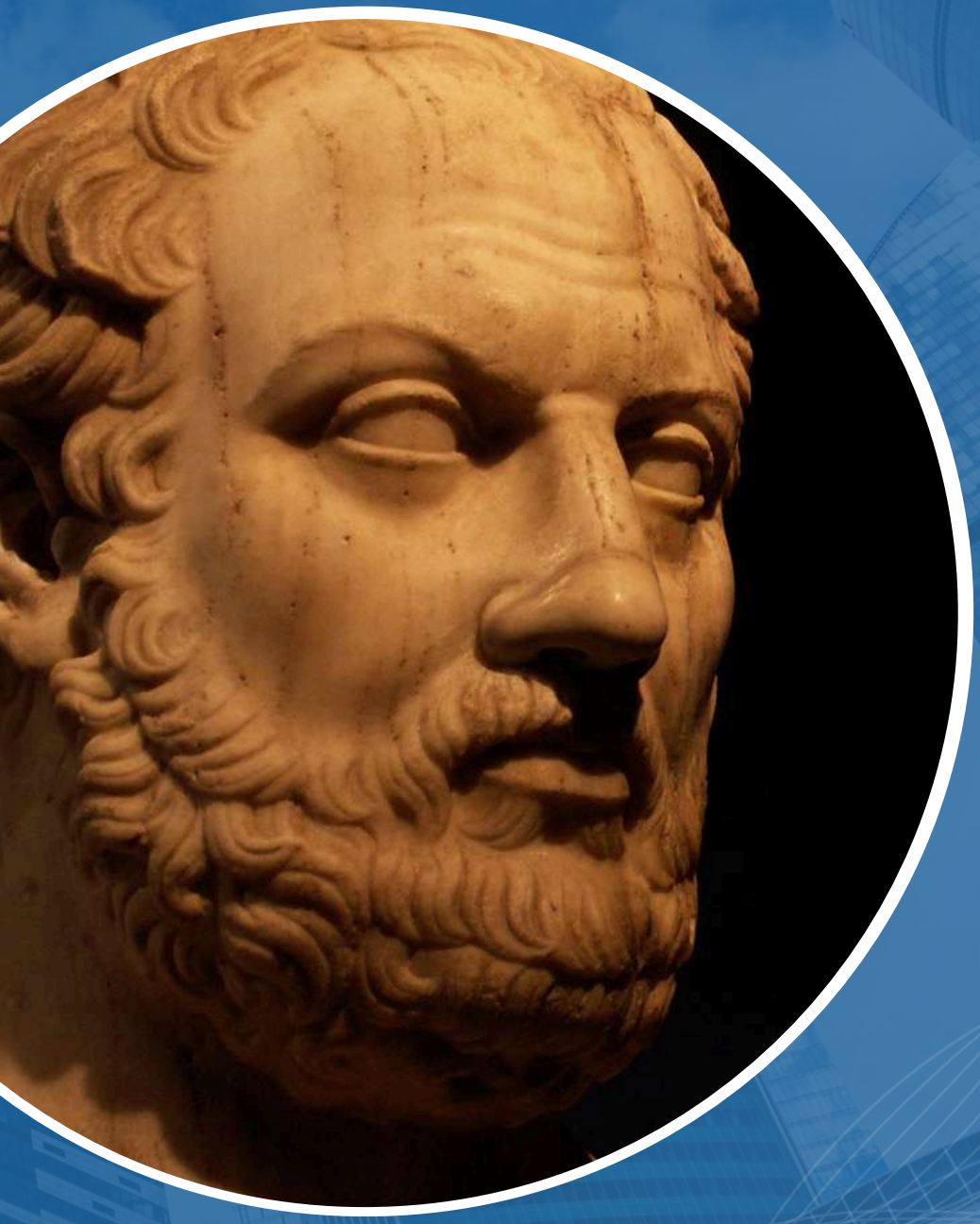
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THE THUCYDIDES TRAP AND THE NEW GLOBAL ORDER

U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY, TRUMP'S STRATEGIC RETURN, AND EUROPE'S GEOPOLITICAL CROSSROADS

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Executive Summary

This monograph examines the strategic rivalry between the United States and China through the analytical framework of the Thucydides Trap. Drawing from classical Greek political philosophy, realism, and power transition theory, the study explores the geopolitical implications of rising and established powers competing for strategic influence. Particular focus is placed on Donald Trump's post-2024 strategic orientation, technological competition, maritime security, economic fragmentation, and Europe's geopolitical dilemmas. Through scenario-based forecasting and philosophical reflection, the monograph argues that the principal danger lies not in competition itself, but in strategic miscalculation, institutional fragmentation, and leadership failure within an increasingly unstable international system.

