

**CHINA, THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE
AND WAR: AVOIDING THE
THUCYDIDES TRAP?**

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Executive Summary

1. In September 2015, President Xi Jinping rejected the fatalistic view that China and the United States are destined for war. He affirmed: “There is no such thing as the so-called Thucydides trap in the world. But should major countries time and again make the mistakes of strategic miscalculation, they might create such traps for themselves”.
2. Xi flagged the Thucydides Trap (TT) as a matter of concern during his US state visit as the concept seemed to have gained ground among certain American elites and intellectuals.
3. While war between the United States and China appears unthinkable (both being nuclear powers), the contrarian belief that war is probable between them may make the TT a self-fulfilling prophesy if such thinking were to gather momentum.
4. Although Harvard Professor Graham Allison coined TT to describe the dyad of a rising power challenging a status quo or declining great power, the concept originated from Greek historian Thucydides almost two and a half millennia ago.
5. Thucydides categorically stated: what “made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta”. The disturbing analogy is: what “made war inevitable is the growth of Chinese power and the fear which this caused in the United States”.
6. According to the Belfer Centre of Harvard University, 12 out of 16 cases of great power transition in the last 500 years broke out in war.
7. To avoid the TT, President Xi has proposed a “New Type of Major Power Relations” (NTMPR)—a peaceful win-win approach (positive-sum game) based on mutual benefit and respect rather than the zero-sum game of traditional great power rivalry and war.

8. However, the US superpower appears sceptical of the NTMPR proposal and unwilling to grant parity status to China.
9. In October 2015, the United States sent a naval destroyer within 12 nautical miles of Beijing's artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea. Arguably, the United States does not subscribe to Xi's concept of a NTMPR based on mutual respect of core interests.
10. The danger of the TT is also between China and US allies of Japan, the Philippines and Taiwan (quasi-ally) which may entangle the United States into a collision course with China.
11. Whether actions by China's ally in the Korean peninsula, and American allies in the Taiwan Strait, East China Sea and the South China Sea will unleash a chain of events that drags the great powers in a war just like the allies of Sparta and Athens two and a half millennia ago remains unknown.