The anti-China bias and why Thucydides trap is just an invention (and a dangerous one)

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November 09, 2023

Abstract

Allison’s Thucydides trap has become one of the most potent analogies used to describe US-Chinese relations. It can be found everywhere among political observers and policymakers. While the notion has met several criticisms, to date no one has observed that Allison relied on an inaccurate adaptation of the English translation of Thucydides’ key sentence he used. This inaccuracy has led to the invention of Thucydides trap, whereby a rising power, Athens (China), threatens a hegemonic power, Sparta (the US); and this threat often results in war. Yet Thucydides’ key sentence, the rest of his work, and (even basic) familiarity with Greek history point to the fact that the two rivals were already established hegemonic powers. There was no rise of Athens, but Sparta’s fear that the Athenian empire may take over all of Greece. This article shows how abuses of Thucydides in the form of Thucydides trap serve US attempts to legitimize its presence in East Asia while feeding into Western Sinophobia.

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