Why the Classics Can't Console:
Thucydides and the Future of Realism

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"The classics can console. But not enough."
– Derek Walcott, "Sea Grapes"

Introduction

Realist IR theory has a problem. During the 20th century, Realism's most powerful appeal was its parsimony; Waltz, Mearsheimer, and Walt could predict state behavior with only a handful of assumptions about the world. In time, this also proved its greatest weakness. Realism failed to adequately explain the numerous deviances from this ideal model, and had little ability to explain the change that was undeniably observed in international politics as the decades ran on (Walt, 1998).

This empirical gap drove the next and currently dominant wave in Realist thought. Scholars offered a diverse slate of approaches that incorporated divergent historical experiences (Monteiro and Debs 2017), state characteristics and identity (Kydd 1997, Kydd and Glaser 2017), variable interests and threats (Walt 1987, Schweller 1997, Schweller 2006), domestic politics and internal dysfunction (Snyder 1991, Snyder 2000), risk perception/misperception (Jervis 1999, Taliaferro 2006), and numerous other factors. This paradigm, which definitionally offered far greater ability to explain observed state behavior, has been dubbed "Neoclassical Realism" – an allusion to the fusion of classical and modern sensibilities exemplified by painters like Jacques-Louis David.

An even more appropriate artistic model, though, may have been British painter Sir Joshua Reynolds – of whom leading frenemy Thomas Gainsborough famously lamented, "damn him, how various he is!" Variety is precisely Neo-classical Realism's strength – and also its most pressing problem. As the aforementioned list makes clear (all the more so, for being highly incomplete), Neoclassical Realism provides for veritable horde of potential factors which can drive state behavior. Individually, many Neoclassical theories remain parsimonious in their claims about what matters for outcomes. But taken together, it has become increasingly impossible to fit these ideas about the world into anything resembling an overarching, structural theory.

Therefore, we might fairly ask: When does Neoclassical Realism stop being "Realism" at all? And how is it ultimately distinguished, as an underlying theory, from constructivist or Neoliberal thought? Tellingly, this concern has been raised consistently not only by Realism's harshest critics (Moravcsik 1999), but by its most vocal advocates (Rosato and Parent 2018). Of particular concern is why Neoclassical Realists treat certain factors as socially constructed variables (state identity, historically-driven preference formation, perceived threat), but choose to set others as structurally immutable (eg, the anarchy assumption and what it compels states to do).[1] In essence, this becomes social constructivism *a la carte* – as Rosato (2021) points out, something that is hardly survivable for a structural theory.

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[1] Though Neoclassical Realists vary in their approaches here, all engage in some form of this sort of theorizing. After all, the moment anarchy becomes "what states make of it," it seems rather difficult to defend one's self as a Realist.

This is the crisis presently confronting Realist theory: Traditional structural Realism fails empirically, and Neoclassical Realism fails as a structural theory (thus losing both the practical appeal of Realism's parsimony, and its theoretical distinction from Neoliberalism and constructivism). This dissonance has permeated nearly every serious scholarly critique of Realist thought in the past two decades. It is the reliable tool with which a new cohort of nascent IR scholars defend their aversion to Realism in graduate seminars each year. And it helps explain why Realism is – we must admit – so often derided by colleagues in the academy (despite its continued ubiquity on academic syllabi, and its popularity in the policy world). It is this crisis that the next wave of Realist thinkers must find a way to address – at least, if Realism is to evolve and grow yet still remain, in any meaningful way, "really Realist."

Revenge of the First Image

Addressing such theoretical problems of course requires innovation and new ideas. But surprisingly, it may also be helped by a pilgrimage into Realism's distant past. Here, I advance three core arguments:

- Realism, particularly its underlying narratives and treatment of human nature, has always been a deeply psychological project.
- Misreading of some of the "classic" foundations of Realist thinking caused this nuanced psychological approach to disappear from the record, in favor of the focus on structural forces and rules of thumb that ultimately led to the present problems.
- "Re-discovering" the psychological roots of Realism offers a path – perhaps the *only* path – out of the current theoretical deadlock.

After all, even in Waltz's deeply structural conception of Realism, there is structure more fundamental than anarchy, more fundamental than the state: The first image – the human mind.

Certainly, human psychology is not an *easy* candidate for a structural theory: The mind is incredibly complex, human beings are cataclysmically variable in ways that are empirically obvious to anyone, and "knowing" things about human psychology seems in many ways a good deal harder than convincing ourselves that we "know" things about states. Yet the human mind *is* a structure – and we *do* know things about it.[2] We know that every human being is hardwired to fear death, and that there are certain kinds of behavior that arise from this fear ("terror management theory").[3] We know that concepts like nationalism and in-group/out-group distinctions provide both constructive and destructive avenues for addressing insecurity (Chung 2015, Herrmann et al 2009, Herrmann 2017). And we know that fear and anxiety exert powerful effects on political behavior that, while not uniform, may nonetheless follow consistent patterns (Ray and Gelpi, forthcoming).

