Utilization of Thucydides'
History of the Peloponnesian War in International Relations:
A Discontinuist Critique

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Stefanos Georgios Skafidas
s1629093
s.g.skafidas@umail.leidenuniv.nl
BSc. Political Science: International Relations and Organizations
Leiden University
Supervisor: Dr. Claire Vergerio
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Introduction

How do changes in the international order come to be? And what drivers are behind state actions that eventually change the system? These are some of the central questions scholars of international relations have tried to answer. Central to debates about the rise of China today is the so-called 'Thucydides Trap', a concept extrapolated from the *History of the Peloponnesian War* written by Thucydides (460 BC – 395 BC). Famously coined by Harvard professor Graham Allison, the Thucydides Trap entails how a rising power instills fear in a ruling power which has, according to Allison, almost always led to war. Applying the concept to the 21st century, the rise of China will likely lead to war with the US. The Thucydides Trap has gathered such attention, that it has even become part of the political narrative – most notably of Chinese president Xi Jinping.

If it is to play such a significant role in describing major changes in the world order in the 21st century, it is of the utmost importance to understand the meaning of the Thucydides Trap and if an argument from over two thousand years ago is even applicable to contemporary developments. Hence, the research question of this thesis is the following:

To what extent can Thucydides' analysis, with regard to rising powers, be taken out of the historical context it was written in and applied to the current major change in international relations in the shape of the rise of China?

This research question is relevant, as the results of this research further our understanding of the use of Great Thinkers in IR, and more specifically the extent to which it would be useful to cite Thucydides in debates about the current rise of China. It highlights what has gone wrong in the reception of Thucydides in IR today, in contextualist/discontinuist fashion which has not yet been done extensively. Although the reception history of Thucydides in IR has been studied before, the methodology used to apply the Greek's *History* to the rise of China has not yet been analyzed in a systematic manner through a discontinuist approach.

The debate regarding the use of Great Thinkers in IR knows two sides. On the one hand, continuist scholars interpret history as a continuous structural context, using the history of international political thought and the works of Great Thinkers as important points of reference for current theorizing (Keene, 2005, p. 2). Contrarily, discontinuist academics have highlighted the uniqueness of periods in time, underlining how history is not a continuity of lasting problems but a contingency of events, and intellectual- and linguistical contexts in

which Great Thinkers have been situated (see Skinner, 1969). This discussion will be delved into in the conceptual framework chapter of this thesis. In contemporary literature, there is furthermore a division between scholars who are in favor of using Thucydides in IR, i.e. realists, and those who have criticized this use of the Greek author. Both sides to the use of Thucydides will be touched upon in the literature review portion of this work.

In this thesis, Graham Allison's *Destined for war: Can America and China avoid Thucydides's Trap?* (2017) is utilized as an example of the contemporary use of Thucydides' *History*. This book was chosen as it is arguably the most widely discussed exemplar of the contemporary use of Thucydides' *History* to comment on IR, and more specifically on the rise of China. It will be argued from a discontinuist perspective that Graham Allison has fallen into two (main) methodological pitfalls in his use of Thucydides' *History* – firstly by wrongfully extrapolating a 'coherent doctrine' regarding the rise and fall of Great Powers and secondly by using his 21st century vantage point to describe the meaning of the extracted argument, namely the Thucydides Trap. Consequently, a comparison will be made between the Hellenic order anno 431 BC and the contemporary order. Ikenberry's characterization of international orders will be applied – enabling a comparison of the two orders on a wide variety of characteristics without being too extensive for the timeframe of this bachelor's thesis. From this portion, it will become evident that the two orders are polar opposites on every scale provided per characteristic and hence that the Thucydides Trap is not applicable to the current rise of China. Wight's *Systems of States* will most prominently be used as a secondary source on the Hellenic order. Wight's account of the Hellenic order brings together a variety of primary sources, comparing their accounts and accumulating them to create an overview of what the order entailed. For the description of the contemporary order, a variety of sources will be used, including IR textbooks and a range of works on changes in IR.

There are certain limitations to this work. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to read and analyze every single paper and book on the different subjects covered in this work. In this regard, the focus had to be on a limited number of (secondary) sources. Time constraints and the limited length of this thesis have furthermore limited the scope of the comparison of the two international orders. This could have included more background information, more arguments in favor of the non-applicability of the *History* and more anticipated counter-arguments to be debunked. Lastly, limitations in knowledge of the author may have left some stones unturned.

After further laying out the conceptual framework to be used in this thesis, an outline will be given of how Thucydides is used in realism today, and how this use has been criticized. Following said literature review will be a two-fold, original, argumentation. Firstly, an analysis of Allison's *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* will be made through a Skinnerian lens, in which the focus will most notably be on the mythologies of coherence and -parochialism in order to demonstrate how the *History* is currently being misused and misinterpreted by realists. Secondly, a comparison will be drawn between the international order in ancient Greece at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War (431 BC) and now, comparing the two orders according to the five characteristics of international orders provided by Ikenberry and arguing for the non-applicability of the Thucydides Trap to the 21st century due to insurmountable differences between the two orders.

