Thucydides, Theories of International Relations, and the Future of U.S.-China Relations: A South Korean View

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Paper prepared to delivery at the 22nd World Congress of International Political Science Association, Madrid, Spain, July 2012.
Some boys were playing around a pond when they spotted a group of frogs hopping and swimming about in the water. The boys began to throw rocks at the frogs and even competed against each other as to who could hit the most frogs. Sometimes the rocks hit the frogs so hard that they died. Finally one frog hopped upon a lily pad. “Please stop,” he pleaded, “What may seem just fun to you is death to us.”

—the Boys and the Frogs, An Aesop Fable

I. Introduction: Scientists and Fortune-tellers

They are supposed to be scientists. Their profession, like in any other scientific field, purports to discover general laws and develop theories that explain laws. To become a qualified one, they are heavily trained with scientific methods like statistics, and solemnly preached of such scientific virtues as objectivity and value-neutrality. Like their peer scientists in other disciplines, they strive to publish in order not to perish. With journal articles and published books, they often thrive to global eminence.

During the past two decades, an odd thing happened – they have become like fortune-tellers, jockeying people into false hopes and/or groundless fears with hardly falsifiable and rarely falsified predictions, or rather prophecies. They are today’s international relations (IR) theorists. Sometimes, their predictions/prophecies were as grandiose and philosophical as the “end of history” or the “clash of civilizations” (Fukuyama 1992; Huntington 1996). In other times, they have not hesitated to make bold predictions about future of world politics, with huge implications for the planet’s inhabitants – their welfare, their safety, and their life and death.

As the Cold War abruptly ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, for an example, IR theorists quickly noted that an unprecedented unipolar international system had come, and then predicted that it would not last. Based on the theory of balance power, they said the pressure of international anarchy and the fear of uncontested power would lead to the political and military rise of new great powers, with Germany and Japan as likely candidates (Krauthammer 1990; Layne 1993; Waltz 1993). In the next twenty years, the prediction has not been realized. With the U.S. primacists triumphantly heralding the “stability of unipolar world” and U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism (Wohlforth 1999: Brooks and Wohlforth 2008), the balance of power theorists conceded but still contended “if not today, tomorrow.” And then they devised such noble concepts as “balance of threat,” “soft balancing,” “pre-balancing,” and “leash-slipping” in order to save their predictions and their theories.

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1 This paper is prepared for delivery at the 22nd World Congress of International Political Science Association, Madrid, Spain, July 2012. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the annual conference of Korean Association of International Studies, Seoul, December 9-10, 2011.
In so doing, they seem to be determined to hold out until the law of differential growth, if not the “iron law” of balance of power, makes the prophecy proved (Layne 2009).

At the end of the Cold War, for another example, they also predicted “back to the future,” or “instability in Europe after the Cold War” (Mearsheimer 1990). Noticing the instability was not forthcoming there, they turned to Asia which they believed “ripe for rivalry” (Friedberg 1993/94). With the fast and unbending economic growth of China, they predicted the “coming conflict with America” (Bernstein and Monro 1997a, 1997b; cf., Mearsheimer 2001; 2006). With none of these predictions realized, they, instead of admitting they erred and discarding the theory that (mis-)led them to wrong predictions, simply wait until their predictions happen to prove right with the passage of time, during which a myriad of factors may work out to generate the similar result as they had predicted.

The inclination to make predictions on the future history in IR is understandable. Unlike natural sciences or other social sciences, theorists in international relations are deprived of usual methods to test their theories. Laboratory experiments are simply not possible. Comparative analysis is inherently handicapped, for any spatial – cross national or cross-society – comparison is not feasible as there is only one international system without any contemporary and comparative referent. Temporal, over-time comparison is the only viable way to test their theories. Many of their theories have been developed out of comparison with the past. Luckily for them, the world has been in flux. The forty-five years of bipolarity have given way to an unprecedented unipolarity. They are now facing a once-in-a-life-time or even a once-in-history opportunity to observe the great transition, against which they can test theories. All kinds of theoretical labels – balance of power theory, balance of threat theory, hegemonic stability theory, power transition theory, democratic peace theory, offensive structural realism, defensive structural realism, liberal institutionalism, and so on – have been called upon to meet the test.