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[2] At least, to the extent that such things are and can be "known" about the social world. That is, the theoretical buy-in here may be significant, but it is not ultimately more significant than claiming knowledge about states in the international system.

[3] See: Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski (2015), Mitzen (2005, 2006).

What does it mean to treat the human mind as the dominant structure in Realist theory? Nothing radically different than casting the anarchical global system in that role. We must simply explain how we expect human beings to engage with various forces in international politics. Here we might be tempted to say, "wait! Don't Neoclassical Realists do that already?" The answer is no, in one key aspect: Generally, neoclassical Realists theorize about how states behave based on observing… how states behave. This creates the risk of tautological reasoning and guts the ability to make causal claims: After all, if a theory is drawn from observing when great powers went to war from 1946 to 2000, you cannot *test* that theory by seeing when great powers went to war from 1946 to 2000.

A psychological model of Realism, on the other hand, would build theories based on how we have observed *humans* behaving generally over decades of psychological research – and *then* make predictions which can be tested on a dataset of state behavior.[4] While political psychologists have begun to popularize this approach in recent years, their work remains largely focused on specific claims about psychological variables (for instance, how "resolve" impacts conflict outcome). But the same techniques can be used to build a larger, coherent theory of the political mind.

Of course, such a theory would absolutely be less parsimonious than the Neorealism of Mearsheimer or Waltz. But it would be far *more* parsimonious than the aggregate body of Neoclassical Realist thought. More importantly, it offers a coherent framework for theorizing about when and how different variables will impact state behavior – providing firm ground with which to make structural claims, and thus retaining the defining appeal of Realist theory.

A turn to the First Image would in some respects differ radically from dominant Realist paradigms. And yet, it may in some respects be an even more traditional realism than the various schools that emerged over the past two centuries. I argue that the core of the Realist tradition has its roots firmly in a kind of psychological-structural thinking – particularly (though not exclusively) exemplified by the Greek historian and beloved Realist security blanket Thucydides. Though the popular mis-imagining of these men and their ideas helped drive Realism *away* from psychological thinking, a reconsideration of "the classics" may somewhat paradoxically help point the way forward.

Thucydides in the Realist Imagination

Thucydides occupies a complicated but unquestionably central place in the tradition of Realist thought. Writing in Reus-Smit and Snidal's *Oxford Handbook of International Relations,* Wohlforth (2018) calls Thucydides a "canonical Realist." Nye (1988) characterizes Thucydides as the "founding father of Realism," [5] while Mearsheimer claims that he elucidated the essential principles of intergroup competition "long before the birth of the state system."[6] And Waltz's

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[4] Perhaps the foremost example of exactly this sort of method is Kertzer's *Resolve in International Politics* (2016), which codes leaders/countries based on traits we know to be associated with high resolve, and then uses that database to examine conflict outcomes.

[5] Joseph Nye, "Neorealism and Neoliberalism," World Politics 40:2 (1988), 317.

[6] John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 364.

Theory of International Politics (1979) includes a striking passage about a common trope of various Realist thinkers formatively reading Thucydides and then immediately connecting it to their own contemporary situation (be it Hobbes's England, or the Cold War nuclear landscape that confronted Halle and Waltz himself).[7]

Of course, Thucydides is not credited with directly formulating any of the structural theories that defined 20th and 21st century Realism. But nearly every Realist theory is built on a core set of ideas that emerge directly from his work: The cold reality of a self-help world, the inherent fact and dire implications of uncertainty over future intentions, the much-maligned but still ubiquitous "Thucydides Trap," etc. Thucydides might then be said to embody the underlying "Realist intuition" about how human beings operate in the world – a scaffold on which mechanical, structural theories of self-interest can be built. If the surest test of character is one's friends and enemies, it is perhaps most telling that the Athenian thinker has been so reliably idolized by Realism's champions – and often held in various degrees of contempt by its most vocal critics.

Such a state of affairs is deeply unfortunate – because each group has critically misunderstood major aspects of his work. Thucydides *does* illustrate how a fundamental structure drives human behavior under group competition (and make claims about the ideal strategies this implies). But that structure is *not* the anarchical political landscape. Rather, it is far better understood as human psychology and the way it engages with threat. And the "proper strategy" is not at all the sort of coldly rational, trust-eschewing, power-prioritizing self-interest that grew to animate Realist assumptions. In fact, the opposite may be far closer to the truth.