Table of Contents

Contents

Executive Summary 4

Table of Contents 5

Introduction 6

The Strategic Dimensions of U.S.–China Competition 7

Trump's Strategic Return and Policy Implications 8

Europe's Strategic Dilemma 9

Scenario-Based Strategic Forecasting 9

The Middle East and Global Strategic Competition 10

Philosophical Conclusion 10

References 12

Introduction

The twenty-first century international system is increasingly defined by the strategic rivalry between the United States and China. What initially appeared as economic competition has gradually evolved into a multidimensional geopolitical confrontation involving trade, technology, cyber capabilities, maritime security, strategic resources, financial systems, artificial intelligence, and global influence. Within this evolving environment, the concept of the "Thucydides Trap" has emerged as one of the most influential analytical frameworks for understanding the dangers associated with rising and established powers competing for strategic dominance.

The intellectual roots of the theory extend well beyond contemporary political science. The concept originates from the work of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, particularly his account of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. His observation that "the rise of Athens and the fear this instilled in Sparta made war inevitable" remains one of the most frequently cited interpretations of strategic competition and power transition.

However, the wider Greek philosophical tradition had already introduced essential questions surrounding governance, legitimacy, leadership, fear, ambition, and political order. Plato examined justice, ideal governance, and state organization in The Republic, while Aristotle explored constitutional systems, political order, and practical statecraft in Politics. These philosophical foundations later evolved into modern realism and contemporary geopolitical analysis.

The modern realist tradition transformed classical strategic thought into structured international relations theory. Hans Morgenthau emphasized national interest, survival, and the struggle for power within an anarchic international system. Kenneth Waltz argued that the structure of the international system itself compels rivalry regardless of leadership intentions. John Mearsheimer later expanded offensive realism by arguing that major powers naturally seek regional hegemony to guarantee survival and strategic influence.

Equally influential was A.F.K. Organski's Power Transition Theory, which argued that conflict becomes more likely when a rising power approaches parity with an established hegemon. Henry Kissinger later integrated historical realism with diplomacy and balance-of-power politics, emphasizing that stability depends on strategic equilibrium rather than idealistic assumptions.

Within this broader intellectual framework, Graham Allison popularized the term "Thucydides Trap" through his work Destined for War, where he analyzed historical cases involving rising and ruling powers. Yet unlike previous historical confrontations, the current U.S.–China rivalry unfolds in a highly interconnected global environment shaped by globalization, nuclear deterrence, cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, and economic interdependence.

Importantly, the debate surrounding the Thucydides Trap is not limited to Western academia. Chinese leadership itself has acknowledged the dangers associated with the theory. Xi Jinping repeatedly argued that China and the United States must avoid the "historical pattern" in which rising and established powers inevitably move toward

confrontation. Beijing therefore promotes the concept of a "new type of major power relations," aimed at avoiding direct conflict while simultaneously expanding China's geopolitical influence.

This language is strategically significant.

China recognizes that the Thucydidean interpretation increasingly shapes Western strategic thinking and policy formulation. At the same time, however, Chinese foreign and security policy demonstrates the behavior of a rising power-seeking strategic space, maritime access, technological supremacy, regional influence, and systemic recognition.

The Strategic Dimensions of U.S.–China Competition

The strategic competition between Washington and Beijing is no longer theoretical. It is visible in concrete policy decisions and geopolitical developments across multiple sectors.