I. Conceptual framework: the use of Great Thinkers in IR

International relations scholarship has frequently appropriated the works of a number of pre-eminent authors from the past (e.g. Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes) (Bedford & Workman, 2001, p. 51). Through the use of said Great Thinkers' works, later authors have developed and explained their own ideas (Keene, 2005, p. 2). However, a growing number of historians of political thought have countered such use of Great Thinkers in IR as it has led to misinterpretations and misuse of their works. The two conflicting approaches to the use of Great Thinkers in IR, the continuity and the discontinuity approach, will be delved into in order to touch upon the broader debate and to provide an outline of and support for the discontinuity approach to be used in this thesis.

Both the continuity and the discontinuity approach rely on "interpretative frameworks to select and make sense of the facts that they relate" (Keene, 2005, p. 5). The continuity approach suggests that the whole point of studying past works is due to their timeless elements in the shape of universal ideas, dateless wisdom and universal application (Skinner, 1969, p. 4). History in this sense is understood as 'scripture', giving abstract lessons about a continuous structural context which in turn generates a number of derivative logics (Lawson, 2010, p. 206). In this regard, it is argued that throughout history, all human thought has been concerned with the same fundamental themes or problems, meaning that the historical limitation of this thought can be transcended (Zuckert, 2011, p. 34). Consequently, although authors from different periods in time have used different words to describe the world, in the end they have meant the same things and can thus be compared to each other (Keene, 2005, p. 17).

Strauss (1953) thus thought that the human mind liberates itself from historical constraints – using Great Thinkers to solve lasting problems.

The case as to why Great Thinkers should not be used in contemporary IR is most notably supported by discontinuist scholars. Central to the discontinuity approach is contextualism. At its core, contextualism locates authors in their historical environments (Bevir, 2011, p. 11). The approach holds that "our ideas constitute a *response* to more immediate circumstances", and that "we should in consequence study not the texts in themselves, but rather the *context* of other happenings which *explains* them." (Skinner, 1969, p. 39). It is an historicist approach, entailing the pursuance of "an understanding of the contingent, disruptive, constitutive impact of local events, particularities and discontinuities" (Lawson, 2012, p. 207). The approach highlights discontinuities between particular periods and is organized around moments of crisis in the theory and practice of international politics, when old beliefs started to fade and new ideas became more prominent (Keene, 2005, p. 5).

Discontinuist critique of the continuity approach is far-reaching. Quentin Skinner's typology summarizes these errors in four mythologies: of doctrines, coherence, prolepsis and parochialism. The mythology of doctrines entails past authors being criticized when they fail to clearly come up with a recognizable doctrine on one of the 'mandatory themes' of a certain discipline (Skinner, 1969, p. 12). In the mythology of coherence, the duty of the continuist interpreter is seen as that of trying to present the ideas postulated in a text in some coherent form – being a procedure of abstracting "the variety of a man's thoughts to the level that they can be said to "attain" some coherence" (Skinner, 1969, p. 17). Continuist thinkers furthermore lapse into the mythology of prolepsis as they are often more interested in the retrospective significance of a given historical work or action than in its meaning for the agent himself (Skinner, 1969, p. 22). Lastly, by utilizing a continuity approach, scholars have applied their own paradigms to ascribe meaning to past arguments, interpreting and applying them through a contemporary theory (Skinner, 1969, p. 28). Through this mythology of parochialism, notions and concepts of past thinkers are morphed into something the original writer never had in mind. As the discontinuity approach can give different insights than the continuity approach, a pure focus on the latter would deprive the study of the history of political thought of valuable insights (Keene, 2005, p. 5). Thus, in this thesis, a discontinuity approach will be applied – looking at Thucydides as a Great Thinker through a different lens than done previously by most IR scholars (and notably realists like Graham Allison).

II. Literature review: current use of Thucydides in IR and its critics

Current use of Thucydides in IR

In Keene's (2015) third phase of the reception of Thucydides in IR, realist scholars have thoroughly integrated Thucydides into political thought. Through the different steps of interpretation and reinterpretation, realist understanding of Thucydides has developed into what it is today. Even though it is questionable to what extent Thucydides' own viewpoint can be deduced from the *History*, realists have selected fragments from the work to support their own assumptions – including those concerning state actors, power, anarchy, morality and justice which define the realist tradition (Korab-Karpowicz, 2017; see also Johnson Bagby, 1995).

Realists, and especially neo-realists, argue that states exist in a world without a higher authority than themselves who can enforce rules or order (Grieco, Ikenberry & Mastanduno, 2015, p. 72). In such a system of anarchy and self-help, where each state is responsible for its own survival, states must rely on their own resources to further their interests (Heywood, 2014, p. 63). According to realists, states are thus free to pursue power, leading to a situation in which power has the superior role in shaping inter-state relations (Korab-Karpowicz, 2017). In this regard, Morgenthau specifically draws on Thucydides, quoting that "it is the law of [men's] nature that they rule whatever they can" (as cited in Morgenthau & Thompson, 1985, p. 40).

Furthermore, as realists see the world as anarchic, they view security as the central problem of international politics (Grieco, Ikenberry & Mastanduno, 2015, p. 73). For states to attain security, it is necessary to increase their power. In this logic, wars are fought to prevent competing nations from becoming stronger militarily (Korab-Karpowicz, 2017). Linking back to Thucydides; Waltz highlights the fact that the Greek writer did not see as the true cause of the Peloponnesian War any particular events which preceded its outbreak. Instead, Thucydides highlighted the concern over relative power positions which formed the deeper cause of the war: the growth in power of Athens which instilled fear upon the Spartans and made war inevitable (Waltz, 2001, p. 159).

