensive national power” was 1.75 times that of the US in 2017 [36]. Foreign scholars see the “end of unipolarity” and the “return of bipolarity” [44, 70]. Rapid economic growth not only makes China wealthy, but has also enabled it to expand its military build-up, access many cutting-edge technologies and incorporate economic instruments into its political armory.

### China’s Sense of Self, Ambition and Confidence

The growth of China’s power has caused many changes in Chinese sentiments. While China may still need to take years to surpass the US in its “comprehensive” power (e.g. measured in terms of GDP per capita and technological innovation), growing Chinese power has given it the *feeling* that it has become different from the China of twenty years ago. This feeling first became apparent in 2008, when China’s increasing “assertiveness” attested to a significant change in its understanding of itself [69].<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> There have been heated debates within the US over whether China should be contained or engaged [15, 68]. The predominant view holds that China should be integrated into the US-led international order. Aron affirms: “For most of the past quarter century, the skeptics struggled to gain traction against their more numerous, influential, and optimistic opponents” ([23], 188).

<sup>10</sup> The “assertiveness” discussed here is driven by emotion rather than by rational calculation. In the literature on China’s “assertiveness”, some scholars argue that assertive behavior is driven by a cool-headed assessment of the state’s relative power, along with the opportunities and threats that it currently confronts ([22], 142–6). Cf. Johnson’s skepticism towards China’s “new assertiveness” [38].



This assertiveness not only “stays” for a considerable time [9], but also swells into some feelings that are somehow different and intense. The once low-profile, hidden-capacity and responsibility-shirking China of the past displays a growing sense of power and confidence.

The first is China’s enhanced sense of self. Chinese leaders state that China has “stood up, grown rich, and is becoming strong”, and note that China has transformed itself from a poor country to “stabilizer of world economy” or “anchor for world stability” (as opposed to the warmongering US) [14, 76, 82]. State media advocate that China has become another “economic superpower” alongside the US [10]. Prominent government advisers assert that “[When] China is stable, the world is stable; [when] China is moving, the world is moving; [when] China is good, the world is good” [37]. China scholars see that the country displays “autism”, the self-perceived possession of more centrality and influence entitles it to disregard “foreign sensitivities” about China’s increasingly assertive behavior ([22], 136).

Second, fueled by power and success, China also displays the ambition to overtake the US in strategic, economic and technological fields. Chinese leaders urge China to “take center stage in the world” [82]. State media have published a “manifesto” that claims that China is facing “a historic opportunity” that has “opened up a vast strategic space” for China “to gain superiority” [59].<sup>11</sup> After Xi’s 2017 Davos Speech, a Chinese diplomat famously declared that “if it is necessary for China to play the role of leader” when “the front runner suddenly fell back”, “then China must take on this responsibility” [73, 81]. Made in 2025, an industrial and technological policy, aims to expand China’s high-tech sectors and enables it to win over the US leadership in technology. China’s strategic, economic and technological ambition becomes evident.

Third, China has increasingly shown confidence in its power and future. Prominent advisers to the government state that even with an economic slowdown, “the Chinese century is not at the beginning of the end”, but is “at the end of the beginning [just commenced]” [35]. Chinese officials declare that the trade war will not affect the growth of China’s economy, and “China [...] commands much leeway in foreign trade [compared to the US]” [12].<sup>12</sup> Officials and state media also believe that the US economic dependence on China has steadily increased since 2000, and China’s economic dependence on the US has in turn declined during the same period: this growing dependence on China will make the trade war “backfire on the US economy without hurting China” [30, 33]. If the US “needs a lesson to learn [from a trade war]”, the *Global Times* observes, then “this lesson can only be given by China” [31]. Furthermore, China experts also identify a “strident turn” in Chinese nationalism [84]. China’s state nationalism is reflected, for instance, in the rhetoric that China has the ability to win the trade war and punish the US with some “lessons” [59, 61, 62].<sup>13</sup> Phrases such as “China solution”, “Chinese approach” and “Chinese wisdom” reflects a growing confidence among leaders that China can not only provide better solutions to problems in global governance (ranging from economic issues to environmental ones), but also succeed in managing the problems [71].

