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THE TWO FACES OF THUCYDIDEAN NECESSITY

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Introduction

Thucydides, the Greek historian of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), has never been more popular, principally due to "Thucydides' Trap", a 2012 coinage of the American political scientist Graham Allison[1]. Drawing from the Thucydidean line about the origins of the Peloponnesian War — that it was the growth Athenian power which caused Spartan fear and thus made war inevitable (1.23.6)[2] — Allison has argued power transition dynamics are dangerously operative in the US China relationship, and that they risk a great power conflict[3]. Since 2012, the Trap, and especially the frightening specter of a US China war, have captured the imagination of academics, policymakers, the media, and the general public, with American and Chinese policymakers at the highest levels discussing Allison's Trap trope.

Even before Allison, Thucydides had been viewed as the first realist, the first IR scholar, or even the first political scientist[4]. What commenta-

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[1] G. T. Allison, *Thucydides's Trap has been Sprung in the Pacific*, in "Financial Times", August 12th, 2012.

[2] Citations to Thucydides are by book, chapter (i.e. paragraph), and line.

[3] Allison expanded his argument in an article in 2015 and then a book in 2017. G. T. Allison, *The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?*, in "The Atlantic", September 24th, 2015; G. T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. For necessity, a translation of the Greek *ananke* and variants, see M. Ostwald, *Ananke in Thucydides*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1988; and M. Fisher, K. Hoekstra, *Thucydides and the Politics of Necessity*, in R. Balot, S. Forsdyke, E. Foster (eds.), "The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides", Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 373-390.

[4] For the reception of Thucydides, see C. Lee, N. Morley (eds.), *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides*, Malden, MA, Wiley Blackwell, 2015.

tors often fail to appreciate, however, is the distance between the Thucydidean project and contemporary social science. This article clarifies elements of this difference by exploring the meaning of the famous line about the necessity or inevitability for a Peloponnesian War, which appears at 1.23.6 of the *History*[5]. To do this, it develops a middle way between the power transition and constructivist interpretations of Thucydidean necessity in International Relations literature. We can call these, respectively, the objective (power transition) and subjective (constructivist) faces of necessity. Both capture a partial truth about necessity in the *History*, but both approach the theme from the wrong end of the telescope. Most importantly, the portrait of necessity in high-stakes foreign policy decision-making serves the education of the reader. It is not a scientific theory for scholar-spectators but rather a practical tool for political actors.

Thucydides' aim was the education of citizens, soldiers, and statesmen (cf. 1.22.4). His work is best understood as a handbook for statesmen. Overall, the *History* is a massive case-study of a generation-long war, itself comprised of a multitude of smaller studies of decision-making. Thucydides' claim about Athenian power and Spartan fear and necessity or compulsion is not a theory or law but rather a roadmap for grasping how the Peloponnesian War broke out, which furnishes the reader with tools for understanding the episodes of book one, which centers on the origins of the war. Overall, book one of the *History* offers an education about necessity in foreign policy decision-making, or what we can call the imperatives of the national interest. Too often the road map of 1.23.6, however, has been mistaken for the destination. These points will become clearer through the identification of the partial truths and errors of the power transition and constructivist readings of Thucydides.

1. *Objective Necessity: A Power Transition Thucydides?*

It was in 2012 in the *Financial Times* that Allison first warned American and China to avoid "Thucydides's Trap," or a war between

[5] This article draws from the argument about inevitability in the *History* developed by S.N. Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

a ruling power (America) and a rising one that threatens to displace it (China). He expanded the argument in *The Atlantic* in 2015 and in a 2017 book, *Destined for War: Can America and Chinese Escape Thucydides' Trap*?. He has repeated his arguments in interviews and articles since. In 2012, Allison maintained that the ability to avoid the Trap is, "The defining question about global order in the decades ahead"[6]. He still believes that. As already noted, the coinage comes from the Thucydidean line about the "inevitability" of (or necessity for) a Peloponnesian war at 1.23.6. According to Allison, this is "the most frequently cited one-liner in the study of international relations"[7]. To use his translation, "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable"[8]. The variables here are rise and rule, with Allison stressing the rapid emergence of the rising power as especially destabilizing to the *status quo*[9].