In so doing, however, the supposedly scientific predictions of theirs have become like prophecies and themselves like fortune-tellers. It is the case for at least two ways. On the one hand, the predictions are hardly falsifiable, either because they have been stated in such an open-ended way that they can be saved from any refutation, or because their casters are not willing to give up their paradigms or the hard core of their research programs, or both (Vasquez 1997; Lake 2011). On the other, predictions in social sciences are often recursive. Making predictions could make the predictions wrong. A respected fortune-teller may save a boy from drowning in river by predicting, or by prophesying, that he will be drowning, for the devout parents would prevent the boy from swimming in river in the first place.

Thus, I take it problematic that IR theorists have become like fortune-tellers or prophets uttering prophecies in the pretext of “scientific” predictions for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, it is unhealthy and even harmful to the development of the field. Theories or “isms” in IR today are not sophisticated enough to generate “precise” predictions, subject and amenable to falsification. This is not to say that today’s IR theories are so underdeveloped that it cannot make high-
standard scientific predictions, which shall become possible in due course of scientific progress. Rather, international system is too large and porous to be subject to a general, overarching theory, which allows any precise predictions. What we call theories is little more than a set of loosely related assumptions on the nature of human agents, political organizations, and/or international system. Any predictions out of such theories are necessarily loose and often open-ended. Descriptions and measurements of their empirical counterparts are loose and often open-ended as well. Thus, testing theories via predictions on the future has hardly become a productive practice conducive to development of the field and enhancement of our knowledge on the subject. Instead, it has led to a “theological disputes” among “isms” that has become like religions (Lake 2011).

Practically, it may affect policy discourses, and thereby policies and practices of states such that the predictions become either self-defeating or self-fulfilling. Indeed, predictions in social sciences and on social affairs have power to become either self-defeating or self-fulfilling, because they are dealing with human agents, who are self-reflective. IR is no exception. Lewis F. Richardson (1960) said to his critics that his (differential equation) model of arms race “merely describes what would happen if people do not stop to think.” But people do stop to think. In fact, that human agents are self-reflective is now a popular proposition in IR with the advent of constructivism (Wendt 1999). In the regard, there is little difference between scientific predictions and superstitious prophecies. Just like a prophecy becomes self-defeating as devout parents take the admonition serious and adjust their behavior accordingly, a scientific prediction could be self-defeating. Analysts and practitioners in today’s financial market are too well aware of it. If a prophecy of a looming disaster becomes self-defeating, it would not do much practical harm but disgracing the prophet. Even the prophet may claim certain credit for averting the disaster. If a prophecy promises a good luck and becomes self-defeating, the prophet still has the room to save his face by blaming improper or impious behavior of the audience.

If a prophecy becomes self-fulfilling, however, the story is different. If prophecy of a looming disaster becomes self-fulfilling attenuating the predicted disaster, what credit would the prophet claim? Would the prophet trade pains to many for his/her personal gains (of self-satisfaction or public popularity)? In IR, Robert Jervis (1976) warned of the pervasive tendency and danger of self-fulfilling prophecy in national security policy. In international politics, there is no higher authority, or world government, which can resolve conflict of interests among nations authoritatively and thereby prevent violence and secure survival of the weak – the familiar logic of international anarchy. In such a system, nations become victims of Hobbesian fear, and resort to, not Leviathan, but self-help. Also in international politics of national security and survival, defensive and offensive intentions yield same type of behavior, and national leaders tend to become conservative and assume the worst. One’s behavior for no harm to others but defending self could be evidence of his presumably “harmful” intention. The same logic is equally true for the others, thereby leading to a spiral of conflict – the tragedy of security dilemma.

In this paper, I attempt two things. First, I try to problematize the prevailing tendency of making predictions on the future on two accounts – how it is harmful to the academics and practices of international relations. On this, I will take the case of the
future of U.S.-China relations as a current example. Second, given that IR literature have been heavily influenced by and many of realist insights drawn from Thucydides (1954), I will recast the U.S.-China relations into the context of Thucydidean thesis, and derive implications for the ongoing debate and future development of the bilateral relationship, which many believe shape the future world order.