What is more, realists claim that there is no place for morality in IR, arguing that there is no tension between a demand for morality and the requirements of successful state action; that states do not have their own particular morality; and that if morality is employed, it is merely used as an instrument to justify actions (Korab-Karpowicz, 2017). Realist scholars such

as Allison (2017a, p. 66) use excerpts of the Melian Dialogue to support their rejection of ethical norms in inter-state relations. This part of the *History* describes the Athenian invasion of Melos, where the latter had to choose between destruction and surrender – with the Athenians asking the Melians not to appeal to justice but to think about their own survival (Korab-Karpowicz, 2017). In this regard, the Athenians argued that the only right thing would be of the stronger to dominate the weaker – equating right with might and excluding considerations of justice from inter-state affairs (Korab-Karpowicz, 2017). Correspondingly, Waltz explicitly draws on the *History*, citing Athenian envoys who state that "into the discussion of human affairs the question of justice only enters where there is equal power to enforce it" (as cited in Waltz, 2001, p. 211).

Building on these assumptions of realist theory, Thucydides' *History* is being used as the basis for theories that specifically explain large scale changes in the international order. The fundamental assumption of Gilpin's well-known Theory of Hegemonic War, that the dynamic of IR is provided by differential growth among states, is directly drawn from the *History* (Gilpin, 1989, p. 15). In this sense, central to the dynamic of the Hellenic order was the differential growth between Sparta and Athens, with the latter accumulating more power than the former, which ultimately led to war (Gilpin, 1989, p. 17). Directly drawing on this logic, Gilpin argues that the recurrence of war is due to continuous changes in the distribution of benefits and costs among members of the system (Welch, 2003, p. 1). Updating Thucydides' "realism" (Nye, 1989, p. 8), Gilpin posits that, in a situation of unequal growth in power (in military, technological and economic terms), the international order falls into disequilibrium (Gilpin, 1981, p. 14). Benefits of changing the order start to outweigh the costs, giving rising powers powerful incentives to do so. Gilpin then argues that, as the system then goes into crisis, although peaceful resolution is theoretically possible, throughout history it has almost always led to war (Gilpin, 1981, p. 15).

The case against using Thucydides in IR

The case as to why ancient thinkers should not be used in contemporary IR is most notably supported by discontinuist scholars. The point of departure for these academics is the questionable reception history of certain notions in IR. Reception theory questions the predominance of a received canon of great texts (Thompson, 1993, p. 249). Thompson argues that, if more attention were paid to the theory and practice of literary *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, more historically sensitive studies in the history of political thought would be done – devoted

to the changing reputations of past writers and the changing meanings of past texts (Thompson, 1993, p. 269). In his reception history, Thucydides has been interpreted and reinterpreted various times (Keene, 2015, p. 366). The strong focus on Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War has been associated with a certain kind of understanding of challenges one faces when thinking about IR: *inter alia* the inevitability of power balancing and conflict in the international system (Keene, 2015, p. 367).

In critical scholarship on the contemporary use of Thucydides' *History* in IR, David Welch is one of the only academics to specifically criticize realists in their use of Thucydides from a non-continuist approach. Welch's critique of Thucydides' use in IR is two-fold – laying blame on both realists and on Thucydides himself. Firstly, Welch argues that realists' interpretation of Thucydides has for a large part entailed boiling the *History* down to a small number of specific passages and a very general characterization of the dynamics between city-states to be found in the text (Welch, 2003, p. 304). Hobbes' (1629) translation and distillation of Thucydides' *History* got into the hands of later thinkers who, inspired by natural sciences, progressively made it more and more concentrated to the point where "it is now positively toxic" (Welch, 2003, p. 317). The dominant paradigm in IR today thus evolved from a particular reading of Thucydides which was reinforced over the centuries by a self-referential hermeneutic device (Welch, 2003, p. 317). Mistreating the *History* has led to selective reading, anachronism, misattribution and confusion of evidence with authority which according to Welch have distorted the proper intellectual development of the field (Welch, 2003, p. 302). Moreover, Thucydides has unjustifiably been used to mirror our own assumptions, convictions and biases (Welch, 2003, p. 302). In this regard, it is trivially easy for anyone with a certain theory of international relations to find in the *History* something to use as evidence of a claim. Quotes extrapolated from the *History* at random can thus not be used as evidence of Thucydides being a realist theorist who supports the variety of assumptions projected onto him by realists – such a reading of the *History* is hermeneutically inadequate (Bedford & Workman, 2001, p. 52). A case in point is Diodotus' claim in the Mytilenian debate which could be used as evidence of a Democratic Peace Theory, stating that class interests within states can lead to diverging foreign policy prescriptions (as cited in Welch, 2003, p. 314).

Secondly, Welch blames Thucydides for the way the *History* has been used. Thucydides makes it seem as if the *History* is free from interpretation, but for his work to be of enduring relevance he must be directing the reader towards trans-historical truths (Welch, 2003, p. 303). Indeed, Thucydides' wishes for his work to be useful to solve future problems (1.23). However, as he does not offer a philosophical argument nor a theory, this has led to the

abusive interpretation and reinterpretation of the *History* (Welch, 2003, p. 303, see also Kagan, 1969).

