

3. La distribution de la puissance, équilibre ou hégémonie

Il n'est pas permis d'espérer, parmi les hommes, qu'une puissance supérieure demeure dans les bornes d'une exacte modération, et qu'elle ne veuille dans sa force que ce qu'elle pourrait obtenir dans la plus grande faiblesse. Quand même un prince serait assez parfait pour faire un usage si merveilleux de sa prospérité, cette merveille finirait avec son règne. L'ambition naturelle des souverains, les flatteries de leurs conseillers et la prévention des nations entières ne permettent pas de croire qu'une nation qui peut subjuguier les autres s'en abstienne pendant les siècles entiers.

FÉNELON

Problématique de la séance

L'équilibre des puissances est une notion très souvent utilisée et très diversement comprise. S'agit-il d'un principe à l'œuvre dans les relations internationales avec la régularité d'une loi de la nature, qui condamnerait tout État devenu trop puissant à faire face tôt ou tard à la coalition des autres États menacés par sa prééminence ? Faut-il y voir plutôt un projet délibéré des grandes puissances, qui s'entendraient pour maintenir entre elles un équilibre dont dépendrait l'ordre du monde ? La répartition de la puissance contemporaine est-elle déjà redevenue bipolaire ou les États-Unis conservent-ils leur prépondérance par rapport à la Chine ? Et si l'histoire des relations internationales était moins celle de la recomposition permanente de l'équilibre que celle de la transition d'une hégémonie à une autre ?

Extraits proposés à la lecture

1. Richard LITTLE, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths and Models*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 4-12.
2. Kenneth WALTZ, *Theory of International Politics*, Boston, Addison-Wesley, 1979, pp. 118-126.
3. Hedley BULL, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, Londres, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 (1977), pp. 99-105.
4. John MEARSHEIMER, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, pp. 21-22, 46-47.
5. Robert GILPIN, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 186-198.
6. Graham ALLISON, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston/New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017, pp. 11-12.

Extrait n° 1. Richard LITTLE, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths and Models*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 4-12.

(...)

The sheer longevity of the balance of power idea is unchallengeable. If the essence of the balance of power theory is encapsulated by the idea of counterbalancing hegemony, then it is possible to trace the theory back to the work of contemporary historians and political theorists who described and analyzed the relations that existed among the Italian city states in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (...) Ever since that time it has remained a widely held assumption that when a great power shows signs of attempting to dominate the international system, then other great powers will ally in order to preserve their own security by establishing an unequivocal counterweight to the aspiring hegemon. Since all great powers are seen to be aware that this is the probable response to any hegemonic venture, there is little incentive to try to establish hegemony within the system. In this event, the balance of power theory can be viewed as a self-fulfilling prophecy. But it is clearly a prophecy that has sometimes been disconfirmed by events. Over the last two hundred years, there have obviously been leaders like Napoleon and Hitler who have attempted to establish a Eurasian hegemony, although in line with the balance of power theory, they were eventually confronted and defeated by an overwhelming anti-hegemonic coalition.

The balance of power, however, is not only associated with the idea of anti-hegemonic alliances. It is also linked to the idea that states have habitually attempted to maintain their security and promote their interests by joining forces with other states. If one group of states ally in an attempt to promote their common interests, then the balance of power thesis presupposes that other states, observing this development, and fearing that they might be the potential victims of this alliance, will combine and form a counter-alliance. In this case, instead of an overwhelming alliance forming against an aspiring hegemon, there will be two sets of competing alliances that establish a balance of power.

Although most theories in the contemporary study of international relations can trace their provenance some way back into the past, there is no other theory that has the extended pedigree of the balance of power. However, the theorists examined in this book, who came to the fore after the end of the Second World War, were well aware that they were confronting a very different environment to the one that had confronted European theorists and practitioners from the Renaissance through to the twentieth century. At the start of this period, Europe was situated on the edge of Eurasia, at the end of trading routes that extended across the hemisphere to societies that were richer and more powerful than any that existed in Europe. Yet by the twentieth century, there were few if any areas of the world where the Europeans had not had some impact.