<sup>11</sup> To gain superiority over whom? The answer is “over the US” [74].

<sup>12</sup> Before the trade war, Xinhua News even listed “ten reasons” why China and the US would not fight a trade war. The fifth asserts that the US needs to “rely on China’s huge market to emerge from the economic crisis” [83].

<sup>13</sup> Documentaries by the government such as *Amazing China* illustrate the official nationalism.

## China's Ambitious and Assertive Policies

As a result of China's enhanced sense of self, ambition and confidence, it began to adopt more demanding, unilateral, and audacious policies. These policies include, among others, the launch of the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR, or BRI), pushing for change both within and outside existing international institutions, and a confrontational policy towards the US in the trade dispute. Although Chinese leaders often state that they do not intend to openly challenge the US,<sup>14</sup> these policies are widely seen as underpinning China's assertive bid for international leadership.

First, China launched the OBOR in 2013. The BRI, which pledges one trillion dollars of investment, aims to achieve three strategic objectives. First, it aims to offload its own overcapacity and enhance access to foreign energy resources, maintaining China's domestic economic growth [21]. Second, it aims to expand new markets for Chinese firms, serving as what Hoslag has termed "offensive mercantilism" ([43], see also [78]). Third, the BRI connects China to key parts of Asia, the south Pacific, East Africa and Europe through trade, infrastructure and people-to-people dialogue [53, 77]. Taken together, these objectives reflect China's attempt to boost its own economic development and bind ties with other economies to itself.

Second, China promotes many institutional changes both within and outside the existing international order. In the first respect, China pushes for the reform of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), with the intention of ensuring that its growing power is reflected within the institution. In the second respect, China has created many "parallel" international institutions, which include the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). By creating these parallel institutions, China clearly evidences a belief that it should exert stronger influence over the international political economy. These China-led institutions serve its interests better, and enable it to play a more active part in shaping regional and global political economy [56].

Third, China has also stood up against US pressure during the trade dispute. In contrast to other international actors, such as the EU and Canada, who have made trade concessions to the US, China has directly defied the US by refusing to accept and retaliating against the American tariff. Its Finance Minister has made it clear that China will retaliate "resolutely" [65]. Meanwhile, a spokesman from the Ministry of Commerce has declared that China's retaliation is not only to "safeguard and defend the interests of the country and the people", but also is intended to serve "the common interests of mankind" [49]. More radical voices within China call for an escalation of the trade war. A government-affiliated think tank researcher has urged the government to fight an "epic trade war"; he counsels the adoption of "bolder measure[s]" such as "considering a legal move to possibly remove the US from WTO for violating WTO rules" and even envisages actions that "extend beyond the economic field, to political and other areas" [50]. State media like *People's Daily* and *Global Times* openly argue that trade war "will only speed up China's replacement of the US as [the] world's largest economy", and depict the US trade war with China as a "desperate struggle of US hegemony in the age of globalization" [60, 63, 32].

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Chinese leaders have indicated their preference to build a "New Type of Great Power Relations" that can help them to avoid China-US confrontation.

## Fear and Reprisal

China’s ambitious and audacious policies bring two kinds of consequence. One is overextension and risky conduct that undermine China’s growing power. Chinese scholars, for instance, have referred to China’s “strategic overstretch” [58]. First, the OBOR is seen as a “strategic blunder” [28]. China’s pledge to invest one trillion US dollars in countries that participate in BRI has not only failed to achieve many intended results, but has also generated considerable backlash embodied in the allegation that China is conducting “debt diplomacy”. Second, the Chinese attempt to build a series of alternative security, trade and financial bodies to rival the US-led order have somehow backfired, as SCO increases China-Russian competition over the rest of the members within the institution and AIIB leads to suspicion of Chinese investment. Third, the confrontation with the US and a later softening approach has led many (within and outside China) to doubt if China has become as “amazing” as government depicts [5].