Thucydides in Far More Complicated Reality

The Greek historian Thucydides exists in the scholastic imagination entirely as the author of the *History of Peloponnesian War* – the definitive account of the 431--404 BC conflict that pitted Athens against Sparta in the Greek world's iconic "great power" confrontation. From this account, Realist thinkers (and generations of strategists) have extracted a few powerful ideas. First, about the supposed inevitability of power shifts driving conflict (the "Thucydides Trap" in its coarsest form, but also in variously more nuanced and refined interpretations). And second, about the harsh and overriding reality of international politics – famously articulated as "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."

Certainly, the latter extract is Thucydides' most ubiquitous contribution to IR scholarship – and his core contributions to the underlying theory cutting across all branches of Realism. Mearsheimer explicitly references the line in his explanation of intergroup behavior, claiming that it is understood as foundational by all social groups.[8] The line is delivered in Book 5 of the *History*, as Athens delivers an ultimatum demanding the surrender of the neutral island of Melos, notably making no attempt to morally justify their actions and appealing simply to the realities of power politics.[9] The Melians, indignant, refuse; in turn, the men are slaughtered, and the women and children enslaved. As Realist, it seems, as one can possibly get.

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[7] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 66.

[8] John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 40.

Or, is it? Realist thought has extracted the episode (and really, just the one sentence), but not its context. As scholars like Bosworth (2013) and Welch (2003) have pointed out, Thucydides means to relate the account as a parable – but one with nearly the opposite meaning as has been widely understood. The dialogue is structured as an exact parallel to the earlier Mytilenean Debate (and the later debate over Arginusae), and is meant to tell a sequential story about the decline of Athenian character. Athens, that is, is meant to be understood as doing something *bad and foolish* in their actions at Melos. The episode, for Thucydides, does not illustrate an inevitable truth about the world – but rather precisely way Athens lost the war, by alienating its allies in the name of a nominally "realist" but actually vengeful and paranoid calculus.

The Melian dialogue is therefore presented as an inflection point, where Athens loses the cohesion and self-respect illustrated in earlier sections of the work (exemplified by Pericles's funeral oration). Of course, Athens *does* have the power to do whatever they want to the Melians. But freedom of action is not freedom from consequence, and Athenian power continues to degrade as they pursue the supposedly ideal model of realist expediency. Both parties in the dialogue go to their doom; this is easy to see for the Melians, but less immediately obvious for Athens – precisely why Thucydides relates the account.

Our collective misreading of the passage has left us with a flawed narrative about the nature of world politics – but has also caused something vital to be left out. Thucydides has captured something very important about *why* Athens makes the self-destructive choices that it does. The answer lies in one of the history's most insightful passages (yet one which is barely if ever mentioned in IR literature): The account of the Plague of Athens, and its gradual destruction of Athenian societal cohesion.

The plague, which struck three years before the events at Melos, utterly devastated Athens – killing up to 100,000 people (an astonishing one-fourth of the city's population). Every aspect of Athenian society was thrown into chaos by the outbreak, As Thucydides relates:

> Men now coolly ventured on what they had formerly done in a corner, and not just as they pleased. Perseverance in what men called honour was popular with none, it was so uncertain whether they would be spared to attain the object. Fear of gods or law of man there was none to restrain them. As for the first, they judged it to be just the same whether they worshipped them or not, as they saw all alike perishing; and for the last, no one expected to live to be brought to trial for his offences, but each felt that a far severer sentence had been already passed upon them all and hung ever over their heads, and before this fell it was only reasonable to enjoy life a little."[10]

The plague raged through all layers of Athenian society, and created such general disruption that the city soon found itself unable to even bury the dead. Among the dead was Pericles, the architect of Athens's golden age, which had rapidly descended into an unrecognizable hell. Athenians found themselves stripped of leadership, security, and any sense of predictability.

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[9] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.89. The original Greek (δυνατὰ δὲ οἱ προύχοντες πράσσουσι καὶ οἱ ἀσθενεῖς ξυγχωροῦσιν), has been translated various ways – but all amount to the same bleak sentiment.

[10] Thucydides, *History*, 2.52.

Thucydides's account of the plague is all the more striking because it differs starkly from his general observations. An often defining quality of the *History* is its focus on political events and significance, and disregard for ornamental description of everyday life or milieu. Reading Thucydides tells you little about what it would be like to stand on an Athenian street corner – unless, with singular exception, you happened to be standing on it during the height of the horror and chaos caused by the plague. Though his Classical worldview would have lacked such a vocabulary, what Thucydides is documenting is the incredible *trauma* experienced by every resident of Athens – sustained for years, and accompanied by endemic uncertainty and fear.