Notwithstanding Welch, much of the critical literature focused on the use of Thucydides by IR scholars is written by academics who have stepped into the continuist (realist) frame to explain how the *History* has been misused, applying the same continuist methodology as the authors they criticize (e.g. Ahrensdorf, 1997; Forde, 1995; Monten, 2006). Stepping out of this frame and applying a discontinuist approach is thus done in this thesis. Welch notes that scholars exhibit certain pathologies which are common and difficult to avoid (Welch, 2003, p. 302). However, the author does not touch upon the specific methodological mistakes made in using Thucydides in IR. In this thesis, an attempt is made to fill this gap.

III. A discontinuist critique of Graham Allison's use of Thucydides' *History*

As touched upon in the aforementioned debate, one could posit that the use of the *History* by realists has been problematic. It has been argued how, through the utilization of past works in a continuist manner, the *History* has been abused. How this has been specifically done by Graham Allison, as investigated through a discontinuist Skinnerian lens, will be delved into in this section.

Allison's use of Thucydides can be seen as a 'mythology of coherence', entailing the continuist idea that coherence must be present in a work and that it is the duty of the reader to find the inner coherence of past theorists' doctrines (Skinner, 1969, p. 17). The coherence (or lack of it), discovered by the interpreter of the text, ceases to be an account of historical thought or anything that was actually "thought" in the past for that matter (Skinner, 1969, p. 18). Allison attempts to extrapolate from the *History* a 'coherent' doctrine, namely that of the Thucydides Trap. In *Destined for War*, Allison portrays how the rise of China will most likely result in war due to the Trap, through "the severe structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to replace a ruling one", which has almost always resulted in war (Allison, 2017b, p. 11). This is most prominently based on one quote from the *History*: "τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἡγοῦμαι μεγάλους γιγνομένους καὶ φόβον παρέχοντας τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις ἀναγκάσαι ἐς τὸ πολεμεῖν" - *it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Lacedaemon (Sparta) that made war inevitable* (1.23). It is in this single quote, that Allison 'finds' a doctrine and a primary driver at the root of most (Western) wars, which is most likely to lead to a bellicose rise of China, too (Allison, 2017).

Quentin Skinner furthermore notes a 'metaphysical belief' with regards to the mythology of coherence entailing that, although there may be statements in a work which may seem contradictory, these can be accounted for and do not endanger the message of higher coherence (Skinner, 1969, p. 20). Allison, too, ignores contradictions in his use of the *History*. Although Thucydides presents the War as being started by the ruling power (Sparta), out of fear of the rising power (Athens), he nevertheless states that it was Athens which had an empire "from which it wished to eliminate any Spartan threat by stirring up a war and teaching the hoplite Spartans that they could never win" (Waldron, 2017). Acknowledging contradicting parts of the *History* could endanger Allison's theory of rising powers, making for a strong incentive to ignore said contradictions. However, as Allison's paradigm is itself a product of the interpretation and reinterpretation of Thucydides' *History*, it might as well be the case that he has not read the *History* himself. Indeed, Anthony Vivian notes that Allison makes many factual mistakes when discussing Thucydides and ancient Greece (Vivian, 2017). The result of Allison's abstraction of Thucydides' ideas is not an account of historical thought but a reconstruction of the entire work of a classic thinker into a few quotes and general characterizations to form a "doctrine", which is then used to support a theory of the origins of war.

Besides the non-existent "coherent" doctrine extrapolated from the *History,* Allison misuses his vantage point in describing the 'sense' of the proclaimed cause of the Peloponnesian War. The end-result is a 'mythology of parochialism'. In this respect, scholars may detect (quite rightly so) an argument in a text, but will then use a paradigm they have at their disposal for the description of such an argument (Skinner, 1969, p. 24). With this conceptualization in mind, the person will then turn to the argument and find a theory which the original writer never had in mind (Skinner, 1969, p. 28). In this regard, Allison describes Thucydides' argument, that "it was the fear instilled upon Sparta by the rise of Athens that made war inevitable", through a realist paradigm. This paradigm of power politics, international anarchy and the absence of morality and justice in IR is in turn supported through the arbitrary extraction of certain fragments of the *History* by realists in the 20th century (see Keene, 2015; Ruback, 2015). This realist paradigm, however, is not representative of Thucydides' own thought – illustrative of this is the fact that the Greek did not agree with the Athenians' "realism" in the Melian Dialogue from which the 'absence of morality' presumption stems (Johnson Bagby, 1995, p. 177). The paradigm is nevertheless evident in Graham Allison's work, as the author utilizes a selection of quotes from the *History* just like his realist counterparts (as delved into in the literature review portion of this thesis). The end

result is Allison's theory of rising powers and change in the international order, turning one argument (the cause of the Peloponnesian War according to Thucydides) into a theory of its own through a contemporary realist interpretation of the argument. This 'Thucydides Trap' is then retrospectively applied to sixteen situations in which a rising power threatened a ruling power, arguing for the high likelihood of war in such circumstances. The rise of China and the challenge it poses to the US is thus described by Allison as being prone to war, based upon the attribution of meaning to an utterance uttered in the work of an ancient writer over two thousand years ago, through a paradigm invented in the 20th century.