What is more serious, however, is that China’s ambitious and bold policies sparked US fear and insecurity. Chinese policies lead the US to feel that China’s challenge is visible everywhere, extending from the Eurasia landmass to Asia Pacific, and from economics to technology and onto international institutions [75]. China is therefore seen as a “strategic competitor” that presents a vital threat to US national security ([17], 1). China appears to have designed a “grand strategy” that seeks to compete against the US for supremacy. Its BRI, for instance, is seen to be an attempt to connect the Eurasian landmass to itself and turn the Eurasian landmass into an economic and strategic region that will rival and surpass the Euro-Atlantic region. Its push for institutional innovations appears to have been achieved at the expense of international institutions and American influence. Its position in the trade war also increases this fear, as Christopher Wray, the FBI director, states that “China is trying to position itself as the sole dominant superpower, sole dominant economic power,” and “replace the United States in that role” [7].

The US feeling of fear and insecurity leads it to take a wide range of measure to “defeat” the strategic competitor. Fearing that the BRI will expand China’s power and influence, the US and its regional allies (Australia, India and Japan) have sought to establish a joint enterprise that will compete against BRI, offsetting expanding Chinese influence and counteracting the BRI’s threat. Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State, announced \$113 million in infrastructure and energy in emerging Asian countries as a first-step counteract against China’s BRI [66]. Fearing that institutions such as the SCO have become an “anti-NATO alliance”, the US has strengthened relations with its Asian allies and intensified its activities in places like the South China Sea. Fearing that the trade war might not be able to undermine China’s economic and technological strength, the US threatens to escalate the trade war, and intends to organize an EU-Japan-US free-trade zone to counter China.

While there has not been a conflict between China and the US comparable to the war between Athens and Sparta, the US has come to increasingly fear China. The US feels that its engagement policy towards China has created a “monster” rather than fostered stability [15]. This feeling of losing control and worrying about its debilitated position drives the dynamic of US and China interaction towards more intensified conflict in many fields [51].

## Conclusion

In this article I began with a critique of the power-transition understanding of TT. I suggested that while IR scholars are right in viewing TT as echoing some key elements of PTT (their common focus on the change in balance of power, for instance), TT is different from PTT because it emphasizes the emotional basis of action rather than the instrumental-rational basis. For TT, what is crucial is the emotional implications of the differentiated growth of material capability and the change of feelings induced by the shifting balance of material capability. I seek to show that for Allison, it is the rising and ruling powers syndrome, exhibited as hubris, ambition, confidence, resentment, humiliation, fear, paranoid, and not the very material condition *per se*, that drives events towards war. I have also tried to expand this insight by offering a more theoretically informed account, an account that draws on the work of those who study international politics through the lens of tragedy to elaborate rising and ruling power syndrome. Finally, I have sought to demonstrate how this tragically understood TT can make an empirical contribution by applying it to analyze the dynamic of China-US relations.

Two points here deserve a more sustained engagement. First, it seems to me that Allison's "Thucydides' Trap" can be seen as implying two different kinds of traps that are grounded within the two understandings. The power-transition understanding presents a "material Trap" that is the risk of war or structural stress when the disparity between a rising and ruling power vanishes. The alternative tragic understanding would suggest that Thucydides' Trap is an "emotional Trap". With growing power, a rising power tends to fall victim to the trap of hubris, ambition and confidence; a ruling power, meanwhile, is trapped by fear and insecurity.

Second, the two understandings of Thucydides' Trap lead scholars to ask very different questions. The first line leads them to examine questions such as whether China's material capability is surpassing that possessed by the US ([11], 11-25). This line of enquiry, I suggest, cannot make the idea of Thucydides' Trap very useful and will not shed much light on China-US relations. However, it seems unfortunate that when Allison presents the idea of TT – especially in his later book version – this is precisely what he offers (for instance, Allison places heavy emphasis on TT as the "structural stress" or the "gravitational force"). Yet, a tragic interpretation of TT will lead to the following questions: Can rising and ruling states (i.e. political entities) exhibit emotions? Why does the changing balance of power bring about a drastic change of emotions? How do emotions affect behavior and interaction? If the tragic reading enables scholars to focus on a rising power's positive emotions, such as confidence and ambition, then what about the "negative rising power syndromes", such as resentment and victimhood? For instance, if China wants to achieve "national rejuvenation" after "the century of humiliation", then how will this sentiment shape China's behavior when its power grows? Should IR scholars take the negative emotions in the rising power syndrome seriously when they try to understand the dynamic of great power relations?