As we move into the twenty-first century, moreover, there is a substantial and growing debate about whether or not this impact was more malign than benign. But either way, by the end of the Second World War the future of Europe no longer lay solely in European hands. The centre of global power had shifted to the United States and it was thinking about international politics within this polity that began to count in the future.

Three key factors almost immediately began to differentiate the American experience from the European experience and all three had crucial consequences for a balance of power perspective on international politics. The first was that the United States had the power to shape a new world order and, indeed, they wanted to establish an order that was very different from the order that had prevailed in Europe. The thinking is very evident in a statement made in 1943 by Francis Sayre, an influential State Department official, concerning the prospects for a post-war peace settlement. He argued that ‘if we are to build for lasting peace, we must abandon the nineteenth-century conception that the road to peace lies through a nicely poised balance of power. Again and again world experience has told us that no peace dependent upon a balance of power lasts’ (...) The second difference was that the United States had to contend with the Soviet Union, another state that also had pretensions to establish a new global order but an order that was radically opposed to the one that the United States had in mind. The third difference was that the United States had developed a weapons system that was immediately seen to have the potential for global destruction and it was quickly apparent that the Soviet Union had the technological capability to follow suit.

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An important aspect of the complexity associated with the balance of power, however, is often not acknowledged or even registered in the contemporary field because of the dominance of American realists who ostensibly adhere to a strictly materialist approach to theory-building. From their perspective, the balance of power is a product of the insecurity experienced by states operating in an anarchic international system. Although there are significant areas of disagreement among these realists, it is generally accepted that the great powers monitor the material power possessed by all the other states in the international system and endeavour to manipulate the resulting distribution of power in their own favour as a means of enhancing their chances of survival. I associate this approach with an *adversarial* view of the balance of power.

By contrast, although this alternative line of thinking is not widely acknowledged, English school theorists (and as I show in Chapter 4 classical realists such as Morgenthau) also link the balance of power to the existence of an international society and their approach requires them to take account of ideational as well as material factors. One of the crucial ideational factors is the recognition by great powers that they have a collective responsibility to maintain order in the international society and

that as a consequence they are required to establish and maintain the balance of power. English school theorists argue that it is the institutionalization of this idea that has preserved the contemporary international society and that the impact of this idea distinguishes this society from previous international societies that have emerged across world history. I link this approach with an *associational* view of the balance of power.

From either of these perspectives, however, events since the end of the cold war create a potential anomaly for the resulting theory because the fragmentation of the Soviet Union is seen to have left the United States as the sole super power in a unipolar world. Unsurprisingly, therefore, debates about the balance of power have become even more vociferous in the post-cold war era. For critics, the balance of power looks increasingly anachronistic and unhelpful as a tool for understanding international relations. By contrast, unipolarity has acted as a spur for advocates of the balance of power who have endeavoured to refine their theories to make sense of the reputedly unipolar world that has persisted since the end of the cold war. Many American realists argued, initially, that unipolarity is a very unstable structure and the other great powers in the system would soon begin to balance against the United States. When this did not happen, alternative explanations developed, with, for example, some theorists arguing that unipolarity is likely to be an enduring and stable structure, and others postulating the idea of soft balancing or even arguing that the nature of the international system has undergone fundamental changes that render hard balancing (in the form of arms races and military alliances) redundant. But unreformed balance of power theorists continue to insist either that the United States is restrained by the potential that still exists for balancing, or that balancing is already beginning to come back into play. During the post-cold war era, therefore, American realism provides an increasingly pluralized approach to the balance of power.

Extrait n° 2. Kenneth WALTZ, *Theory of International Politics*, Boston, Addison-Wesley, 1979, pp. 118-126.

(...) A balance-of-power theory, properly stated, begins with assumptions about states: They are unitary actors who, at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination. States, or those who act for them, try in more or less sensible ways to use the means available in order to achieve the ends in view. Those means fall into two categories: internal efforts (moves to increase economic capability, to increase military strength, to develop clever strategies) and external efforts (moves to strengthen and enlarge one's own alliance or to weaken and shrink an opposing one). (...) To the assumptions of the theory we then add the condition for its operation: that two or more states coexist in a self-help system, one with no superior agent to come to the aid of states that may be weakening or to deny to any of them the use of whatever instruments they think will serve their purposes. The theory, then, is built up from the assumed motivations of states and the actions that correspond to them. It describes the constraints that arise from the system that those actions produce, and it indicates the expected outcome: namely, the formation of balances of power. (...)