It is this trauma that destabilizes Athenian decision-making (what Thucydides and his contemporaries would have considered "character," and what a more developed psychological lens may have understood as raging anxiety and a desperate attempt to manage a devastating reality). Athens digs its own grave, at Melos and other moments just like it, because they seek to impose the *illusion* of hegemonic power and control over the ravages of fortune. Ironically, the "Realist" worldview conveyed by the iconic line in the dialogue is really a tool for naïve self-delusion: A story Athenians tell themselves about how they can use power to hammer out difficult realities, and impose certainty and control on an inherently unpredictable world. "The strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must" is not a shortcut to understanding the harsh facts of international life – it is a dangerous myth whose appeal to insecure great powers may well invite their ultimate destruction.

It's a Trap

Indeed, Thucydides was generally averse to such shortcuts and rules of thumb.[11] Unfortunately for him (and us), the *second* most famous line from the *History* has been similarly misunderstood, and packaged into just the kind of "rule of politics" that the historian would have eschewed. This is of course the "Thucydides Trap," articulated in the book's opening chapter: That what made the Peloponnesian War "inevitable" was the growth of Athenian power, and the fear which this provoked in Sparta.[12]

As Gilpin (1988) explains, Thucydides believed that he had "captured the basic mechanism of a great or hegemonic war" through his belief that:

> "human beings are driven by three fundamental passions – interest, pride, and, above all else, fear – they always seek to increase their wealth and power until other humans, driven by like passions, try to stop them."[13]

This fundamental idea has reverberated through the last century of Realist thought, among scholars and practitioners alike (most famously crystallized by Graham Allison in the early

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[11] As Doyle (1990) points out, Thucydides explicitly rejects the idea of core "truths" about the world that could provide "simple formulas" to guide proper strategy: He was as critical of Athenian cruelty at Melos as he was contemptuous of naïve moralizing in the face of unpleasant realities (as when he critiques the Corinthians in Book I).

[12] Thucydides, *History*, 1.23.

[13] Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18:4 (Spring 1988), 593.

2010s). Allison's argument itself has been extensively critiqued, and the empirical evidence is highly fraught (though that hasn't stopped him from writing widely-circulated op-eds as recently as 2018). But the idea remains predominant in policy circles, and either animates or provides the primary foil for much recent scholarship on Sino-American relations.

Even those who most explicitly *reject* the idea of an inevitable Thucydides Trap acknowledge the influence of its underlying narrative. When Brands and Beckley (2021) decry Allison's framework in favor of more nuanced work on power transition theory, they begin by lamenting that the Thucydides Trap has now "become canonical."[14] And when Zhang and Lebow (2020) provide a constructivist argument that U.S.-China conflict is *not* inevitable, they warn that the greatest risk factor driving war is *the fact that everyone believes in the Thucydides Trap.*[15] After a century of reification, it seems the idea has now reached the point of Kanye-ification: Even if you think the Thucydides trap is bad and dumb, you are still talking about the Thucydides Trap.

Thucydides Had One of the Best Videos of All Time

But Thucydides does *not* actually say that the changing dynamics of relative power caused the war! Rather, he claims that the change in relative power caused *fear* in Sparta, and this fear caused the war. Well, fine. What's the difference? After all, if fear (and the very specific incarnation of fear that the Spartans experienced) is simply the natural, mechanistic reaction to such a shift in power, then this distinction is indeed pointless. And certainly, this is how the Realist tradition has treated the narrative (since, in fairness, Thucydides does say that the war was made "inevitable").

The Realist version of this narrative is deeply rational: Sparta is losing power, Athens is gaining power, so (as the hawkish Spartan leader Sthenelaidas argues in Book I) it is better to fight now rather than be forced to fight later, when the disadvantage is even worse. Yet in the actual debate presented in the *History*, Sthenelaidas is not the rationalist at all; his arguments teem with cheap rhetorical appeals to honor, paranoia, and out-group prejudice – to passion, emotion, and idealism. His references to Athenian power have all the hallmarks of fear-mongering, but say nothing about force disposition, likelihood of victory, uncertainty over various risk estimates, etc.[16]

In contrast, it is Archidamus (the leader of Sparta's anti-war party) who provides such analysis. Archidamus agrees that Athenian power is growing – in fact, Athens is *already* more powerful than Sparta, so reflexively fighting a war is actually quite irrational.[17] Rather, Archidamus argues, the best course of action is to pursue diplomacy and extend the period of détente, in the hopes that Athens might overextend and make errors, or that external events could alter the currently-unfavorable odds. (The presumptive implication being that the Persians, also observing rising Athenian power, would seek to balance with Sparta against it –

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[14] https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/24/china-great-power-united-states/

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[16] Michael W. Doyle, "Thucydidean Realism," *Review of International Studies* Vol. 16, No. 3 (Jul., 1990), 232.