IV. Comparing two orders: further complications to the application of the Thucydides Trap

Even if one were to try and apply the Thucydides Trap to the current rise of China, it could be argued that the international order then and the international order now are different in such a variety of ways that the application of the Thucydides Trap to the 21st century cannot be justified. In the following section, after providing an outline of and a justification for the tool of comparison to be used, the Hellenic order anno 431 BC and the contemporary order will be analyzed and compared to argue for the non-applicability of the cause of the Peloponnesian War according to Thucydides, to the current rise of China (i.e. "the fear instilled upon the Spartans by the rise of Athens which made war inevitable," interchangeably used with the 'Thucydides Trap').

The meaning of Thucydides' utterances is to be understood in the context in which they were uttered when applying a contextualist discontinuity approach. In this case, the utterance is the Thucydides Trap which is uttered in a certain context: including a particular international order. Though primitive and power-based at certain points in time, international orders have established the terms by which states "command, follow, benefit and suffer" (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 86). 'International order' can thus be said to exist when there are patterned relations between states, with settled arrangements defining and guiding these relations (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 85). In this sense, orders are evolving structures of common understandings, rules, norms and mutual expectations (Hurrell, 2007, p. 16). International orders have differed in geographic scope, functional scope, levels of institutionalization, levels of hierarchy and distribution of power – making for the possibility to compare orders through time (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 86). The following argument will be made regarding the non-applicability of the Thucydides Trap to the 21st century:

1. If the characteristics of international orders offered by Ikenberry are to be seen as relevant, in the sense of being constituent of the contexts in which utterances are uttered; and

2. If it is concluded that the Hellenic order and the contemporary order are polar opposites on every scale provided per characteristic; then

3. The Hellenic order and the contemporary order are too dissimilar for the Thucydides Trap to be applicable to the 21st century

Geographic scope

Geographically, orders have been global or regional – encompassing the entire world or only a limited amount of states (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 86).

The Hellenic order was regional and can be seen as having covered three areas centered around the Aegean Sea (Watson, 1984, p. 48). *Poleis* (πόλεις) in the whole European peninsula south of Macedon and the Aegean Islands were part of the central Greece-area (Watson, 1984, p. 48). The second area entailed the Asiatic Greeks in Asia Minor and a variety of settlements around the Black Sea (Watson, 1984, p. 48). Thirdly, *poleis* had settlements in 'Greater Greece' (Μεγάλη Ελλάς) which were mainly in southern Italy and Sicily (Watson, 1984, p. 48). Hedley Bull also includes Persia and Carthage in this system, due to their frequent interaction with the *poleis* and because they were an "essential factor" in the strategic equation (though Persia significantly more so than Carthage) (Bull, 1977a, p. 14).

The current order encompasses the entire world. Globalization has made for an increasingly interconnected world due to advances in transportation and communication technology (Grieco, Ikenberry & Mastanduno, 2015, p. 462). As a result, states have become part of a shared global order with a continuously deepening and broadening global political process (Heywood, 2011, p. 9). States in the contemporary order are furthermore part of their respective (regional) sub-orders, which are functioning systems that exist underneath the global system (Stewart-Ingersoll & Frazier, 2012, p. 1)

Due to the state being embedded in a regional order, a rising China needs regional support to achieve global hegemony (Farley, 2018). There is however geopolitical competition within China's East Asian order in the shape of South Korea and Japan ("China 'lacks the gene'," 2017). This has made the US-China rivalry not just a bipolar contest, but a complicated web of competition ("China 'lacks the gene'," 2017). Regional powers have limited Chinese power projection and have thus made a Chinese regional hegemony unlikely to materialize

(Acharya, 2014, p. 111). Moreover, Acharya argues that China does not enjoy the legitimacy necessary to build a regional hegemony, as it lacks both an attractive ideology and a sufficient geopolitical restrain towards its neighbors (Acharya, 2014, p. 111). Contrarily, neither Sparta or Athens were part of a sub-order restraining them – the geographic scope of the Hellenic order was too limited in this regard. Even if one were to consider the three areas of the Hellenic order to be separate 'regions', they cannot be considered to be similar to current regional orders as they were inherently part of Hellas (Ελλάς) as an area and cultural tradition (Watson, 1984, p. 48). Persia as an 'essential factor' was furthermore not part of either Great Power's 'area' nor was it involved in the Athenian-Spartan competition – it prudently refrained from getting involved, intervening after almost twenty years of war and only because it was provoked by Athens after the Sicilian expedition in 413 BC (Wight, 1977, p. 89). Neither Sparta or Athens were thus significantly limited in their conduct by other powers pre-war, except for the bipolar competition with the other's alliances. It was in the context of this one-on-one competition in which the Thucydides Trap came to be. Thus, by being embedded into sub-orders, rising powers in the contemporary order are constrained by a layer not existent in the Hellenic order, making for a first complication in the application of the Thucydides Trap to the 21st century.

Functional scope

In their respective functional scopes, orders can range from being centered around just security protection, or also include economic, political, social and other aspects of life (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 87).

The functional scope of the Hellenic system of states was limited to security protections. Most members of the Athenian-led Delian League completely depended upon Athens for their military security (Kagan, 1996, p. 25). In the Peloponnesian League, Spartan allies enjoyed security protection through bilateral defensive military alliances with Sparta (Kagan, 1996, p. 20). Whilst the order was culturally connected through a common Hellenism, much was organized within the *polis* (πόλις) with limited thought on international relations (Wight, 1977, p. 51). Extensive trade and economic interdependence between *poleis* furthermore only came after the Peloponnesian War (Wight, 1977, p. 63).