To contrive and maintain a balance may be the aim of one or more states, but then again it may not be. According to the theory, balances of power tend to form whether some or all states consciously aim to establish and maintain a balance, or whether some or all states aim for universal domination. (...)

The theory leads us to expect states to behave in ways that result in balances forming. To infer that expectation from the theory is not impressive if balancing is a universal pattern of political behavior, as is sometimes claimed. It is not. Whether political actors balance each other or climb on the bandwagon depends on the system's structure. Political parties, when choosing their presidential candidates, dramatically illustrate both points. When nomination time approaches and no one is established as the party's strong favorite, a number of would-be leaders contend. Some of them form coalitions to check the progress of others. The maneuvering and balancing of would-be leaders when the party lacks one is like the external behavior of states. But this is the pattern only during the leaderless period. As soon as someone looks like the winner, nearly all jump on the bandwagon rather than continuing to build coalitions intended to prevent anyone from winning the prize of power. Bandwagoning, not balancing, becomes the characteristic behavior.

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In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power. Because power is a means and not an end, states prefer to join the weaker of two coalitions. They cannot let power, a possibly useful means, become the end they pursue. The goal the system encourages them to seek is security. Increased power may or may not serve that end. Given two

coalitions, for example, the greater success of one in drawing members to it may tempt the other to risk preventive war, hoping for victory through surprise before disparities widen. If states wished to maximize power, they would join the stronger side, and we would see not balances forming but a world hegemony forged. This does not happen because balancing, not bandwagoning, is the behavior induced by the system. The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system.

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Extrait n° 3. Hedley BULL, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, Londres, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 (1977), pp. 99-105.

(...)

We mean here by ‘the balance of power’ what Vattel meant: ‘a state of affairs such that no one power is in a position where it is preponderant and can lay down the law to others’. It is normally military power that we have in mind when we use the term, but it can refer to other kinds of power in world politics as well. The state of affairs of which Vattel speaks can be realised in a number of different ways.

First, we have to distinguish a simple balance of power from a complex one, that is to say a balance made up of two powers from one consisting of three or more. The simple balance of power is exemplified by the clash of France and Habsburg Spain/Austria in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and by the clash of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War. The complex balance of power is illustrated by the situation of Europe in the mid-eighteenth century, when France and Austria, now detached from Spain, were joined as great powers by England, Russia and Prussia. (...) However, no historical balance of power has ever been perfectly simple or perfectly complex. Situations of a simple balance of power have always been complicated by the existence of some other powers, whose ability to influence the course of events may be slight but is always greater than zero. Situations of a complex balance of power are capable of being simplified by diplomatic combinations, as for example, the six-power balance of the pre-First World War period was resolved into the simple division of the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente.

Whereas a simple balance of power necessarily requires equality or parity in power, a complex balance of power does not. In a situation of three or more competing powers the development of gross inequalities in power among them does not necessarily put the strongest in a position of preponderance, because the others have the possibility of combining against it.

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Second, we must distinguish the general balance of power, that is the absence of a preponderant power in the international system as a whole, from a local or particular balance of power, in one area or segment of the system. In some areas of the world at present, such as the Middle East or the Indian subcontinent or South-east Asia, there may be said to be a local balance of power; in others, such as Eastern Europe or the Caribbean, there is a local preponderance of power. Both sorts of situation are consistent with the fact that in the international system as a whole there is a general balance of power.

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It is a further step again to the conception of the balance of power as a state of affairs brought about not merely by conscious policies of particular states that oppose preponderance throughout all the reaches of the system, but as a conscious goal of the system as a whole. Such a conception implies the possibility of collaboration among states in promoting the common objective of preserving the balance, as exemplified by the successive grand alliances of modern times against potentially dominant powers. It implies also that each state should not only act to frustrate the threatened preponderance of others, but should recognise the responsibility not to upset the balance itself. It implies self-restraint as well as the restraint of others. (...)