[17] Doyle, "Thucydidean Realism," 230.

but as Doyle points out, "as a patriotic Greek, he could not bring himself to utter the name of Persia").[18]

The point is that the Spartan war party had to *lobby* to effect Spartan fear – and that they did so not by invoking the various rational, structural threats the situation ought to pose according to Realist logic, but rather by relying on exactly the sort of national chauvinism and cheap rhetoric that modern Realists have so consistently criticized. "Fear" was not the routinized consequence of a shift in the balance of power, it was an emotional frame that was diligently cultivated *precisely* to take advantage of how human beings engage with anxiety.

The human mind is well-equipped to deal with fear. But anxiety is a different animal. Whereas fear is attached to an object, anxiety is not. When you see a bear and experience fight-or-flight, that's fear. When you spend your entire hiking worrying about whether you will see a bear, and how to respond if you do, it's anxiety. Uncertainty is therefore definitional of anxiety – and it is uncertainty that we know (from decades of psychological research) to be powerfully destabilizing for human cognition.[19]

This difference helps explain why Sthenelaidas is successful even though he is literally advocating that Sparta *fight a likely existential war against a superior enemy*. Because such a war, whatever the outcome, will be decisive – one way or another, it will bring the specter of potentially-looming doom to an end. In contrast, Archidamus's wait-and-see approach requires that Sparta take no action, essentially surrendering perceived control and committing to a protracted period of uncertain threat.

This requires sitting with an incredible amount of anxiety, when everything about human cognition is wired so that anxiety compels us to *take* action. [20] For instance, Marcus, MacKuen, and Neuman's Affective Intelligence Theory (the currently predominant framework for fear/anger responses in political psychology) explains that anxiety activates a "search function": It is our brain's trigger that the status quo is unacceptable, and that action *must* be taken to mitigate the danger. The idea of choosing to voluntarily remain in a highly threatened, highly uncertain situation thus runs contrary to the way the human mind is structured, quite literally on a neurological level. Notably, this holds true even when the alternative is objectively more dangerous and harmful.[21]

Human beings are not anxiety-driven zombies. Everyone reading this paper can imagine a moment where they prevented their anxiety from hijacking their behavior and pushing them to make a harmful decision (just as we can all also recall a time when we most certainly failed to do so). Social milieu, group dynamic, cultural and historical frames, and numerous other factors all matter – just as Neoclassical Realists have told us. But the architecture of cognition does act as a powerful structural force. Trying to sell a strategy that requires tolerating a good deal of anxiety (even if that strategy is clearly better!) against an alternative that resolves it (even if the alternative is catastrophically reckless) constitutes an inherently uphill battle – one that, historically, states have often paid a dire price for losing.

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[18] *Ibid*, 230.

[19] See: Grupe and Nitschke (2013), Carleton, Norton, et al (2007), Ditto and Lopez (1992), Badia et al. (1966).

[20] See: Ladd and Lenz (2018); Marcus, MacKuen, and Neuman (2011); Ladd and Lenz (2008); Marcus (2003); Shitka et al (2004).

[21] Badia et al. (1966), for instance, found that individuals facing a very low-level electric shock at uncertain intervals exhibited considerably more physiological, cognitive, and emotional distress than those subjected to a much more painful shock – as long as it was preceded by a warning buzzer.

Did fear make it inevitable that the Spartans went to war? Unquestionably, yes. But the rise of Athenian power *did not make fear inevitable*. Rather, the direct culprit was the failure of a competing anti-war narrative to successfully manage anxiety. There were essentially two options for this: Providing a concretely reassuring argument for peace, or stoking hysteria over the unpredictability of war. Archidamus actually *does* have a tool to do the former – he can explain that peace is not just about letting Athens expand and hoping for the best, but a (reasonable) calculation that this will bring Persia into the mix, evening the odds. But he cannot say this, because ego and identity needs prevent it. Similarly, Archidamus could seek to undermine the case for war by engaging in the same sort of fear-mongering his opponents use (thus making both options equally high-uncertainty). But he doesn't want to do this – he's a good rationalist after all, so why not just let the obvious (realist) logic carry the day? Ironically enough, in the Spartan case, Realism is failed by realism.