II. The Rise of China, Future of U.S.-China Relations, and South Korea

Future historians may record the year 2010 as a landmark year. People’s Republic of China, which has recorded remarkable economic growth during the past three decades, finally and officially became the second largest economy in the world by surpassing Japan in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measured in official exchange rate. In due course, it is expected to overtake the United States of America to become the biggest in a decade or so, if it has not done so already (Subramanian 2011). And, “might” followed “money” as China confronted Japan over the disputed islands of Senkaku/Diaoyu, Vietnam and others over the South China Sea, and South Korea and the U.S. over North Korea’s military provocations in the same year (cf., Lampton 2008).

What does the fast economic growth of the most populous country in the world portend? Would it mean expanded economic opportunity for all, like cheaper products and bigger market? Or, would it mean stronger muscles of an already mighty and intimidating juggernaut? How would the juggernaut behave and how would others respond to it? And what would the interaction of China’s behavior and others’ responses culminate? These are some of the questions that people in the street are interested in and that scholars, IR scholars in particular, have tried to answer to.

Majority of interested people have seen the positive side of the picture, i.e., that China’s growth expands the pie for all while its growing muscles can be harnessed by the web of international institutions. Yet, IR scholars have seen and warned against its negative side: growing economy means expansionism, to the detriment of others, and will eventually lead to the clash of interests with the reigning hegemon, the United States. Indeed, the future relations between the fast-growing China and the reigning U.S. has been the core of public debates on and off the academic journals, the mass media, and the street.

If prevailing views were on its positive side, it has got to be IR scholars to become a devil’s advocate and to warn against the perils of wishful thinking and the danger of unprepared surprise. Bernstein and Munro (1997a; 1997b) provided a timely and early warning that there is a potential that the future world might be different from what most people think it would be. In their words,

China’s goal of achieving paramount status in Asia conflicts with an established American objective: preventing any single country from gaining overwhelming power in Asia. … It seems almost indisputable that over the next decade or two China will seek to become the dominant power on its side of the Pacific. Actual military conflict between the United States and China, provoked, for example, by a
Chinese attempt to seize Taiwan by force or to resolve by military means its territorial claims in the South China Sea, is always possible, particularly as China’s military strength continues to grow (Bernstein and Munro, 1997a: 21).

With the military crisis over the Taiwan Strait in the previous year of 1996, on the occasion of the presidential election in Taiwan, to which President Clinton dispatched two aircraft carriers, the thesis of “China threat” was well and widely received. In four years by 2001, Professor John J. Mearsheimer (2001) published a “canonical” book on offensive realism, which concludes with the following prediction:

It is clear that the most dangerous scenario that the United States might face in the early twenty-first century is one in which China becomes a potential hegemon in Northeast Asia. … [W]e would expect China to attempt to dominate Japan and Korea, as well as other regional actors, by building military forces that are so powerful that those other states would not dare challenge it. … U.S. policy on China is misguided. A wealthy China would not be a status quo power but an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony (pp. 401-402).

Mearsheimer’s book was a canonical work intended to supplement (by correcting the hidden bias toward status quo of, hence defensive realism in) earlier canonical work of Kenneth N. Waltz (1979). Those could be called “canonical,” as they aspire to establish a general/universal theory of international politics, based on the assumption of international anarchy, and supported by historical evidences, and guide future studies in the field by established scholars and aspiring graduate students alike.

Yet, as Hans J. Morgenthau, a grandfather of contemporary realism, had warned (which they knowingly or unknowingly ignored for the sake of universal theory), they, as social scientists, cannot separate themselves from the society by being an indifferent observer, but are actively engaged in the very process of historical development as both its products and creators (Morgenthau 1946: 142-43). As mentioned earlier, social agents are self-reflective and predictions in social sciences and on social affairs are recursive such that they become either self-defeating or self-fulfilling.