The term 'balance of power' is notorious for the numerous meanings that may be attached to it, the tendency of those who use it to shift from one to another and the uncritical reverence which statements about it are liable to command. It is a mistake, however, to dismiss the notion as a meaningless one, as von Justi did in the eighteenth century and Cobden in the nineteenth, and some political scientists are inclined to do now. (...)

But if we can make clear what we mean by the proposition that preservation of the balance of power functions to preserve international order, is it true? Is it the case that a state which finds itself in a position of preponderant power will always use it to 'lay down the law to others'? Will a locally preponderant state always be a menace to the independence of its neighbours, and a generally preponderant state to the survival of the system of states?

The proposition is implicitly denied by the leaders of powerful states, who see sufficient safeguard of the rights of others in their own virtue and good intentions. Franklin Roosevelt saw the safeguard of Latin America's rights in U.S. adherence to the 'good-neighbour policy'. The United States and the Soviet Union now each recognise a need to limit the power of the other, and assert that this is a need not simply of theirs but of international society at large. But they do not admit the need for any comparable check on their own power.

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Against this we have to set Acton's view that power itself corrupts, that no matter what the ideology or the institutions or the virtue or good intentions of a state in a position of preponderance, that position itself contains a menace to other states which cannot be contained by agreements or laws but only by countervailing power. States are not prevented from falling foul of this by constitutional systems of checks and balances; the corrupting effects of power are felt not merely by the rulers but by the political system as a whole. Rulers who cling to their virtue in situations where possibilities of vice abound tend to be replaced by rulers who do not.

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Extrait n° 4. John MEARSHEIMER, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*,
New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, pp. 21-22, 46-47.

Many in the West seem to believe that “perpetual peace” among the great powers is finally at hand. The end of the Cold War, so the argument goes, marked a sea change in how great powers interact with one another. We have entered a world in which there is little chance that the major powers will engage each other in security competition, much less war, which has become an obsolescent enterprise. In the words of one famous author, the end of the Cold War has brought us to the “the end of history.”

This perspective suggests that great powers no longer view each other as potential military rivals, but instead as members of a family of nations, members of what is sometimes called the “international community.” The prospects for cooperation are abundant in this promising new world, a world which is likely to bring increased prosperity and peace to all the great powers. Even a few adherents of realism, a school of thought that has historically held pessimistic views about the prospects for peace among the great powers, appear to have bought into the reigning optimism, as reflected in an article from the mid-1990s titled “Realists as Optimists.”

Alas, the claim that security competition and war between the great powers have been purged from the international system is wrong. Indeed, there is much evidence that the promise of everlasting peace among the great powers was stillborn. Consider, for example, that even though the Soviet threat has disappeared, the United States still maintains about one hundred thousand troops in Europe and roughly the same number in Northeast Asia. It does so because it recognizes that dangerous rivalries would probably emerge among the major powers in these regions if U.S. troops were withdrawn. Moreover, almost every European state, including the United Kingdom and France, still harbors deep-seated, albeit muted, fears that a Germany unchecked by American power might behave aggressively; fear of Japan in Northeast Asia is probably even more profound, and it is certainly more frequently expressed. Finally, the possibility of a clash between China and the United States over Taiwan is hardly remote. This is not to say that such a war is likely, but the possibility reminds us that the threat of great-power war has not disappeared.

The sad fact is that international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way. Although the intensity of their competition waxes and wanes, great powers fear each other and always compete with each other for power. The overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states. But great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest of all the great powers, although that is a welcome outcome. Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon—that is, the only great power in the system.

There are no status quo powers in the international system, save for the occasional hegemon that wants to maintain its dominating position over potential rivals. Great

powers are rarely content with the current distribution of power; on the contrary, they face a constant incentive to change it in their favor. They almost always have revisionist intentions, and they will use force to alter the balance of power if they think it can be done at a reasonable price. At times, the costs and risks of trying to shift the balance of power are too great, forcing great powers to wait for more favorable circumstances. But the desire for more power does not go away, unless a state achieves the ultimate goal of hegemony. Since no state is likely to achieve global hegemony, however, the world is condemned to perpetual great-power competition.