The contemporary order, on the other hand, is not just organized around security protection – it also organizes a variety of matters in the economic, social and political sphere. In the economic sphere, states are highly interdependent, exchanging capital, goods and services (Cohn, 2011, p. 3). In the social sphere, a variety of treaties has been signed on global

and regional levels governing social issues, with international legal norms as a particular means for the regulation of individual and group-rights (Traisbach, 2017, p. 66). In the political sphere, states have thorough bilateral relations with other states on a variety of issues and have organized themselves in many global- and regional organizations (Traisbach, 2017, p. 59).

Due to the broad functional scope of the contemporary order, both the rising power and the ruling power have significantly more to lose from going to war than if they were to (peacefully) coexist. As the US and China slowly become more equal in their ability to beat each other's military, a possible war would be increasingly more damaging, with neither being confident of winning at an "acceptable price", not only militarily but also economically (Gompert, Stuth Cevallos & Garafola, 2016, p. 73). This is due to the deep economic interdependence that characterizes the contemporary order (Cohn, 2011, p. 168). In case of war, the economic and financial sectors (e.g. stock markets, trade, consumption, foreign investment) of both sides (and the global system in general) would be severely damaged (Gompert, Stuth Cevallos & Garafola, 2016, p. 62). Contrarily, before the Peloponnesian War, possible consequences were not thought of as "not acceptable" by either side. Rising Athens was not poised to be ravaged by Sparta (Kagan, 1969, p. 190). In addition, Kagan argues that the Spartans would have never undertaken a war they truly believed would be long and costly (Kagan, 1969, p. 301). And, as mentioned before, economic interdependence was limited and only increased after the Peloponnesian War (Wight, 1977, p. 63). Even Graham Allison points to economic interdependence (and the possibility of 'mutually assured economic destruction') as a reason why war is not inevitable, with the current order displaying levels of economic integration and cooperation which are not comparable to previous cases in which the Thucydides Trap did 'unfold' (Allison, 2017a, p. 290). Differences between the broadness of the functional scope and considerations regarding the ensuing breadth of losses in case of war between the Hellenic order and the current order thus make for a second complication in the application of the Thucydides Trap to the 21st century.

Levels of institutionalization

In terms of institutionalization, orders can range from entailing limited explicit or formal rules and institutions, to being highly institutionalized with "elaborate, formal and legalistic specifications of the terms of state relations" (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 87).

International organization of the Hellenic states-system was limited and largely based around religious matters, with the most important *amphictyony* (αμφικτυονία, religious league)

being located in Delphi and being as extensive as the entire order (Wight, 1977, p. 53). Especially significant to Thucydides' Greece was the arbitration mechanism as accepted upon in the peace treaty between Athens and Sparta in 446-445 BC. The treaty required both sides to submit future grievances to binding arbitration, which seems to be the first attempt in history to maintain perpetual peace through such a device (Kagan, 1994, p. 31). However, the Hellenic order had no notion of international law: *Hellenes* (Ἑλληνες) did not conceive of the *polis* as possessing rights and being subject to obligations, and did not have legal norms (Wight, 1977, p. 52). Furthermore, it is a common misconception to treat the arbitration clause in the Treaty as 'arbitration' in the proper sense, due to the fact that a key word, *dike* (δίκη), has often been mistranslated. *Dike* did not mean 'law' in the modern sense, but denoted only the determining of right by appropriate proceedings and ultimately a reasonable settlement (Wight, 1977, p. 52; Watson, 1984, p. 54).

Contrarily, the contemporary order is highly institutionalized, with formal, elaborate and legalistic specifications in terms of inter-state relations and appropriate legal mechanisms for settling disputes. Globalization has created an increasing demand for cooperation and decreases the degree of concern with relative gains (Hurrell, 2007, p. 15). In this highly globalized world of global governance, a number of international organizations has been set up, differing in membership, competence, function and decision-making authority – making some more powerful than others (Heywood, 2011, p. 440). International law is furthermore far-reaching, providing guidance and limitations to state practice in the international order, and dispute settlement- and adjudication mechanisms in a variety of fields such as investment- , humanitarian- and human rights law.

In the post-World War II era, American-led organizations such as the IMF, World Bank and WTO have dominated much of the economic- and financial realm, covering a variety of policy areas such as monetary relations, development and trade (Cohn, 2011, p. 22). States have furthermore signed multiple regional trade agreements (RTAs), which have further liberalized intra-regional trade (Cohn, 2011, p. 216). Regional integration has led to regional organizations which provide for cooperative problem-solving by bringing the decision-making process closer to the state than possible through the United Nations (Heywood, 2011, p. 439).

Institutionalization and cooperation in today's order is thus almost all-encompassing, with states working together in almost every policy area one could think of. The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, only knew a limited amount of (religious) institutions and cooperation. Communication in ancient Greece was not easy, often being done by sea (Thucydides, 2012, p. 10). Limited communication strongly encouraged political

fragmentation (Watson, 1984, p. 48). As a result, the Hellenic order was internally disconnected – Spartan "fear" could thus be said to have partly been the result of the disconnect between the itself and Athens, with no direct line of communication due to the absence of technology and a thorough diplomatic system (Wight, 1977, p. 53). In turn, this lack of data and feedback about the other reinforced negatives images of the other (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003, p. 182). Arbitration, being the only institutionalized mechanism for peace in the Hellenic order, was furthermore simply refused by Sparta when offered by Athens at the dawn of the Peloponnesian War (Kagan, 1969, p. 299). In today's order, such isolation from another state is almost impossible – communications technologies have made the world more interconnected than it has ever been; China and the US cooperate on a panoply of issues; and the two are for a large part party to the same (legal) agreements. Today's highly institutionalized order facilitates such cooperation, fostering collective action, resolving conflicts and avoiding war (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 86). Although conflicts have occurred since WWII, these have for a large part been non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) (Buhaug, Gates, Hegre & Strand, 2007, p. 3) and are thus not an example of the international order not being able to avoid a US-Chinese international armed conflict. The significant difference in institutionalization and cooperation between the two orders thus makes for a third complication in the application of the Thucydides Trap to the rise of China in the 21st century.