Allison's Thucydides' Trap has become the most famous variant of a structural or external approach to necessity in the *History*, or what we can call the objective face of Thucydidean necessity. Here, necessity is something out there in the world. It bears upon actors such that they are compelled to behave in X or Y way. This necessity is usually thought of as form of social science causation. On such interpretations, 1.23.6 is a law — a theory about how shifting power causes war[10]. Rapid changes in the power-balance drive conflict between risers and maintainers. And if the model (or theory) works to explain or predict events, then we don't need the perspectives of actors to appreciate how and why wars occur. Consequently, power transition theorists are less interested in decision-making, for that horizon is limited by external or structural pressures.

[6] G. T. Allison, *Thucydides's Trap has been Sprung in the Pacific*, cit.

[7] G. T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, cit., p. 9.

[8] G. T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, cit., p. 4.

[9] G. T. Allison, *Thucydides's Trap has been Sprung in the Pacific*, cit.

[10] R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 93-94; for power transition theory, see A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, New York, Knopf, 1958, pp. 315–316; and A. F. K. Organski, J. Kugler, *The War Ledger*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

In *Destined for War*, Allison expands upon his claim as follows:

> While other observers emphasized proximate causes, Thucydides goes to the heart of the matter, 'As to the reasons why Sparta and Athens broke the truce, ' he writes, 'I propose first to give an account of the causes of complaint which they had against each other and of the specific instances where their interests clashed.' But he warns, 'the real reason for war is most likely to be obscured by such arguments.' Beneath these contributing factors lies a more fundamental cause, and he focuses his spotlight on it. What made war "inevitable," Thucydides tells us, 'was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta'[11].

Thucydides here identifies "the real reason" or "fundamental cause." Allison selects "inevitable" as his translation of the Greek *anankasai,* and he associates inevitability with "fundamental cause." Social scientific inevitability implies causal determinism. Structural forces risk eclipsing the freedom of actors. Backing away from a thoroughgoing determinism, however, Allison maintains war is much more likely than the protagonists recognize. Significant effort is required to avert it. *Destined for War* then has a therapeutic purpose, to help actors avoid war. In speaking so directly to policymakers, there is a kinship between Allison's intention and the Thucydidean one. Both are really writing for political men and not academics. Nonetheless, Allison claims that Thucydides is articulating a social scientific law or theory, which he then uses to capture the attention of American and Chinese policymakers. But 1.23.6 is not precisely a law or theory.

As we will see, Thucydidean necessity does not preclude choice but is instead intimately bound up with it[12]. In foregrounding objective (or structural) circumstances or inertias, Allison focuses on what we can call the objective face of Thucydidean necessity, i.e., those things 'out there' in the world that cause conflict. And this *is* clearly part of what Thucydides is showing readers, how actors can be deeply constrained by their strategic circumstances.

Nonetheless, the subjective perspectives of actors is also part of

[11] G. T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, cit., p. 35. Allison indicates he is drawing on Strassler's update of the Crawley translation of *The Landmark Thucydides*, p. 266, note 2.

[12] See M. Fisher, K. Hoekstra, *Thucydides and the Politics of Necessity*, cit., pp. 374-375.

this story, with the *experience* of a foreign-policy necessity encompassing calculation as well as miscalculation. Inevitability in the sense of causal determinism is therefore misleading, or at best only captures half of the Thucydidean account. This is partly the case because Thucydides is writing before the invention of social science and the modern understanding of cause. Thucydides' own emphasis on the inner horizon of decision-making is suggestive of a constructivist Thucydides, a reading developed most compelling by Richard Ned Lebow, to which we now turn.

2. *Subjective Necessity: A Constructivist Thucydides?*

The most significant rival IR approach to the structural reading of Allison is the constructivist Thucydides developed by Richard Ned Lebow, a critic of Allison and power transition theory[13]. In contrast to structural readings, constructivism does explore the horizon of decision-making, or what we can call the subjective face of Thucydidean necessity. Nonetheless, Lebow appears to conceive of Thucydides as writing for scholars and not actors — as if he were a fellow social scientist — and thus he, too, misses important directions of Thucydidean meaning.

Nonetheless, Lebow stands out for the sensitivity of his readings of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*[14]. In *The Tragic Vision* in 2003, he offers an involved account of the origins of the Peloponnesian war, instead of cherry-picking individual lines[15]. In 2001, he debuted

[13] Lebow is a critic, essentially, of material explanations as to why wars break out.