All these questions give an emotional twist to TT, bringing the Thucydides Trap Project into a broader project that promotes an "emotive turn" in IR. I suggest that the inquiry into "rising power syndrome" and "ruling power syndrome" is a more productive angle from which the Thucydides Trap Project can be approached and explored. And the Thucydides Trap project can have a bright prospect if scholars shift the

focus away from material balance – or rational calculation of power and interest – and instead come to focus on the emotions exhibited in response to the changes in balance.

**Acknowledgements** I thank the guest editors and Ben Boulton for their suggestions and help. All faults are of course mine.

**Funding** In writing this article, I have been supported by the “Program for Young Innovative Research Team in China University of Political Science and Law” (16CXTD10).

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Disclosure Statement** No disclosure.

## References

- Alexandroff, A. and Stein, A. 2017. The trap in “the Thucydides Trap”: Framing US-China relations. <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/30/05/2017/trap-+-thucydides-trap-+-framing-us-china-relations> Accessed 20 August 2018.
- Allison, G. 2013. Obama and Xi must think broadly to avoid a classical trap. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/opinion/obama-and-xi-must-think-broadly-to-avoid-a-classic-trap.html> Accessed 27 December 2018.
- Allison, G. 2015. The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China headed for war? *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/> Accessed 01 July 2018.
- Allison, G. 2017. *Destined for war: can America and China escape Thucydides’ trap?* London: Scribe.
- BBC. 2018. Zhongmei maoyizhan yinfafa rey: Zhongguo zhende “lihaile” ma? [China-US trade war sparked heated debate: is China really “Amazing”?] <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-45240548>
- Bedford, D., and T. Workman. 2001. The Tragic reading of the Thucydidean tragedy. *Review of International Studies* 27 (1): 51–67.
- Business Insider. 2018. FBI director calls China “the broadest, most significant” threat to the US. <https://www.businessinsider.com/fbi-director-says-china-is-the-broadest-most-significant-threat-to-the-us-2018-7> Accessed 11 December 2018.
- Butterfield, H. 1951. *History and human relations*. London: Collins.
- Mastro, O.S. 2014. Why Chinese assertiveness is here to stay. *The Washington Quarterly* 37 (4): 151–170.
- CCTV. 2018. Zhongguo yicheng jingji chaojidaguo: ganggang gongbu de zhege zhibiao jiushi zhengming. [China has become an economic superpower. This indicator just announced is proof.] [http://www.ce.cn/xwxz/gnsz/gdxw/201801/15/t20180115\\_27727168.shtml](http://www.ce.cn/xwxz/gnsz/gdxw/201801/15/t20180115_27727168.shtml) 15 December 2015.
- Chan, S. 2008. *China, the US, and the power-transition theory*. New York: Routledge.
- China Daily. 2018. Sino-US trade frictions cannot hinder Chinese economy: Official. <http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201804/17/WS5ad595fca3105cdcf6518cfcfb.html> Accessed 23 August.
- China News. 2014. Zhongguo chao yue meiguo cheng quanqiu zuida maoyiguo yinfafa qianglie guanzhu [China’s surpassing the United States as the world’s largest trading nation has attracted wide attention]. <http://www.chinanews.com/cj/2014/01-11/5724587.shtml>. Accessed 13 August 2018.
- China News. 2016. Li Keqiang: zhongguo jingji shi shijie jingji de “wendingmao” [Li Keqiang: China is the “Anchor of Stability” for world economy]. <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2016/07-22/7948998.shtml> Accessed 16 August 2018.
- Christensen, T.J. 2006. fostering stability or creating a monster? the rise of China and US policy toward East Asia. *International Security* 31 (1): 81–126.
- Cornford, F.M. 1907. *Thucydides mythistoricus*. London: E. Arnold.
- Defense Department (US). 2018. *Summary of the national defense strategy*. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> Accessed 29 December 2018.
- DiCicco, J.M. 2017. Power transition theory and the essence of revisionism. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*.
- DiCicco, J.M., and J.S. Levy. 1999. Power shifts and problem shifts. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43 (6): 675–704.