Levels of hierarchy

Levels of hierarchy determine the distribution of rights and authority among states (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 86). Inter-state relations can be seen as 'contracts' which are imperfect in practice due to the fact that there is a varying 'residual' of rights, obligations and actions which are unspecified in these 'contracts' (Lake, 1996, p. 7). The party which has the ability to, *de jure* or *de facto*, make decisions in this 'residual', is the state which has the ability to control the behavior of other states in some areas (Lake, 1996, p. 7). In this sense, relations between states in the order can be highly hierarchical, entailing relationships between superordinate and subordinate states; or inter-state relations can be less hierarchical, with states operating according to rights and authority which are organized in a more equal and horizontal manner (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 87).

Hierarchy in the Hellenic system was determined according to the respective *poleis* and their allies. In both alliances, there was one superordinate and a number of subordinates – none of which came close to their respective great-power ally. The Peloponnesian League was

a relatively loose alliance led by Sparta, making the latter the first great power in classical Greek history (Kagan, 1996, p. 20). Allies were connected to Sparta by separate treaties, in which each *polis* swore to have the same friends and enemies in exchange for Spartan protection and recognition of its integrity and autonomy (Kagan, 1996, p. 20). The entire alliance met only when the Spartans wanted it to, which was on a few limited occasions. The Athenian alliance was at first of voluntary nature, but later became an empire under Athenian command – functioning for the advantage of classical Greece's second great power (Kagan, 1996, p. 24). Due to its overwhelming dominance, Athenian orders to allies were unlikely to be defied (Kagan, 1996, p. 25). The limited number of neutral *poleis* only knew one semi-formidable military power, Corcyra, which did not come close to the power of the two great *poleis* but still had a large enough naval force to be of some importance (Kagan, 1996, p. 44).

A judgment of the levels of hierarchy in the contemporary order differs according to the theory of IR one applies. Ikenberry (2014) argues that the US organized its relations with allies post-WWII hierarchically. In this sense, the US has used its primacy to institutionalize its power and transform it to rational-legal authority (Finnemore, 2009, p. 69). This is changing, however, as the contemporary order is characterized by its number of powerful (rising) states. Although the US has retained its primacy in the hierarchy, it faces a number of other powerful (rising) states in a variety of issue-areas. Economically, a number of states have exponentially grown over the past decades (e.g. China, India and Brazil), challenging US influence in the economic sphere (Cohn, 2011, p. xi). In addition, non-state actors, most notably in the shape of multinational enterprises (MNEs), have assumed powerful positions in the world economy – being responsible for substantial proportions of global capital formation, global capital formation, global output of goods and services, and global trade (Grieco, Ikenberry & Mastanduno, 2015, p. 267). In the social sphere, emerging powers such as India and Brazil have adopted strategies of 'social creativity', exerting influence through advocacy of new "international norms, regimes, institutions, or developmental models" (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014, p. 41). The main challenge to the US is thus not the rise of China, but the rise in power of a number of others – both state and non-state actors (Nye, 2015, p. 122). Although Allison might argue that it is still China which poses the main challenge to the US, the growth in power of a number of states (notably 'non-Western' G20 members) in a variety of realms is moving the current order towards more multipolarization of power (see Stuenkel, 2016).

Levels of hierarchy in the contemporary order thus fundamentally differ from those in the Hellenic hierarchy. The Hellenic order entailed high levels of domination by two great

poleis, with only a single *polis* rising to challenge the ruling state. Spartan "fear" of a rising Athens was part of this order, with Athens endangering Sparta's ruling position in the hierarchy by gaining military power. Contrarily, the challenge to the US is not that it will be overtaken by China but the fact that a number of state- and non-state actors are rising in power. It is this diffusion of power resources which will make the US less able to control others (Nye, 2015, p. 122). Indeed, Acharya (2014) argues that the world is moving towards a multiplex order with decentralized agency and leadership. The current contest is thus not only a bipolar competition which characterized the rise of Athens (and Thucydides Trap) in the Hellenic order. Differences in the 'levels of hierarchy' characteristic thus make for a fourth reason complicating the application of the Thucydides Trap to the 21st century.

Distribution of power

The distribution of power in an international order has been defined in a variety of ways. In this thesis, 'power' as a concept includes some element of hard power (e.g. economic and military resources) and soft power (e.g. the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion instead of coercion and payment) (Nye, 2017). In the international order, power can be organized around a certain number of poles. A multipolar order entails a highly decentralized distribution of power, with three or more powerful states. Bipolar orders revolve around two preeminent states which are roughly equal in power, entailing a relatively centralized distribution of power. Lastly, a unipolar order entails a highly centralized distribution of power, with one preeminent state/pole.