[14] See R. N. LEBOW, *Thucydides the Constructivist*, in "American Political Science Review", n.3, 2001, pp. 547–560; R. N. LEBOW, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; R. N. LEBOW, B. VALENTINO, *Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory*, in "International Relations", n. 3, 2009, pp. 389-410; R. N. LEBOW, D. P. THOMPKINS, *The Thucydides Claptrap*, in "Washington Monthly", June 28th, 2016; and a solo-authored book on the causes of war, R. N. LEBOW, *Why Nations Fight*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010; finally, he has even developed a grand IR theory influenced by Thucydides. R. N. LEBOW, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[15] For his lengthiest account of the causes of the Peloponnesian War, see R. N. LEBOW, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders*, cit., pp. 115-167.

a constructivist Thucydides in the pages of the *APSR*[16]. In the conclusion, he concedes Thucydides is "both a realist and a constructivist", but the article begins with a provocation: "Movements establish genealogies to legitimize themselves"[17]. In this way, Lebow delegitimates realism by forging a link between Thucydides and his preferred constructivism, focusing on the interplay of identities and interests.

At the deepest level, Lebow argues Thucydides' *History* is "... about the rise and fall of civilization and what might be done to salvage it"[18]. Drawing on Connor's narratological approach, he identifies four levels that Thucydides helps the reader to navigate[19]. Yet he does not flesh out how the episodes of book one are intended to move the reader between his levels, leaving his account underdetermined. More than Lebow appreciates, the Thucydidean education foregrounds decision-making moments. For considerations of civilization, no matter how important, exist at a certain remove from the perspective of actors, who invariably have more local concerns[20].

Consistent with his constructivism, Lebow is a critic of power transition theory. His 2010 monograph *Why Nations Fight* offers a rival theoretical framework as well as case studies, interpreted in constructivist light. There, he attacks power transition theory as well as other theories involving material causation[21]. For Lebow, wars occur because of ideas

[16] R. N. Lebow, *Thucydides the Constructivist*, cit.; for an anthropologist offering a constructivist Thucydides, Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa*, Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2004.

[17] R. N. Lebow, *Thucydides the Constructivist*, cit., p. 559 and p. 547.

[18] R. N. Lebow, *Thucydides the Constructivist*, cit., p. 549; see also R. N. Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, cit., p. 3.

[19] W. R. Connor, *Thucydides*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984. Lebow's interpretative levels are " ... (1) the nature and relationships among power, interest, and justice; (2) Athens as a tragedy; (3) the relationship between *nomos* (convention, custom and law) and *phusis* (nature); and (4) the relationship between *erga* and *logoi* and its implications for civilization." R. N. Lebow, *Thucydides the Constructivist*, cit., pp. 549.

[20] This is not to say that Thucydides' position does not ultimately rise above the perspective of actors. Without denying that political wisdom allows a statesman greater purchase over events than ignorance of it (and despite the title of his book, *The Tragic Vision*), Lebow may underestimate the tragic character of the Thucydidean view of civilization.

[21] The treatment of power transition theory in R. N. Lebow, *Why Nations Fight*, cit., occurs at pp. 33-41. See also S. Chan, *Thucydides's Trap?: Historical Interpretation, Logic of Inquiry, and the Future of Sino-American Relations*, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2020, which critiques Allison's power transition theory claims.

and beliefs[22]. Perception really matters. Again, there are only (allegedly) objective circumstances, which are forever interpreted through the subjective eyes of actors. In 2016 in the "The Thucydides Claptrap", Lebow and Daniel Tompkins, a classicist, reject Allison's Thucydides' Trap by contesting Allison's translation of "inevitable" in 1.23.6 but also by challenging his cases. Lebow and Tompkins maintain that the word Allison translates as "inevitability" (*anankasai*) is better translated as "pressured", though this article will argue that this translation is too weak. Despite Lebow's constructivism, he still foregrounds external "pressure", when, as we will see, necessity itself has a thoroughly internal face[23].

Elsewhere, Lebow has argued that the line about Athenian power at 1.23.6 is the "truest *precondition*" for war[24]. In Lebow's mind, then, Athenian power is not the reason for the Peloponnesian War in the causal sense, but rather its essential precondition, a permissive cause, we might say today. War was *not* inevitable[25]. These claims, however, run afoul strong Thucydidean statements to the contrary, though Lebow is correct to focus on decision-making.

