

# The Dual Thucydides Trap

More than bilateral competition  
by 1stLt Alexandre Shivnen

There has been much written in recent years about the Thucydides Trap, wherein the inevitability of war increases when one great power threatens to displace another. The first historian's account of the Peloponnesian War and the danger from the miscalculations of rising and existing powers are apt in this changing period. Much of those accounts, however, labor under a narrow view: bilateral competition. They take solace in that not all Thucydides traps are sprung, the rising power finds restraint in its growing power, and the existing one accommodates. However, this does not describe our century's challenge. Geopolitics are caught in a much more dangerous current: the dual Thucydides trap. Here an existing power is challenged by a rising power who is in turn challenged by a simultaneously rising third. In these cases, conflict becomes ever more difficult to avoid. While most Thucydides traps end in conflict without great care by those ensnared, they universally do in the case of the dual. This is not meant as a fatalistic warning, rather a cold and reasoned one. We, as a Marine Corps, must look at the recent examples and learn from them how best to defend our Nation's strategic interest.

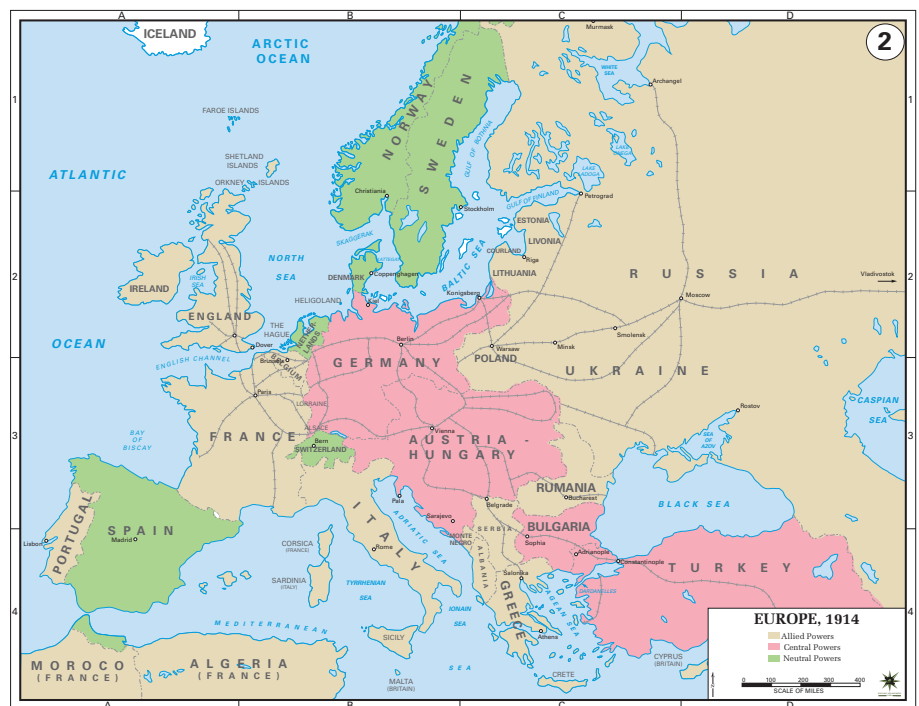
The first example of a dual Thucydides trap is a well-known one from 1914 during World War I. The United Kingdom stood as a first world hegemon threatened by the rising power of a rapidly industrializing Germany. The naval arms race kicked off by the Kaiser's misguided policies drove the British to protect their standing and pushed them into alignment with the Entente and eventually to join when

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war broke out. This dynamic is well understood and studied. Less examined is the danger to Germany's status as the pre-eminent European land power by Russia's equally rapid industrialization. The French, seeking to offset the advantages of their more populous rival, invested heavily in the underdeveloped empire of the Tzar. Through this they meant to create a cordon of industrialized rivals around Germany. Germany

in turn supported its weaker ally in Austria-Hungary to offset the numerical and increasingly industrial disadvantage they stood at. Germany's unconditional support for the Hapsburgs then led to the Sarajevo crisis following the Archduke's assassination, causing conflict with both Russia, France, and ultimately the British.

The second example is usually not studied in this context but is salient: the 1937 Japanese invasion of China. This is often studied as rogue aggression, but that notion is mistaken—it was a calculated risk. The Japanese had as a strategic objective to be free of imperialism. This meant they needed to expand to have the resources to compete with the Western powers and



*In 1914 Germany and the Central Powers faced a two-front war. (Photo by author.)*



The 1937 Japanese invasion of China provides another example. (Map: West Point Atlas Series.)

China. This expansion through the 1930s brought them into conflict with the United States—who progressively imposed sanctions. Concurrent to this was China’s rise through the 1920s and 1930s. China was rapidly industrializing and leveraging its 500 million

which seeks to take hegemony of East Asia and beyond, and simultaneous rising Asian-land rival, India. The Chinese position is not enviable. Like the Germans, they have a rising rival on their border which will have a larger population and a strategic incentive to

When caught in a rip tide, the best way out is to swim laterally to the current. In this way, you can make progress to escape without exhausting your limited strength against an insurmountable current. We as a Marine Corps must plan like we are in a rip tide; the Chinese are rising in power, have a strategic interest in pushing us off the first island chain, and one day soon they will be wealthier than us. This does not mean we are at a disadvantage, however. The dual Thucydides trap provides us with tremendous leverage. There are historic, economic, and strategic trends at play driving the Indians to conflict with China; we must leverage them. The Nation must revive the “Quad” and begin planning a cordon sanitaire. The Navy and Marine Corps should begin joint exercises with India for the coming conflict. The Indian Navy should conduct joint patrols in both the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. EABO should be practiced between the Indians and the Marines in both the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. Knowing that trends are pushing us together, the Marine Corps should make every effort to learn our future allies’ capabilities and how we can best integrate. Critically, we must find common ground in operational planning and conduct of fires. With those established, we will best be able to use each other’s assets in any potential fight while having a common operational language to coordinate in.

Both described occurrences of the dual trap were overcome by the standing power working in close concert with the third rising power. Together, our resources will never be overtaken by the Chinese—neither in manpower nor material resources. Combine these demographic advantages with the positional advantage our forces have across the first and second island chains and a far more optimistic image appears than what has been forecasted. If done properly, we may even display enough strength that the Chinese Communist Party will see the futility of challenging our grand alliance and see peace despite the dangers of our competition.



***Our current trap is the dynamic between the United States, the current world hegemon, a rising China, which seeks to take hegemony of East Asia ... and a simultaneous rising Asian-land rival, India.***

people who would inevitably overtake Japan as the East Asian power. As a result, Japan had to contend with the existing Pacific hegemon in the United States and a rising China threatening its East Asian dominance. Japan, out of necessity, moved to create a market large enough to offset the Chinese one, suppress Chinese growth, and displace American dominance of the Pacific—resulting in war across Asia.

Our current trap is the dynamic between the United States, the current world hegemon, a rising China,

compete. Like Japan, they have foreign powers holding dominance of global markets they are dependent on. Like both, China is faced with a standing power which can leverage its neighbors against them. This is a good position for the United States. In both examples, the standing power was victorious—with the third rising power leveraging much of the burden of the fighting. The United States, and by extension the Marine Corps, should internalize this concept and prepare for the future with no misunderstandings.