The distribution of power in the Hellenic system was that of a *diarchy* (δυαρχία) of two hegemonic powers in a joint hegemony of the Hellenic order/civilization (Watson, 1992; Wight, 1977). However, the *diarchy* was unstable and uneasy due to Spartan dislike and fear of Athenian power (Wight, 1977, p. 61). The Hellenic system was in this respect unique, as there were no attempts to preserve the balance of power in the system (Bull, 1977b, p. 17). In this regard, Sparta stated that "the dualism had to be accepted until it could be smashed" (Wade-Gery, 1958, p. 255). Additionally, Pericles, Athens' first statesman, meant for the Spartan-Athenian dualism to be provisional (Wade-Gery, 1958, p. 253).

In the Hellenic order, to be powerful meant having a relatively large military compared to other *poleis*. Thus, knowing little commerce, Spartan military power stemmed from the fact that all families and individuals in Sparta were subordinated to the needs of the *polis* through obligatory military service for men starting at the age of seven (Kagan, 1996, p. 19). Power

and prosperity of the Athenian democracy depended on its command of its great maritime empire, which necessitated a large Navy (Kagan, 1996, p. 24).

The distribution of power in the contemporary order can be seen as a complex three-dimensional chessboard, as illustrated by Nye (2004). The top layer is military power which is unipolar and dominated by the US, which spends more on its military than the next eight states combined (Carroll, 2016). This has been translated to a permanent military presence abroad, projecting military power on a global scale and often acting as the world's policeman (Nye, 2015, p. 18; Davis, 2017). The middle layer is economic power, which is multipolar due to the diffusion of economic growth of countries such as China, India and Brazil – leading to a global economic scene dominated by no single country (World Bank, 2011, p. 1). Lastly, the bottom layer of the chessboard consists of transnational or cross-border transactions of non-state actors which are largely outside of state control, in which power is dispersed in a chaotic fashion (Nye, 2004). These include non-governmental organizations and transnational social movements (Hurrell, 2007, p. 25).

When comparing the Hellenic order and the contemporary order with regards to the characteristic of the 'distribution of power', the two orders are, again, polar opposites. With military power being central to the Hellenic order, Spartan fear of Athens was based on the threat it posed to the *polis* through military defeat. A major shift in the distribution of said military power caused instability and fear, leading to the Spartan desire (though arguably encouraged by Athens) to rid itself of its major challenger (Wade-Gery, 1958, p. 255). Contrarily, the distribution of power in the contemporary order is multidimensional due to the various sources of power. The rise of China over the past thirty years has thus meant exponential economic growth, while its military spending is still only one-third of that of the US (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2017). In this regard, China will not soon be America's equal in global power projection in the military sphere (Nye, 2015, p. 63). The realist argument of the lasting centrality of military power in inter-state relations therefore does not completely hold: the centrality of the change in distribution of military power to relations between the 'rising' and the 'ruling' power in the Hellenic order is not present in the contemporary order. The Thucydides Trap, as based on expanding military power of one of the two poles in the *diarchy*, is thus the antithet of the contemporary order – making for a fifth and last (accumulative) reason as to why the Thucydides Trap is hardly applicable to the contemporary order.

Conclusion

A two-fold argument has been made in this thesis. Firstly, it has been argued from a discontinuist point of view in what two (main) ways Thucydides' *History* has been abused by Allison. It has been shown how, by taking a few quotes from the *History*, realist scholars have fallen into the pit-fall of the 'mythology of coherence' by extrapolating a seemingly 'coherent' doctrine from the Greek's work even though the *History* contains no such thing. In this regard, contradictions to the extracted 'Thucydides Trap' have been willfully ignored by realists. It has furthermore been underlined how Allison and realists have used their vantage points in explaining the 'sense' of the *History*, with scholars using their own realist paradigm to ascribe meaning to arguments found in the text. In this 'mythology of parochialism', the *History* is (wrongfully) used to support basic realist assumptions regarding state actors, anarchy, morality and justice through a selective reading of the work. In turn, the cause of the Peloponnesian War was interpreted through this realist paradigm and consequently turned into an extension of the theory.

Secondly, in this thesis it has been argued through a comparison of the Hellenic- and contemporary order that, even if one were to try and apply it to the contemporary order, the Thucydides Trap is not applicable. The comparison has underlined the breadth of differences between the two orders; on every scale provided per characteristic of international orders, the two have been proven to be polar opposites. Cumulatively, the differences amount to the two orders being too dissimilar for the Thucydides Trap to be applied in the context of the contemporary order. Although the analysis may have seemed simplistic at times, this has been because the two orders are noticeably different, which has made the comparison relatively straightforward. The result, however, is further evidence that not every observation made at a distant point in time can be taken out of context and applied to any development a scholar decides upon. All in all, it can thus be said that the real 'Thucydides Trap' is to take the *History* out of its historical context and applying it to contemporary developments. Thucydides gives us an account of a period of twenty-seven years of human history, touching upon the developments prior to the outbreak of one war and giving us a cause of said war. Notwithstanding the possibility for productive use of other historical works in IR, the particular logic put forward in the *History* can hardly be applied to over two thousand years to provide mankind with trans-historical truths of the inner workings of international politics.

Ignoring this fact goes against the notion of respecting the uniqueness of certain historical events and -thought, as promoted by a growing number of historians of political thought.

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