If the power transition reading of the *History* is wrong, then why did a Peloponnesian war break out? To simplify Lebow's interpretation, it was the Athenian challenge to Spartan honor, to Spartan identity, that brought about the war[26]. There were also reinforcing miscalculations on the road to war, which also give the lie to inevitability[27]. As we will

[22] "I contend that most, if not all, foreign-policy behavior can be reduced to three fundamental motives: fear, interest and honor. I believe that we can learn something important about the causes of war by understanding the underlying reasons why leaders go to war. This assumes, as I do, that most wars are set in motion by conscious decisions by leaders to use force, or at least to pursue initiatives they recognize have the potential to escalate into war." N. Lebow, *Why Nations Fight*, cit., p. 14. Here, at least, Lebow really is channeling Thucydides.

[23] R. N. Lebow, D. P. Thompkins, *The Thucydides Claptrap*, cit.

[24] R. N. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders*, cit., pp. 77-78, pp. 107-108, p. 111, p. 159.

[25] Lebow argues that Thucydides' narrative undercuts 1.23.6. R. N. Lebow, *Play it Again, Pericles: Agents, Structures, and the Peloponnesian War*, in "European Journal of International Relations", n. 2.2, 1996, pp. 231-232; R. N. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders*, cit., pp. 64, 105.

[26] R. N. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders*, cit., pp. 67, 84, 100-4, 114, 159; R. N. Lebow, *Thucydides the Constructivist*, cit., p. 549; R. N. Lebow, *Why Nations Fight*, cit., p. 75.

[27] On miscalculation, see R. N. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests*

soon see, this constitutes a misunderstanding of Thucydidean necessity. For Lebow, then, war broke out not because of Spartan fear of Athenian power — he accepts Kagan's contentious claim that Athenian power was not growing between 445-435 BC[28] — but because of Spartan anxiety about its honor and standing, and because of poor strategic decision-making[29]. Lebow's argument could be correct historically, but it does not sufficient find corroboration in Thucydides' text[30].

Indeed, there are good grounds for thinking Thucydides believed Spartan security concerns paramount in the outbreak of war, for he repeats the claim in three places, at 1.23.6, 1.88, and 118.2. If Thucydides intends another explanation, then the burden is on Lebow to explain why Thucydides does not say so. This does not preclude honor from being a motive, of course, even on the Thucydidean account. There are often mixed motives in decision-making, something Thucydides himself shows the reader. Lebow's claim about the existence of reinforcing miscalculations on the road to war is also contestable, though Thucydides is clearly interested in miscalculation[31]. With these sketches of a power transition and constructivist Thucydides now in place, we can offer a different vision of Thucydidean necessity, exploring how its objective and subjective faces work together.

and Orders, cit., pp. 64, 67 (and fn 8), p. 90 (Corinth), pp. 93-95 (Pericles), p. 96 (reinforcing miscalculations), p. 114, p. 159; on war not being inevitable, pp. 89-96. "Corinthian, Spartan and Athenian illusions about the likely consequences of their policies suggest that the Peloponnesian War was the result of an improbable series of remarkably bad judgments made by the leaders of the several powers involved." R. N. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders*, cit., p. 89.

[28] This is *not* Thucydides' position. D. Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1969.

[29] For another account foregrounding — in my view, overestimating — the role of honor in the outbreak of a Peloponnesian war, see J. E. Lendon, *Song of Wrath: The Peloponnesian War Begins*, New York: Basic Books, 2010.

[30] Thucydides is our most important contemporary source for the Peloponnesian War. This does not mean he is correct in all aspects of historical reportage. There is Thucydides' *History* and then the war itself. In practice, disentangling these is difficult. Lebow is correcting Thucydides from Thucydides, though he claims Thucydides intended the correction.

[31] Lebow seems to identify miscalculations by reference to undesirable outcomes. Without denying the value of hindsight, the question is whether a decision was reasonable in prospect. There is little evidence that Thucydides himself believed Periclean resistance to Spartan ultimatums, to give only one example, was strategically unsound.