20. Erskine, T., and R.N. Lebow. 2012. Understanding tragedy and understanding International relations. In *Tragedy and international relations*, ed. T. Erskine and R.N. Lebow. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
21. Ferdinand, P. 2016. Westward Ho – The China dream and One Belt. *One Road. International Affairs* 92 (4): 941–957.
22. Friedberg, A. 2014. The sources of Chinese conduct: explaining Beijing’s assertiveness. *The Washington Quarterly* 37 (4): 133–150.
23. Friedberg, A. 2018. The signs were there. *Foreign Affairs*, online first.
24. Fettweiss, C.J. 2013. *The Pathologies of power: fear, honor, glory, and hubris in US foreign policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
25. Finley, J.H. 1967. *Three essays on Thucydides*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
26. Forde, S. 2012. Thucydides and “Realism” among the classics of International Relations. In *Thucydides and the modern world*, ed. K. Harloe and N. Morley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
27. Foot, R. 2017. Book review roundtable: Is war with China coming? <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/war-with-china-contrasting-visions/> Accessed 30 July 2018.
28. Greer, T. 2018. One Belt, One Road, one big mistake. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/06/bri-china-belt-road-initiative-blunder/#> Accessed 30 December 2018.
29. Gilpin, R. 1981. *War and change in world politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
30. *Global Times*. 2018. Trump’s moves towards trade war will backfire on US economy without hurting China. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1093603.shtml> Accessed 17 July 2018.
31. *Global Times*. 2018. Sheping: Zhongguo you chongzu shili dui maoyizhan fengpeidaodi [Editorial: China are strong enough to fight the trade war to the end]. <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2018-03/11691236.html> Accessed 15 July 2018.
32. *Global Times*. 2018. Sheping: Meiguo duihua maoyizhan shi baquanzhuyi zai quanqiu hua shidai de zhengzha [Editorial: US’ trade war with China is the desperate struggle of hegemony in the era of globalization]. <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2018-08/12683151.html>. Accessed 26 August 2018.
33. Guo, S. 2018. Meiguo tiaoque maoyizhan chixu [The United States has provoked a trade war but find it difficult to sustain.] <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2018/07-05/8557870.shtml> Accessed 21 August 2018.
34. Harris, P. 2014. Problems with power-transition theory: Beyond the vanishing disparities thesis. *Asian Security* 10 (3): 241–259.
35. Hu, A. 2015. Embracing China’s new normal: Why the economy is still on track. *Foreign Affairs* 94 (3): 8–12.
36. Hu, A. (et al.) 2017. Daguo xingshuai yu zhongguo jiyu: guojia zonghe guoli pinggu [The rise and fall of great powers and China’s opportunities: Comprehensive national power assessment]. *Economic Herald* 3: 14–25.
37. Hu, A. and Cheng, W. 2017. The ship of Chinese economy moves stably. *People’s Daily* (Overseas edition). 14, October 2017, p.01.
38. Johnston, A.I. 2013. How new and assertive is China’s New Assertiveness? *International Security* 37 (4): 7–48.
39. Kang, D., and X. Ma. 2018. Power transitions: Thucydides didn’t live in East Asia. *The Washington Quarterly* 41 (1): 137–154.
40. Kauppi, M.V. 1991. Contemporary International Relations theory and the Peloponnesian War. In *Hegemonic rivalry: From Thucydides to the nuclear age*, ed. R.N. Lebow and B.S. Strauss. Boulder: Westview.
41. Kauppi, M.V. 1995. Thucydides: character and capabilities. *Security Studies* 5 (2): 142–168.
42. Kirshner, J. 2018. Handle him with care: The importance of getting Thucydides right. *Security Studies*, online first.
43. Hoslag, J. 2017. How China’s New Silk Road threatens European trade. *International Spectator* 52 (1): 46–60.
44. Layne, C. 2012. This time it’s real: The end of unipolarity and the Pax Americana. *International Studies Quarterly* 56 (1): 203–213.
45. Lebow, R. 1991. Thucydides, power transition and the causes of war. In *Hegemonic rivalry: From Thucydides to the nuclear age*, ed. R.N. Lebow and B.S. Strauss. Boulder: Westview.
46. Lebow, R. 2003. *The Tragic vision of politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
47. Mearsheimer, J. 2001. *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York: W.W. Norton.
48. Mearsheimer, J. 2015. The gathering storm. *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (4): 381–396.
49. Ministry of Commerce. 2018. Shangwubu xinwen fayanren dui mei baigong 6yue 18ri shengming fabiao jianghua. [Spokesperson speaks on the White House statement on June 18.] <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/ac/ag/201806/20180602756563.shtml> Accessed 26 August 2018.
50. Mei, X. 2018. Trump’s action demands strong response. *China Daily*. <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201803/23/W55ab4becda3105cdef6513e84.html> Accessed 17 August 2018.
51. Moore, G.J. 2017. Avoiding a Thucydides Trap in Sino-American relations ... and 7 reasons why that might be difficult. *Asian Security* 13 (2): 98–115.
52. Morley, N. 2017. Thucydides and Contemporary Politics: A Syllabus. <https://eidolon.pub/thucydides-and-contemporary-politics-a-syllabus-b169c8e7c41a> Accessed 01 August 2018.