This unrelenting pursuit of power means that great powers are inclined to look for opportunities to alter the distribution of world power in their favor. They will seize these opportunities if they have the necessary capability. Simply put, great powers are primed for offense. But not only does a great power seek to gain power at the expense of other states, it also tries to thwart rivals bent on gaining power at its expense. Thus, a great power will defend the balance of power when looming change favors another state, and it will try to undermine the balance when the direction of change is in its own favor.

Why do great powers behave this way? My answer is that the structure of the international system forces states which seek only to be secure nonetheless to act aggressively toward each other. Three features of the international system combine to cause states to fear one another: 1) the absence of a central authority that sits above states and can protect them from each other, 2) the fact that states always have some offensive military capability, and 3) the fact that states can never be certain about other states' intentions. Given this fear—which can never be wholly eliminated—states recognize that the more powerful they are relative to their rivals, the better their chances of survival. Indeed, the best guarantee of survival is to be a hegemon, because no other state can seriously threaten such a mighty power.

This situation, which no one consciously designed or intended, is genuinely tragic. Great powers that have no reason to fight each other—that are merely concerned with their own survival—nevertheless have little choice but to pursue power and to seek to dominate the other states in the system. (...)

Although it is depressing to realize that great powers might think and act this way, it behooves us to see the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. For example, one of the key foreign policy issues facing the United States is the question of how China will behave if its rapid economic growth continues and effectively turns China into a giant Hong Kong. Many Americans believe that if China is democratic and enmeshed in the global capitalist system, it will not act aggressively; instead it will be content with the status quo in Northeast Asia. According to this logic, the United States should engage China in order to promote the latter's integration into the world economy, a policy that also seeks to encourage China's transition to democracy. If engagement succeeds,

the United States can work with a wealthy and democratic China to promote peace around the globe.

Unfortunately, a policy of engagement is doomed to fail. If China becomes an economic powerhouse it will almost certainly translate its economic might into military might and make a run at dominating Northeast Asia. Whether China is democratic and deeply enmeshed in the global economy or autocratic and autarkic will have little effect on its behavior, because democracies care about security as much as non-democracies do, and hegemony is the best way for any state to guarantee its own survival. Of course, neither its neighbors nor the United States would stand idly by while China gained increasing increments of power. Instead, they would seek to contain China, probably by trying to form a balancing coalition. The result would be an intense security competition between China and its rivals, with the ever-present danger of great-power war hanging over them. In short, China and the United States are destined to be adversaries as China's power grows.

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My argument, which I develop at length in subsequent chapters, is that except for the unlikely event wherein one state achieves clear-cut nuclear superiority, it is virtually impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony. The principal impediment to world domination is the difficulty of projecting power across the world's oceans onto the territory of a rival great power. The United States, for example, is the most powerful state on the planet today. But it does not dominate Europe and Northeast Asia the way it does the Western Hemisphere, and it has no intention of trying to conquer and control those distant regions, mainly because of the stopping power of water. Indeed, there is reason to think that the American military commitment to Europe and Northeast Asia might wither away over the next decade. In short, there has never been a global hegemon, and there is not likely to be one anytime soon.

The best outcome a great power can hope for is to be a regional hegemon and possibly control another region that is nearby and accessible over land. The United States is the only regional hegemon in modern history, although other states have fought major wars in pursuit of regional hegemony: imperial Japan in Northeast Asia, and Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, and Nazi Germany in Europe. But none succeeded. The Soviet Union, which is located in Europe and Northeast Asia, threatened to dominate both of those regions during the Cold War. The Soviet Union might also have attempted to conquer the oil-rich Persian Gulf region, with which it shared a border. But even if Moscow had been able to dominate Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf, which it never came close to doing, it still would have been unable to conquer the Western Hemisphere and become a true global hegemon.

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Extrait n° 5. Robert GILPIN, *War and Change in World Politics*,
Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 186-198.

The disequilibrium in the international system is due to increasing disjuncture between the existing governance of the system and the redistribution of power in the system. Although the hierarchy of prestige, the distribution of territory, the rules of the system, and the international division of labor continue to favor the traditional dominant power or powers, the power base on which the governance of the system ultimately rests has eroded because of differential growth and development among states. This disjuncture among the components of the international system creates challenges for the dominant states and opportunities for the rising states in the system.