Bernstein and Monro (1997a: 20) find an evidence of the sinister side of China’s growth in a slogan that Deng Xioping is said to have said: taoguang yanghui, which was read by them to mean “concealing our abilities and bide our time.” The Chinese took the thesis seriously, and great pains to explain that it is “not a calculated call for temporary moderation until China has enough material power and confidence to promote its hidden agenda,” but simply and literally mean “keeping a low profile in international affairs” (Wang 2011: 73). The Chinese took the thesis of “China threat” so seriously that the leadership of Hu Jintao has promoted a new, alternative slogan, which they hoped sounds less sinister: heping jueqi (peaceful rise), underlining the word heping or “peace.” Mearsheimer ridiculed the new slogan by underlining jueqi or “rise” instead of heping or “peace,” and elaborated his earlier thesis further (Mearsheimer 2006). It in turn forced Hu to change the slogan to heping fazhan (peaceful development).
If Hu meant it and wanted to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding because of just “wording,” the realist prophecy of “coming conflict with China” (Bernstein and Monro 1997b) may become a self-defeating one. If, on the contrary, Deng really meant “vengeance” on the imperialist past in due time by taoguang yanghui, the realist prophecy may be seen to the Chinese as evidence of imperialist jealousy and animosity, and the Chinese new slogan of “peaceful” development may mean a tactic of taoguang yanghui to conceal their true intention – a case of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Mearsheimer, together with his close colleague Stephen Walt, visited Seoul, Korea in early October of 2011. On an international conference organized by the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, a think-tank arm of the ROK’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, he delivered a paper on “the Rise of China and the Fate of South Korea” (Mearsheimer 2011). In the paper, he reiterated his offensive neo-realist thesis on the rise of China and derived a lesson for South Korea: (1) a rising China will invariably seek a regional hegemon in East Asia; (2) the U.S., the sole regional hegemon in the contemporary world, will not tolerate a peer hegemon; (3) Asian powers including South Korea will have no choice but to join the U.S. in its attempt to contain China; (4) if China is able to attain the modern military capability that the U.S. alone has, South Korea will have no choice but to abandon containment policy and instead bandwagon on China (cf., Mearsheimer 2006).

Mearsheimer, who, like Walt, visited South Korea for the first time, was extremely well received by South Korean hosts – a big honorarium, a meeting with Lee Myung-bak, the President of South Korea, and a helicopter tour to DMZ (Walt, 2011). Looking into the much heralded state visit to the United States and a speech at a joint session in Congress, President Lee had an interview of the Washington Post, which was published on October 12 (Harlan 2011). In the interview, Lee was reported to have “called on the United States to increase its role in Asia, cooperating with China while also serving as a balance to China’s rise.” “In response to apparent jitters here that the statement could alienate China, … Cheong Wa Dae [President’s Office] published the whole transcript of the interview, saying the paper misreported Lee’s remarks” (Chosun Ilbo, 2011).

On and around the same time, protesters had been sabotaging the construction of a naval base at the southern tip of the Jeju Island by arguing that the base could be used by the U.S. in its hegemonic struggle with China and thereby jeopardizing South Korea’s independence and security. In 2005, South Korean society was deeply divided over the issue of “strategic flexibility” of U.S. Army stationed in South Korea, that is, if the American forces stationed in Korea may be dispatched to other locales of conflict. Those who opposed the idea argued that such a movement would inevitably embroil South Korea into unnecessary and unwanted conflicts, with U.S.-Chinese clashes over Taiwan as the most prominent example.

Foreign policy discourses in South Korea is complex. South Koreans have for long struggled with foreign policy dilemmas including its love-hate relations with North Korea, with security-autonomy trade-offs with the U.S., and economic ties and historical animosities with Japan. But none of these would be bigger than the profound fear of being a shrimp among fighting whales. Uttering hegemonic struggle between China and the U.S. in the face of the president, in the capacity of a leading
theorician in the field of International Relations, is like adding fuel to the fire, intended or not. Or, it is like a fortune-teller admonishing a feeble-minded mother of looming disaster to her beloved child in order to extract certain payment. Or, it is like the boys throwing rocks at the frogs for fun, which means death to the frogs.

Indeed, the prevailing discourse of the inevitability of hegemonic rivalry, struggle, or war between the rising China and the reigning U.S. itself could play its own social roles, either by either aggravating or by attenuating one or more of elements of conflict, or by changing balance of influences among various factors of conflict and cooperation.