3. *Necessity, Advantage, and Choice*

To clarify necessity in the *History*, a modern example will prove helpful. The reorientation is necessary because of the conceptual baggage attending social scientific causation, which risks confusing us as to what Thucydides is doing in his account. Let us imagine that during a bank robbery a masked gunman points his gun at a bystander and demands that he bag up the money. We would say that the bystander is compelled to become an accomplice. In what way? He is compelled because he values his life, which is threatened, and so he complies to save it. The imperatives of safety constitute his necessity. If we judge this man's actions reasonable, then we affirm the threat he faced to be exculpatory. Any reasonable actor would do the same, and so the man should not be blamed for complying. Despite aiding in the commission of the crime, our bystander is innocent. Note the recurrent words — reasonable, innocent, and compelled, with the last our surrogate for necessity. Note, too, that claims about necessity (or compulsion) arise within horizon of blame. The bank robber *is* morally responsible, while our coerced accomplice is innocent, precisely because of the coercion. Both were materially involved in the crime, but we apportion the blame differently depending upon our assessment of the relative freedom of the actors. The gunmen robbed freely, presumably, while our coerced bystander did so only under duress. Claims about necessity in the *History* have a similarly exculpatory character.

Throughout Thucydides' first book, claims about the justice and necessity for the war are bound up with the question of the first violator of the Thirty Years Peace, to which the two sides are signatories, and which collapses with the outbreak of war[32]. The question of justice (or blame) relates to the question of the actor morally responsible for the war[33]. Here, the causes of a war can be understood in moral or amoral ways, with the former being the concern of the belligerents, who usu-

[32] E. Baltrusch, *"I Have Set Out First the Grievances and Disputes:" Greek International Law in Thucydides*, in C. Wendt, C. R. Thauer (eds.), "Thucydides and Political Order", New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 6-10.

[33] Thucydides uses the question of the first violator of the Thirty Years Peace to open up a dialectic between justice, necessity, and advantage; see the overall argument of S.N. Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest*, cit.

ally loudly argue about who is to blame[34]. To say Sparta broke the Peace and so Athens must fight is an example of the former (cf. 1.140.2). By launching a preventive war against Athens in violation of the Peace, Sparta caused (and thus is blameworthy for) the war[35]. To argue power transition dynamics actually caused the Peloponnesian War is an amoral account. The Treaty was never going to hold — the actors were compelled by external dynamics — and so they should not be held morally responsible for it. War happens. Amoral accounts shrink the moral horizon, the horizon of decision-making agency and freedom, while privileging dynamics for which we cannot reasonably hold actors responsible, here shifts in the power-balance. There is an analogy here with our *innocent* bystander. Despite not being a power-transition claim, Thucydides' statement about Athenian, power, Spartan fear, and necessity/compulsion is similarly amoral. That claim, however, is ultimately psychological, relating, as it does, to the Thucydidean account of human nature. Nonetheless, insofar as actors are genuinely compelled, then we do not hold them morally responsible for their actions.

Returning to our example, if we believe the necessity under which our bystander acts to be genuine, then it excuses actions for which we would normally hold the man accountable. But if we think the necessity under which our bystander acts to be spurious, then we will hold him accountable. There are gradations here. Judgements about apportioning blame move between the poles of wholly responsible to entirely blameless. In the *History*, appeals to necessity generally involve the defense of the actor against allegations of injustice: "I was compelled; I had no choice." Such defenses may be true or false, offered sincerely or rhetorically. Implied in the invocation of any such claim are the existence of genuine necessities, if disagreement about what constitutes them.

There is, moreover, an implicit relationship between necessity and advantage, which we must now make explicit. When we say that our

[34] The distinction in social science between facts and values suggests that these accounts are incommensurable. Thucydides, for his part, introduces claims about necessity within a horizon of blame, but then uses these claims to move toward amoral causation rooted in the recurring drives of politically relevant human nature.

[35] Sparta failed to arbitrate its disputes with Athens consistent with the Treaty, and the Athenians *did* offer arbitration (cf. 1.78.4, 1.85.2, 1.144.2, 7.18.2).

bystander "had no choice", we really mean that he had no more reasonable choice than compliance. Here, the reasonableness of his choice is assessed by reference not only to the likelihood of achieving his own aim — safety— but also with respect to the reasonableness of his aim. For our bystander *did* have other choices, including foolish ones. Choice and necessity are therefore not opposed.