Thucydides and the New (Old) Realism

What, then, can we *do* as a result of re-discovering the inherently psychological nature of Thucydides (and Realism generally)? What can it offer contemporary theorizing, and help us understand about the modern world? Certainly, it suggests a fundamental restructuring of theoretical mechanisms. "Fear" is not a mechanical intermediate in great power politics, but a dynamic and often causally dominant variable that must be understood in the context of what we know about human cognition. When we speak of "inevitable conflict" or "inherent uncertainty over future intentions," these theories must be grounded in research on human cognition – whatever other factors they emphasize.

Similarly, we should complicate our underlying narratives about the Realist "facts of the world." The Melian Dialogue does indeed illustrate a "hard truth" about intergroup competition. But it is *not* that "the strong do what they will." Rather, it is that trauma and anxiety have incredible power to hijack state decision making, and drive deeply self-destructive behavior. The Athens of 416 BC was a mangled vestige of the city-state under Pericles just 15 years earlier. It had become dominated by fears and neuroses, and so sought to rabidly impose a false sense of security just as a traumatized child might: By grabbing what it could and forcing it to behave how it wanted. But such behavior always has long-term consequences – nor should we expect it to be counteracted merely by appeals to rational utility, no atter how compelling.

Perhaps most saliently, bringing the actual Thucydides back into the "Thucydides Trap" has major implications for thinking about U.S.-China relations in the 21st century. Rather than viewing the most important variable as the relative power of the two states, we might instead be directed toward Chinese fears and American fears: What narrative form do these fears take? How do uncertainty and anxiety differentially appear in the dominant proposed solutions to the problem? Which strategies should we understand to "stack the deck" – to appeal to us beyond their objective value – and thus be deserving of increased skepticism?

A more psychological Realism can also help "fill in the gaps" that remain in some of the excellent recent advances in scholarship around the issue. Consider, for instance, Monteiro's (2014) argument that nuclear security and the modern neoliberal economic order can allow China and the US to "escape" the Thucydides Trap. Monteiro acknowledges that rising powers who face economic restriction may still be driven to war against the hegemon – but argues that, backed by a nuclear arsenal, powers like China will *not* start a war merely to overturn a hegemon-favoring system. Thus, the U.S. can allow China to expand (and thus not threaten the PRC into war) without fear that China will in turn seek to revise the prevailing order.

Why, though, would China fight a war to prevent being economically stifled – but *not* fight the same war to overturn a system (even if doing so would realize an equivalent economic gain)? That is, imagine that in 2023, China's expected GDP is $20 trillion. By replacing (or at least removing) the U.S. as the hegemon of the global economic system, imagine that China could increase their GDP to $25 trillion. Conversely, imagine that the U.S. could adopt cataclysmic economic restrictions that drop China's GDP to $15 trillion. Monteiro's logic suggests that China would fight a war in the latter world, but no the former – even though the economic utility is the same. Why?

To phrase the question another way: In a theory predicated on state survival, why would China risk a war with a nuclear power over restricted economic expansion? The only answer that would fit within Monteiro's logic is that states experience economic restriction to be equally existentially threatening as the possibility of war (and potentially nuclear war) with the largest military power in history. This doesn't seem to make sense in a world of traditional state rationality – economic restriction may be stifling and enraging, but it cannot destroy the state.[22]

Through a lens of uncertainty and anxiety, however, the calculus makes much more sense. Entering the realm of losses invites far more anxiety than existing in the realm of gains. Losing one-fourth of national GDP invites a litany of other unpredictable and threatening outcomes: Social instability, damage to the existing equilibrium of self-perception and national standing, the possibility that cascading consequences could further erode China's position, etc. Conversely, in the status quo world (where China might stand to gain an equal or even greater amount of economic benefit by going to war), the uncertainty cuts in the other direction: Going to war invites the unpredictable and threatening possibilities. In both scenarios, uncertainty (and thus, anxiety) plays the dominant role. The critical question then becomes exactly what Chinese (and American) security narratives are – and which policies would threaten to "take away" the things that seem to provide stability.

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[22] A regime, of course, can be undone by economic stagnation. But it seems hard to argue that US policies constitute such a threat to the PRC, and Monteiro in any event does not set his argument at the regime level. The argument that is offered – that states will eventually be unable to pay for nuclear weapons – is fairly unconvincing, given the relatively paltry amount China spends on a small but still entirely effective nuclear deterrent.
See also: Fazal (2004), who points out that state death has now generally become a relic of a fast-receding past.