This is never meant to say that IR scholars should forgo using their expert knowledge on international affairs and remain silent. On the contrary, it is their job to analyze the balance and its directions among various factors in operation, upon which policy makers rely for reference and guidance in their decisions. Indeed, Friedberg (2005) does a wonderful job of applying various theoretical perspectives to a myriad of facts in the U.S.-China relations and providing overall picture. What I consider problematic is the tendency of rewarding “extremism” in the “theological battles” among “isms” or sects in the scientific field of International Relations (Lake 2011). In his wonderfully balanced work, Friedberg (2005) asks “is conflict inevitable?” Why does he use the word inevitable? Is there anything that is inevitable in social affairs? Someone’s death is inevitable but it is not a social, but a natural affair.

By asking the question, he knowingly or unknowingly may be under the influence of the positivist epistemology of neo-realism, and have in mind the words of Thucydides: “What made [the Peloponnesian] war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta” (Thucydides, 1954: 49, emphasis added.) How many neo-realists would not be tempted to replace Athens with China and Sparta with the U.S.?

III. Thucydides and IR Theories

Indeed, Thucydides has long and often been referred to as an earliest (realist) IR scholar (e.g., Keohane 1986). His narratives, analyses and comments have incited imaginations and insights of many theorists and been instrumental to the developments of many theories: power transition theory (Organski and Kugler 1980; Rapkin and Thompson 2003), hegemonic cycle theory (Gilpin 1983; Kennedy 1987), and hegemonic war theory (Gilpin 1989). He has also been cited as the authority in the realist principles of power politics. It is neo-realists who found age-old support in Thucydides for their general claims: (1) primacy of system structure for state behaviors; (2) search for scientific, universal laws; and (3) rationalist approaches or the method of rational reconstruction (Keohane 1986).

First, neo-realism or structural realism emphasizes the anarchic structure of international system as the most profound and decisive factor in all international politics, then focuses on the distribution of capabilities over states, or the number of great powers (polarity) as primary explanatory variable. Change in the value of the
key variable should cause big changes in the system behavior. They find the oldest and the most authoritative support for this claim in Thucydides who said the real or true cause of the Peloponnesian War was in the changing balance of power.²

Second, scientific or positivist orientation of neo-realism, seeking universal theories that are valid over time and across spaces, could also be vindicated by Thucydides. For Thucydides, who seems to have claimed that he found “true cause” to the war in terms of the structure of a system, also seems to have said that his finding is true forever.³

Third, what makes IR theories or any social theory for that matter, general and universal, hence scientific is the assumption on human nature that is valid temporally and spatially – that human agents are rational and their decisions and actions can be reconstructed rationally. This is where Keohane (1986: 163-65), in his reconstruction of (neo-) realism, finds the commonality between Thucydides and Morgenthau.⁴

In so doing, however, Thucydides was often misused or even abused (Bagby 1994). In his paper for South Koreans, for example, Mearsheimer said: “[Asian countries] would therefore have little choice but to abandon containment and bandwagon with China. This would be a bitter pill to swallow for countries like South Korea, but as Thucydides said long ago, ‘The strong do what they want and the weak accept what they have to accept’.” No! Thucydides did not say that; he merely recorded what the Athenians said to the Melians (Thucydides 1954: 402). Indeed, neorealist reading of Thucydides is extremely superficial. According to Lebow (2003: 113-18), one of the most thorough readers of Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War could be read and uncovered at four layers. The first and most shallow layer is the discussion of power, fear, interests, and honor, as motives for action. Neorealist reading remains at this level, even without exploring its fullest meaning by leaving out honor as motive. The second layer is that the entire history could be read as a tragedy covering the rise and fall of the Athenian empire. Tragedy was a very popular form of art and literature in 5th century Athens with Sophocles as a popular example, and Thucydides was a contemporary to Sophocles. The third layer is concerned with the relationship between convention and nature, between words and deeds. On this account, Thucydides is not a realist, let alone a neo-realist. He is a constructivist (cf., Garst 1989; Lebow 2001). The fourth and deepest layer is more philosophical concerning “the rise and fall of Greek civilization, and the circumstances in which different facets of human nature come to the fore” (Lebow 2003: 117).