The first major arena is technology and semiconductor competition. Beginning in October 2022 and expanding through 2023–2026, the United States imposed export restrictions targeting advanced semiconductors, AI chips, and manufacturing technologies connected to Chinese development. Washington increasingly views technological supremacy as inseparable from national security and military superiority. Beijing interprets these measures as strategic containment designed to slow China's rise.

Second, maritime security and Indo-Pacific strategy have become central components of the rivalry. Alliances such as AUKUS and the revitalized Quadrilateral Security Dialogue demonstrate efforts to balance China's expanding naval influence. China simultaneously continues naval modernization, strategic infrastructure expansion, and military exercises surrounding Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Third, the Taiwan issue remains perhaps the most dangerous geopolitical flashpoint of the twenty-first century. U.S. military support, congressional visits, and strategic ambiguity increasingly collide with China's insistence on sovereignty and reunification. Any miscalculation surrounding Taiwan could trigger a broader regional or even global crisis involving economic disruption, maritime instability, energy insecurity, and military escalation.

Fourth, economic decoupling and "de-risking" policies illustrate the transformation of globalization itself. Supply-chain diversification, reshoring strategies, restrictions on rare earth access, and industrial subsidies increasingly demonstrate that economics and national security are becoming inseparable.

Fifth, competition increasingly extends into logistics, ports, maritime infrastructure, energy routes, and digital networks. China's Belt and Road Initiative seeks to expand logistical, economic, and geopolitical influence across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Strategic ports and infrastructure projects are increasingly viewed through the lens of geopolitical leverage rather than simple economic investment.

Trump's Strategic Return and Policy Implications

The return of Donald Trump to the center of U.S. foreign policy calculations after the 2024 American elections introduces a more assertive strategic phase in U.S.–China relations.

Trump's worldview approaches China not merely as an economic competitor but as a direct challenger to American industrial, technological, economic, and geopolitical supremacy. His policy orientation increasingly revolves around economic nationalism, industrial reshoring, technological containment, alliance burden-sharing, and strategic pressure.

Trump's choices after 2025 may become historically decisive.

First, economic nationalism remains central. Trump continues emphasizing tariffs, domestic manufacturing, industrial sovereignty, and strategic supply-chain relocation away from China. Critical sectors include semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, artificial intelligence, energy systems, and rare earth materials.

Second, technological containment has become increasingly important. Artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, quantum computing, advanced chips, and digital infrastructure are now viewed as strategic battlefields directly connected to national power and future military superiority.

Third, Trump continues questioning alliance dependency and burden-sharing. This creates uncertainty within NATO and broader transatlantic strategic planning while simultaneously pressuring allies to increase defense spending and strategic capabilities.

Fourth, Middle East recalibration has emerged as an increasingly significant dimension of Trump's strategic outlook. His diplomatic engagements during May 2026 with Gulf states highlighted broader concerns regarding Chinese influence over infrastructure, logistics, energy investments, AI systems, ports, and maritime connectivity throughout the Middle East.

The Gulf increasingly represents more than an energy arena. It has become a strategic corridor connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa.

Fifth, Trump's strategic approach appears less ideological than transactional. The objective is not necessarily immediate military confrontation but long-term economic, technological, and strategic pressure capable of exhausting Chinese influence over time.

This creates a paradoxical situation. Trump's harder approach toward China may strengthen deterrence and strategic clarity, yet simultaneously accelerate geopolitical fragmentation, bloc formation, and economic polarization.

Europe's Strategic Dilemma

For Europe, the implications are profound.

Europe today stands strategically between economic dependency and geopolitical alignment. While many European economies remain closely linked to Chinese trade, manufacturing, and investment, Europe's security architecture continues relying heavily on the United States through NATO.

This creates a deeply existential strategic dilemma.

Can Europe maintain economic engagement with China while remaining strategically aligned with Washington?

Can Europe achieve strategic autonomy without military integration, industrial resilience, technological sovereignty, and energy independence?

Or will Europe ultimately become the geopolitical arena where larger powers compete for influence?

Recent crises including the war in Ukraine, maritime instability, supply-chain disruptions, inflationary pressures, cyber threats, and energy insecurity have accelerated European discussions regarding defense integration, industrial policy, technological sovereignty, and strategic resilience.