53. Nordin, A.H., and M. Weissmann. 2018. Will Trump make China great again? The belt and road initiative and international order. *International Affairs* 94 (2): 231–249.
54. Novo, A.R. 2016. Where we get Thucydides wrong: the fallacies of history’s first hegemonic war. *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27 (1): 1–21.
55. Organski, A.F.K. 1968. *World politics*. 2nd ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
56. Paradise, J.F. 2016. The role of “parallel institutions” in china’s growing participation in global economic governance. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 21 (2): 149–175.
57. Pempel, T.J. 2015. Thucydides (Clap)Trap: US-China relations in a changing Asia-Pacific. [https://www.globalasia.org/v10no4/feature/thucydides-claptrap-us-china-relations-in-a-changing-asia-pacific\\_tj-pempel](https://www.globalasia.org/v10no4/feature/thucydides-claptrap-us-china-relations-in-a-changing-asia-pacific_tj-pempel) Accessed 12 July 2017.
58. Pu, X., and C. Wang. 2018. Rethinking China’s rise: Chinese scholars debate strategic overstretch. *International Affairs* 94 (5): 1019–1035.
59. People’s Daily. 2018. Jinjin Zhuazhu Lishi Jiyuqi. [Grasping the Period of Historical Opportunity]. 2018.01.15 p. 01.
60. People’s Daily. 2018. Meiguo yingzai duihua maoyizhan de cuowu daolu shang mitu zhifan [The US should return to the correct path in its wrong way of trade war with China]. 22 July 2018, p. 3.
61. People’s Daily. 2018. Shijie Buneng Renyou Meiguo Hulai [The World Cannot Allow the US to Mess Things Up]. 14 July 2018, p. 06.
62. People’s Daily. 2018. Jianjue youli, dating meifang. [With resolution and strength, make the US painful]. 06 April 2018, p. 02.
63. People’s Daily (Overseas Edition). 2018. Rang Meiguo Zhangdian Jixing. [Let the US Remember]. 12 April 2018, p. 06.
64. Porter, P. 2014. Thucydides Trap 2.0: superpower suicide? *The National Interest* <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/thucydides-trap-20-superpower-suicide-10352> Accessed 31 July 2018.
65. Reuters. 2018. China to keep hitting back at U.S. over trade, to boost government spending – finance minister. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-china-finmin/exclusive-china-to-keep-hitting-back-at-u-s-over-trade-to-boost-government-spending-finance-minister> Accessed 10 December 2018.
66. Reuters. 2018. Wary of China’s rise, Pompeo announces U.S. initiatives in emerging Asia. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-trade/wary-of-chinas-rise-pompeo-announces-u-s-initiatives-in-emerging-asia-ideUKKBN1KK0TH>. 29 August 2018.
67. Richards, D.K. 2014. Thucydides dethroned: Historical differences that weaken the Peloponnesian Analogy. In *The next Great War?: The roots of World War I and the risk of U.S.-China conflict*, ed. R.N. Rosecrance and D. Miller. Cambridge: MIT Press.
68. Shambaugh, D. 1996. Containment or engagement of China? Calculating Beijing’s responses. *International Security* 21 (2): 180–209.
69. Swaine, M.D. 2010. Perceptions of an assertive China. *China Leadership Monitor* 32 (2): 1–19.
70. Tunstjø, Ø. 2018. *The return of bipolarity in world politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
71. *The Economist*. 2017. Is China challenging the US for global leadership? <https://www.economist.com/china/2017/04/01/is-china-challenging-the-united-states-for-global-leadership> Accessed 14 August 2018.
72. *The Financial Times*. 2014. China poised to pass US as world’s leading economic power this year. <https://www.ft.com/content/d79ff88-cfb7-11e3-9b2b-00144feabd0c> Accessed 16 December 2018.
73. *The Wallstreet Journals*. 2017. China says prepared to lead global economy if necessary. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-says-prepared-to-lead-global-economy-if-necessary-1485178890> Accessed 20 December 2018.
74. *The Washington Post*. 2018. In the age of Trump and Brexit, China’s national hubris is on the rise. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/01/31/in-the-age-of-trump-and-brexits-chinas-national-hubris-is-on-the-rise/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.c4e781b75bcf](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/01/31/in-the-age-of-trump-and-brexits-chinas-national-hubris-is-on-the-rise/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c4e781b75bcf) Accessed 2 December 2018.
75. *The Washington Post*. 2018. Trump’s national security strategy marks a hawkish turn on China. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/12/18/trumps-national-security-strategy-marks-a-hawkish-turn-on-china/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.9a72034dfe34](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/12/18/trumps-national-security-strategy-marks-a-hawkish-turn-on-china/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9a72034dfe34) Accessed 1 December 2018.
76. Wang, Yi. 2017. China Strives to be anchor for world stability. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/08/c\\_136113471.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/08/c_136113471.htm) Accessed 16 August 2018.
77. Wang, Yi. 2017. One Belt, One Road is the most popular international public product to date. <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/0323/c157278-26737546.html> Accessed 20 August 2018.
78. Wang, Yong. 2016. Offensive for defensive: the belt and road initiative and China’s new grand strategy. *The Pacific Review* 29 (3): 455–463.
79. Welch, D.A. 2003. Why International Relations theorists should stop reading Thucydides. *Review of International Studies* 29 (3): 301–319.