This disequilibrium may be expressed by different formulations, depending on the perspective taken. From the perspective of the system, it involves disjuncture among the components of the system. As noted in the preceding paragraph, although the international distribution of power has undergone a significant change, the other components of the system have remained relatively constant. From the perspective of dominant powers, the costs of maintaining the international status quo have increased, producing a serious discrepancy between one's power and one's commitments. From the perspective of rising powers, the perceived costs of changing the international system have declined relative to the potential benefits of doing so. However the disequilibrium is viewed, what has changed is the distribution of power among the states in the system.

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Throughout history the primary means of resolving the disequilibrium between the structure of the international system and the redistribution of power has been war, more particularly, what we shall call a hegemonic war. In the words of Raymond Aron, describing World War I, a hegemonic war "is characterized less by its immediate causes or its explicit purposes than by its extent and the stakes involved. It affected all the political units inside one system of relations between sovereign states. Let us call it, for want of a better term, a war of hegemony, hegemony being, if not conscious motive, at any rate the inevitable consequence of the victory of at least one of the states or groups" (...) Thus, a hegemonic war is the ultimate test of change in the relative standings of the powers in the existing system.

Every international system that the world has known has been a consequence of the territorial, economic, and diplomatic realignments that have followed such hegemonic struggles. The most important consequence of a hegemonic war is that it changes the system in accordance with the new international distribution of power; it brings about a reordering of the basic components of the system. Victory and defeat reestablish an unambiguous hierarchy of prestige congruent with the new distribution of power in the system. The war determines who will govern the international system and whose

interests will be primarily served by the new international order. The war leads to a redistribution of territory among the states in the system, a new set of rules of the system, a revised international division of labor, etc. As a consequence of these changes, a relatively more stable international order and effective governance of the international system are created based on the new realities of the international distribution of power. In short, hegemonic wars have (unfortunately) been functional and integral parts of the evolution and dynamics of international systems.

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Extrait n° 6. Graham ALLISON, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston/New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017, pp. 11-12.

(...)

In the most frequently cited one-liner in the study of international relations, the ancient Greek historian Thucydides explained, “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”

Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian War, a conflict that engulfed his homeland, the city-state of Athens, in the fifth century BCE, and which in time came to consume almost the entirety of ancient Greece. A former soldier, Thucydides watched as Athens challenged the dominant Greek power of the day, the martial city-state of Sparta. (...)

While others identified an array of contributing causes of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides went to the heart of the matter. When he turned the spotlight on “the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta,” he identified a primary driver at the root of some of history’s most catastrophic and puzzling wars. Intentions aside, when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, the resulting structural stress makes a violent clash the rule, not the exception. (...)

Like so many others, Athens believed its advance to be benign. Over the half century that preceded the conflict, it had emerged as a steeple of civilization. Philosophy, drama, architecture, democracy, history, and naval prowess—Athens had it all, beyond anything previously seen under the sun. Its rapid development began to threaten Sparta, which had grown accustomed to its position as the dominant power on the Peloponnese. As Athenian confidence and pride grew, so too did its demands for respect and expectations that arrangements be revised to reflect new realities of power. These were, Thucydides tells us, natural reactions to its changing station. How could Athenians not believe that their interests deserved more weight? How could Athenians not expect that they should have greater influence in resolving differences?

But it was also natural, Thucydides explained, that Spartans should see the Athenian claims as unreasonable, and even ungrateful. Who, Spartans rightly asked, provided the security environment that allowed Athens to flourish? As Athens swelled with a growing sense of its own importance, and felt entitled to greater say and sway, Sparta reacted with insecurity, fear, and a determination to defend the status quo.

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Thucydides’s Trap refers to the natural, inevitable discombobulation that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power. This can happen in any sphere. But its implications are most dangerous in international affairs. For just as the original instance of Thucydides’s Trap resulted in a war that brought ancient Greece to its knees, this phenomenon has haunted diplomacy in the millennia since. Today it has set the world’s two biggest powers on a path to a cataclysm nobody wants, but which they may prove unable to avoid.

(...)