Let us sketch the thinking of our bystander. Like most people, he prioritizes safety. In most circumstances, it would be intolerable for him to risk his life. As the robbery begins, he judges the danger posed by the gunman to be credible and severe. He decides that compliance instead of riskier flight or riskier attack is safest and thus best. To render overly neat a less than rational process, he assesses his strategic situation (the threat), identifies options he ranks by outcomes with reference to safety (flee, attack, comply), and selects compliance as the security-maximizing choice. Given the intensity of his concern with his safety, the other options appear intolerable to him. He thus *feels* compelled to comply. The form of assessment is utility maximization, where the necessity of the action hinges upon the utility to be maximized. Necessity, then, stands revealed as a *conditional* imperative, conditional upon advantage. In the *History*, necessity in foreign policy decision-making proves conditional upon what Thucydides calls the advantageous things, or what we today call the national interest. The motivations that condition the experience of a foreign policy necessity appear to be the famous Thucydidean trinity of fear (i.e., security), honor, and interest (cf. 1.75.5 and 1.76.1-2)[36].These, too, ultimately prove bound up with the Thucydidean account of human nature.

What if our bystander is mistaken in his judgement/s? This raises the question of genuine versus spurious necessity. Yet believing something to be necessary makes it so for the actor. The experience of necessity is, therefore, separable from its genuineness. The necessity of the fool is no less motivating for the fool than the necessity of the wise man is for the wise man. Spurious necessities pose as genuine ones. The issue at stake in the matter of genuine versus spurious necessity relates to the ends political actors ought to pursue, but also whether they have effectively married their means to their ends. All of this is

[36] For a complete interpretation of this Athenian speech, S.N. Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest*, cit., pp. 76-101.

tied to an understanding of the way of the political world. The genuineness of a necessity then is dependent upon a proper understanding of international politics, along with sound judgements about it, the education to which is the broadest pedagogical aim of Thucydides' *History*, taken as a whole.

Again, Thucydides' aim is to fit citizens, soldiers, and statesmen to the world. If Athens and Sparta, say, both think war is necessary, then it becomes necessary. If Athens believes it has no more reasonable choice than war, and if Sparta comes to believe the same, then a Peloponnesian war is the objective result of the subjective necessities of Athens and Sparta, the competing *imperatives* of their national interests. Indeed, Thucydides' first book progressively reveals how Athens and Sparta came to see war as unavoidable in precisely this sense.

4. *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*

The first book of the *History* shifts between the immediate triggers for war and the broader dynamics and back again. Ultimately, the architectonic necessity for the war proves to be the conjoint product of the *disparate* (subjective) necessities of Athens and Sparta, while the triggering events isolate key moments of Athenian growth and Spartan anxiety about it[37]. As they move through book one, Thucydides invites readers to keep their eyes on power, fear, and necessity[38]. It is the recurrence of these themes that unlocks the meaning of the episodes as a teaching for political actors.

1.23.6 sheds light on two security dilemmas. Regarding these dilemmas, both involve Corinth, a middle rate power. It is Corinth that drags Sparta into a preventive war against Athens. Thucydides bookends the escalating clashes between Athens and Corinth, over Corcyra and Potidaea, respectively, with statements about the moral and legal allegations the parties have against one another regarding the violation

[37] This abridgement draws from S.N. Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest*, cit., pp. 20-58.

[38] I term those ways Thucydides speaks through the speeches to the reader as "double communication," S.N. Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest*, cit., p. 10. The Thucydidean repetition of terminology is one such form.

of the Peace (cf., 1.55.2 and 1.66). Athens, for its part, is faced with the choice of whether it should ally with Corcyra or not — a technically legal action — but one which increases the odds of war. Of course, if war is coming independent of alliance, then Athens would be foolish not to make one. Nonetheless, by making the alliance Athens puts itself on a collision course with Corinth, a Spartan ally. This is the Athenian security dilemma. The Athenians hedge and form a defensive alliance, which still predictably leads to a clash with Corinth. They feel *compelled* to do so. The corresponding security dilemma Sparta faces is the danger of Corinthian defection, for when Athens and Corinth skirmish, the Corinthians feel *compelled* to turn to Sparta for help. In this context, Corinth threatens defection, which could lead to the defection of others. At this moment, Sparta feels *compelled* to defend its allies, while Athens feels *compelled* to resist Spartan aggression. This word *compelled* is what is intended by Thucydidean necessity. Crucially, these actors are compelled by the imperatives of their national interests. A foreign policy necessity, then, emerges from that contact between an outside, objective circumstance and an inner or subjective vision of the national interest — it occurs at a decision moment.

Conclusions

Given the two faces of Thucydidean necessity, how might we better understand the educational purpose of the *History*? First, the *History's* lessons are not laws but rather softer guidelines or frameworks or conceptual tools. An education in foreign policy decision-making involves, first, the discerning of formal patterns within a shifting, complex reality; second, the identification of these same patterns in different situations; and, third, the ability to apply lessons to new circumstances. The engine of this learning is analogical reasoning, which is geared toward improving the judgement of the political reader.