Of course, constructivist scholars have sought to answer just that question. But they have often done so without anchoring their theories in human psychology. Zhang and Lebow (2020), for instance, argue that the U.S. and China can assuage each other's fears by making "costly … irrevocable commitments" to undercut the perception of threat.[23] But their argument is normative – a plea for what the U.S. *should* do – and says little about what allows states to feel secure enough to make such costly signals in the first place. The assumption here seems to be that it is *always* advantageous to make a costly commitment in a rising power/dominant power dynamic (because it averts war), but this was certainly not true at Munich. And even if Zhang and Lebow would argue that it *is* always true now, this is clearly not how strategists see the world – not when we can simply say "Munich" and have little doubt that everyone reading it will understand exactly what we mean.

Psychological Realism provides a framework to explore this argument without having to reduce it to strict constructivism (which, taken to its logical end, suggests that the problem can be solved if only everyone stopped reading Thucydides and Mearsheimer, and instead read Wendt and Lebow). But there is more to threat perception than which argument gets most often repeated. *How* states reassure each other – and threaten each other – matters a great deal. So too does the ways in which states affirm a sense of security and stability.

Pessimists of Sino-American relations have often cited the idea that Chinese conceptions of great power identity must implicitly require reunifying with Taiwan – perhaps the most likely trigger for actual war between the U.S. and China. To make the case, doomsayers often point to extensive propaganda project the PRC has conducted around the issue over the past two decades: The prominence of the "One China Principle," the ubiquity of the Nine-Dash Line in maps in every classroom in China, often harsh rhetoric or military provocation regarding the Taiwan Straits, etc.

Here again, psychological Realism would invite a subtle but important reframe: Instead of "ardent nationalism leads to aggression on Taiwan," we might better understand the process as "ardent nationalism provides a way to meet an underlying psychological need of managing anxiety." Chinese leadership *has* made reunification a part of that nationalist narrative – but it is not a constitutive requirement of meeting the underlying need, nor is conflict even an inherent result of stoking national zealotry. Chung (2015), for instance, finds that affirming national chauvinism and superiority actually makes individuals more trusting of outgroup members, and more likely to seek cooperative solutions (because they feel more secure in their own power and identity).

This change would be even more consequential in policy circles than scholarly ones. National security communities (in the U.S., or China, or anywhere) are in many ways explicitly designed to treat threats as a given. Threat sensitivity is *definitional* of such environments – especially in a world where Washington remains highly affected by a post-9/11 mentality, and Beijing is acutely aware of the long track record of power disparity leading to the historical exploitation of China.

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[23] Feng Zhang and Richard Ned Lebow, *Taming Sino-American Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

How different would the national security process become, if the core question of U.S. grand strategy shifted from "what are our greatest threats" to "how do we identify which fears are justified and which are manufactured – and figure out which factors make us inclined to think so?" It is this stage of the process that is the true *variable* in the rising power/dominant power engagement – just as it was for Sparta and Athens. In a world where the main driver of conflict is China's rising power (or declining power, as Brands and Bexley would argue), there is little point in interrogating national or elite anxiety.[24] But if the real Thucydides is to be a guide, nothing could be more important.

Beyond Rising Powers and Troubled Islands

Critically though, these lessons are not specific to the Athens/Sparta, China/U.S. analogy; they extend far beyond Taiwan and Melos, offering insight into almost every sphere of great power politics. Here, I will close by offering a single snapshot of how revising the narratives in our Realist imagination might completely shift how we think about strategic interest, on an issue far removed even from the already expansive framework of rising powers and insecurity.

Recall again the Melian narrative hard at work in the engine of Realist thought – the strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must. Suppose instead that the quote reverberating around every first-year student's skull was something more like, "lashing out with brutality makes the world seem simpler and you feel more secure, but usually comes back to bite you." Suppose further that we attached to this narrative the understanding that the decision to slaughter the Melians was a direct product of Athen's devastating experience with years of plague and war, of the breakdown of social stability wrought by ongoing collective trauma.

What would this alternate narrative tell us about the true price of allowing (or even more relevantly, directly facilitating) persistent turmoil and violence as a tool of national strategy? Under such an understanding of human behavior, persistent national trauma created by years of war or threat are not merely moral questions – they are *strategic vulnerabilities.* They leave states apt to make destructive choices, and be less receptive to the incentive-based reassurance that has helped construct the prevailing international order. And they extend far beyond direct or immediate consequences, even in cases of minimal U.S. involvement.

Though the conflict is woefully invisible in the American consciousness, there is perhaps no better illustration of this point than the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. The quintessential US narrative of the conflict (which pitted Saddam Hussein against post-Revolutionary Iran) was probably best captured by Henry Kissinger, who famously quipped, "it's a pity they can't both lose." The underlying logic here is clear enough. After all, why wouldn't a state want two of its enemies to fight each other – especially to a brutally exhaustive stalemate? How could this be seen as anything but a win-win scenario for the United States?