At the same time, internal European divisions remain significant. Some European states increasingly support stronger transatlantic alignment and deterrence against China, while others continue emphasizing economic pragmatism and engagement with Beijing.

The absence of complete strategic unity limits Europe's geopolitical influence at a time when coherence is increasingly necessary.

Scenario-Based Strategic Forecasting

From a predictive standpoint, several major scenarios emerge for the coming decade.

Scenario One: Managed Strategic Competition

Washington and Beijing maintain controlled rivalry while avoiding direct military confrontation through deterrence, diplomacy, economic management, and selective cooperation. Competition intensifies technologically and economically, but both powers avoid catastrophic escalation.

Scenario Two: Fragmented Bipolarity

The international system increasingly divides into competing U.S. and Chinese spheres of influence. Technological ecosystems separate, global supply chains fragment, and economic polarization deepens. Europe faces increasing pressure to strategically align.

Scenario Three: Strategic Escalation

A crisis involving Taiwan, cyber infrastructure, or maritime confrontation triggers wider geopolitical instability. Even limited escalation could disrupt global trade, financial systems, shipping routes, insurance markets, energy flows, and technological production.

Scenario Four: Multipolar Adjustment

A more fluid multipolar order emerges where middle powers including Europe, India, Gulf states, and regional actors gain balancing influence. In this environment, strategic flexibility increases, but instability may also grow due to overlapping interests and competing coalitions.

Scenario Five: Renewed Transatlantic Consolidation

The United States and Europe reinforce strategic alignment in response to geopolitical uncertainty and Chinese expansion. Cooperation deepens in defense, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, cyber security, maritime security, and industrial policy.

Scenario Six: Strategic Europe–China Accommodation

Certain European states pursue more balanced relations with China driven by economic necessity and industrial competitiveness. Chinese investments expand across logistics, green technologies, digital infrastructure, ports, and manufacturing.

However, this path carries risks involving strategic dependency, weakened transatlantic cohesion, and exposure to external leverage.

The Middle East and Global Strategic Competition

The Middle East increasingly occupies a central position within the broader U.S.–China strategic competition.

Historically viewed primarily through energy security, the region now represents a critical arena involving logistics corridors, infrastructure, AI investments, rare earth access, ports, maritime routes, and digital connectivity.

China's growing economic influence throughout the Gulf reflects a broader strategic effort to secure long-term access to infrastructure, trade corridors, and energy networks. Simultaneously, the United States seeks to preserve strategic partnerships and maintain influence over regional security architecture.

This competition increasingly intersects with Europe's interests as well, particularly regarding energy diversification, maritime security, migration, and trade routes.

The Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, Strait of Hormuz, and Indo-Pacific maritime routes are gradually becoming interconnected strategic theatres.

Philosophical Conclusion

At its deepest level, the Thucydides Trap is not merely a geopolitical theory. It is a philosophical reflection on fear, ambition, insecurity, prestige, leadership, and the cyclical struggle for power throughout history.

From ancient Athens and Sparta to the modern rivalry between Washington and Beijing, the central dilemma remains remarkably unchanged: rising powers seek recognition and strategic space, while established powers fear decline and the erosion of dominance.

The modern world, however, differs fundamentally from previous eras.

For the first time in history, humanity possesses technological, nuclear, cyber, and economic interconnectedness capable not only of transforming civilization but also destabilizing it globally within days.

The danger therefore lies not in competition itself. Competition among powers is natural and historically constant. The danger lies in strategic arrogance, ideological rigidity, political absolutism, institutional fragmentation, and failures of leadership.

The international system increasingly stands between two philosophical paths: one based on managed coexistence, strategic balance, and pragmatic realism, and another driven by fear, nationalism, fragmentation, and systemic confrontation.

Trump's strategic choices after 2025 may therefore become historically decisive. They may either reinforce a controlled balance-of-power framework capable of managing competition with China, or accelerate fragmentation into rival geopolitical, technological, and economic blocs.

History does not repeat itself mechanically. Yet it often echoes through the decisions of leaders unable — or unwilling — to learn from it.

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