Regarding the conditional interests at the heart of the experience of necessity, these are partially shaped by regime character in the *History*. In Thucydides' pages, Athens is the real Athens, of course, but the city is also the quintessence of a daring, acquisitive power, while Sparta is the exemplar of a status quo one. Regime character is separable from the strategic positionality of the cities vis-a-vis each other as

well as from the power-balance. In the Peloponnesian War, Athens is a daring riser, cautious Sparta a maintainer. One could easily imagine, however, a daring riser and a daring maintainer, however, or even a cautious riser and cautious maintainer[39]. These combinations would presumably influence how and when wars break out. A daring riser and a daring maintainer would be the most war-prone combination, presumably, while a cautious riser and cautious maintainer would be less so. Nonetheless, one can still imagine the imperatives of the national interest of a cautious riser ultimately colliding with those of a cautious maintainer.

Threats or opportunities are identifiable by reference to a background vision of interests, which an actor grasps in relation to some status quo, with the experience of necessity emerging from a challenge to a deeply held interest, like our bystander's concern for his safety during the robbery. To use contemporary language, actions that states will not tolerate constitute their redlines, the crossing of which, they say, will compel (i.e., necessitate) a certain response. Regarding necessity itself, the *History* furnishes the reader with the concept as a tool for understanding foreign policy decision-making. The thematic question, 'What *is* a foreign policy imperative?' proves highly educational. For it invites the reader to think carefully about the judgements at play in strategic decision-making, and the ways these judgements can be mistaken[40]. Thucydides' *History* is a virtual catalogue of political success and failure. The reader is hereby encouraged to appreciate how and why some actors responded prudently to their situations, and how and why others failed to do so.

Regarding a power-transition or constructivist Thucydides, Allison and Lebow seem to believe that Thucydides is offering a theoretical teaching for spectators and not a series of practical tools for actors. Allison maintains that the line about Athenian power, Spartan fear, and necessity is a social scientific theory. He then explains what this means for policymakers, who are his principal audience. But he does not fully untangle *how* the structural pressures he rightly identifies generate pathways to war linked to the internal horizon of decision-making, as

[39] It is a separate but interesting question as to whether a riser becomes more daring due to being a riser. Does power embolden?

[40] Several were canvassed in the bank robbery discussion.

Thucydides himself does. Unlike Allison, Lebow is mainly writing for scholars, but he does explore the angle of vision of actors. Nonetheless, he too fails to offer an adequate interpretation of 1.23.6. He asserts war occurred because of the Athenian threat to Spartan identity and honor. This sits uncomfortably with Thucydidean statements to the contrary. Overall, Lebow fails to explore out how Thucydidean "constructivism" serves the education of future actors, with the experience of necessity playing a critical role in that practical teaching.

There are, in other words, misalignments between these two IR readings and the Thucydidean enterprise itself. This article has attempted to clarify several differences between the social scientific development of theories for spectators and the intended Thucydidean education of actors, such that we can become clearer about what *The History of the Peloponnesian War* can teach us and not teach us about international politics today.

Riassunto - Questo articolo propone una nuova lettura del concetto di necessità nella *Guerra del Peloponneso* di Tucidide. Esplora le parziali verità e i parziali errori delle due appropriazioni predominanti di Tucidide nell'ambito delle relazioni internazionali, la teoria della transizione di potere e il costruttivismo. L'analisi più famosa della transizione di potere è quella fornita da Graham Allison nella sua Trappola di Tucidide, la quale suggerisce che, così come i cambiamenti di potere causarono la Guerra nel Peloponneso, ora rischiano di scatenare una guerra di vaste proporzioni tra Stati Uniti e Cina. L'interpretazione opposta più significativa è quella del Tucidide costruttivista di Richard Ned Lebow. Questo articolo esplora come gli aspetti oggettivi e soggettivi della necessità tucididea interagiscano nell'ambito di un percorso educativo per i partecipanti attivi della vita politica. Una corretta comprensione delle differenze tra le scienze sociali contemporanee e il progetto originariamente sviluppato da Tucidide può aiutare a interpretare meglio l'opera stessa di Tucidide, ma anche a comprendere cosa quest'opera offra e non offra ai professionisti della politica estera di oggi.