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[24] This dynamic is further worsened by what Critical Security scholars like Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998) have identified as the pernicious effects of securitization: Once something is reified as an existential threat, it becomes increasingly difficult to argue for moderation (and justifies increasingly extreme state action).

For Thucydides, perhaps, the question would not have been rhetorical at all. The toll of the Iran-Iraq War was drastically extended by U.S. policy – becoming the longest interstate war of the 20th century – and inflicting extraordinary damage not just on Iran's military, but on its infrastructure and people. For the Reagan administration that saw Iran as a major US enemy, this was a feature not a bug. But the damage was so extreme that it led to fundamental changes in Iranian political society. The mass conscripts who survived the war emerged as a unique political network – forged in the crucible of a decade of war trauma (which they blamed on the United States), and fiercely loyal to the Ayatollah. This network coalesced into what would become the regime's crucial instrument of power: The Basij militia.

As it turned out, this would matter a great deal to US interests. In the early 1990s, the Iranian regime was in trouble: The Iranian public, angered over a failing economy and repressive rule, pushed back against a government now led by Ali Khamenei, who was far less nationally popular than his predecessor. In 1994, Khamenei ordered the IRGC (the Iranian army) to put down a massive uprising in the city of Qazvin. They refused. This might well have been the end of the Islamic Republic – authoritarian regimes whose militaries refuse orders to shoot revolutionaries don't tend to last very long. Immediately, the Basij stepped in – incurring a remarkable amount of personal risk, given that the military had already become the first mover (in the other direction!) in what seemed like a plausibly fatal political crisis for the regime.

The Basij knew that they were placing their heads directly on the chopping block. It was a risk the IRGC, despite being loyal to and benefitting from the regime, was unwilling to take. But the Basij had seen their place in society and sense of self ripped apart and remade over a decade of brutal warfare. The war had induced in them an unshakable connection to the Ayatollah – and a sense that every perceived opponent was part of a relentless, even apocalyptic assault. To these men, protesters were not fellow Iranians, or even political opponents. They were agents of destruction, who in a deeply familiar dynamic of collective trauma could not be separated from the formative threats of the past.

The Iran-Iraq War, then – prolonged and worsened as it was by deliberate US policy – directly created the very thing that saved the Islamic Republic of Iran. For all the quixotic American longing for regime change in Tehran, the greatest threat to state was (and will always be) the Iranian people. But when Iranians found themselves the closest they have ever been to that goal, it was a direct artifact of US policy that stopped them in their tracks. It is an irony to rival that of the Spartans and Athenians forsaking realism in the name of Realism – and just as criminally misunderstood by our dominant strategic narratives.

Conclusion: Toward a Psychological Realism?

Admittedly, the argument here is filtered through a single and undoubtedly remote reference point (the world *is* very different from Classical Greece). Yet this distance is also theoretically valuable. It helps reveal, for instance, that Waltz's "first image" has been at the center of Realist thought since the very beginning (though the structural turn to Neo-realism in the late 20th century helped obscure it). And it illustrates that human psychology can indeed provide a consistent *structure* for theorizing about international politics – even across two millennia of history.

Moreover, in reviving the psychological Realism of Thucydides, we are not restricted to using only Classical tools. To the wisdom of the ancients we can add insights from modern cognitive psychology, allowing us to more specifically theorize "fear" and "uncertainty" as creating a very specific kind of anxiety – one that cannot truly be eliminated, and which will always and actively seek something to manage it. And as the Iranian case illustrates, failing to adopt such a perspective does not simply leave us unable to properly incorporate key factors into national grand strategy – it leaves us unable to even perceive them at all.

Not every human being will respond to psychological pressures like uncertainty and anxiety in the same way. But we know that every human mind is hardwired to detest it. And we can use this knowledge to begin to formulate dominant paradigms of anxiety management in politics – which sort of actions or situations seem most reassuring, which threats appear most unacceptable, and how these things tend to vary across certain types of people. This is still a world of quite expansive possibilities – a far, far cry from the extraordinary parsimony of Waltz and Mearsheimer. But that is precisely the point: The *world* is a world of expansive possibilities! The inability of structural Realism to capture these possibilities drove the last wave of Realist thought, and it seems likely to continue driving the next one. But if this new Realism is to offer a true alternative to ad hoc theorizing – while still capturing the empirical realities of the world – it will need to be a psychological Realism.[25]

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[25] I am anti-grateful to colleagues who politely objected to "psycho-Realism," which seems, to me, undeniably cooler.