80. Welch, D.A. 2015. Can the United States and China avoid a Thucydides Trap? <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/06/can-the-united-states-and-china-avoid-a-thucydides-trap/> Accessed 9 July 2018.
81. Xi, J. 2017. Zai shijing jingji luntan 2017nian nianhui kaimushi shang de zhuzhi yanjiang. [Keynote speech at 2017 World Economic Forum]. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-01/18/c\\_1120331545.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-01/18/c_1120331545.htm) Accessed 15 July 2018.
82. Xi, J. 2017. Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respect. [http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content\\_5234876.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm) Accessed 12 December 2018.
83. *Xinhua*. 2015. Zhongmei buhui xianru xiuxidide xianjing de shida yuanyin [Ten reasons why China and the US will not fall into the Thucydides' Trap]. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-09/27/c\\_1116689742.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-09/27/c_1116689742.htm) Accessed 17 August 2018.
84. Zhao, S. 2013. Foreign policy implications of Chinese nationalism revisited: The strident turn. *Journal of Contemporary China* 22 (82): 535–553.

**Biao Zhang** was educated at the universities of Beijing, Warwick and Exeter, and is currently a lecturer in IR at China University of Political Science and Law. His research interests lie in IR theory and China's foreign relations with the UK and the US. His recent publications include "Hans Morgenthau, Realist Theory of International Leadership, and the Future of Global Order", *Chinese Political Science Review*, and (in Chinese) "Global Britain: British Foreign Policy after Brexit", *Contemporary International Relations*.