Whether Thucydides is a realist or a constructivist does not concern me. My point of argument is, first, that IR theorists’ love for theorization (through abstraction and generalization) costs them the subtlety, delicacy, and complexity that readers can find in Thucydides. Then, I argue that applying the theories to current affairs including the U.S.-China relations so as to gain practical lessons is not only hopeless

² “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta (I.23)” (Thucydides 1954: 49).
³ “My work … was done to last for ever (I.22)” (Thucydides 1954: 48).
⁴ “My method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation (I. 22)” (Thucydides 1954: 47).
but also harmful, both for theories and for practices. In the next section, I will highlight some of the prominent factors that played roles in one of the greatest wars in history so as to gain insights into and lessons for future courses of U.S.-China relations.

IV. Peloponnesian War: A Short Story

Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) was the war fought between Sparta and its allies on the one side and Athens and its allies, most of whom were in fact tribute-paying subordinate states, on the other for 27 years. The war and its history had attracted many readers, not just historians but also IR theorists, thanks to Thucydides, who as a contemporary of the war provided detailed account of the war, together with his thoughtful analysis of causes and progression of the war.

Sparta since the 6th century BC had been the hegemonic state in the Greek world. Armed with best citizen warriors, selected at the birth, heavily trained during entire childhood, Sparta freed many of Greek city states from tyranny and established regimes that would serve their interests, and thereby became the hegemon. In 480-479 BC, King Xerxes of Persian Empire invaded Greece with full force, and reflecting its hegemonic status, Sparta organized allied forces of Greek states and defeated Persia both at sea (the Battle of Salamis) and on land (the Battle of Plataea).

At the end of the war, the Athenians took over the leadership of Greek allies in the war to pursue retreating Persians and liberate Greek states from Persia on and around the Aegean Sea. By then, the Athenians already had the largest navy in Hellas and had gained high reputation for their daring character and military prowess among the Greeks. During the war of liberation that lasted for decades, the allies became reluctant to fight and risk their lives, and preferred to contribute to the allied cause not by army and navy, but by ships and money. They in due course became subordinate to Athens, who with the money and ships from the allies built a navy that no other Greek state could match. Also by constructing the Long Walls around the city, Athens became invincible from the land as well as from the sea. Also with the money from the allies and the wealth that their commercial activities, well protected by the navy, brought about, Athenians prospered and built one of the most shining civilizations in world history. Socrates, the philosopher, Herodotus, the historian, Hippocrates, the physician, Sophocles, the tragedy writer, Phidias, the architect, and Pericles, the politician, were the builders and the products of the civilization.

The Athenian empire kept expanding, north to Trace, east to Asia, south to Egypt, and west to Boeotia and even Megara, thereby encroached Sparta’s sphere of influence. In 445 BC, Athenian expansion finally stalled: they suffered a fatal defeat in Boeotia, a revolt by the ally in Euboea, and invasion of Attica by the Peloponnesian almost at the same time. They were forced to agree to a 30 years peace treaty with Sparta. In the treaty, the two sides agreed not to take any ally from the other’s league of allies. Balance of power between two opposing leagues, the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta and the Delian League led by Athens, was both delicate and fragile. The balance could have been broken by defection by a single ally either because of their own dissatisfaction with the status quo, either
internal or external, or treachery by one of the great powers.

In 435 BC, Epidamnus, a small city state in a remote barbarian land established by Corcyra, which was in turn created by Corinth, experienced internal turmoil. Democratic Party, which had become popular in most Greek cities due to Athenian success with democracy, forcefully took power from the ruling aristocratic party, who in exile allied with neighboring barbarians and attacked the ruling party. The ruling democratic party appealed to its mother city, Corcyra, for help but achieved nothing. They then turned to its grand-mother city, Corinth for help, who accepted the invitation with great enthusiasm. Their enthusiasm had to do as much with their hatred of Corcyraeans, who for long had refused to respect their mother city of Corinth, as with the opportunity for territorial expansion.

So the two states went into a war. At the initial stage of the war, Corcyra stood fairly well against the traditional great power of Corinth. Their navy, which they boasted to be the second only to Athens in Hellas, defeated Corinthian navy. Yet, when Corinth, a traditional great power, mobilized its own resources and allies, and swore vengeance, they had to look for outside assistance. Although Corcyra allied with none of Athens and Sparta, they decided to ask for help from Athens, given that Corinth was an ally of Sparta. Their offer of the second strongest navy in Hellas to Athens, and their implicit threat of the same navy falling into the hands of the enemy made the Athenians both tempted and fearful. With growing apprehension that war with Sparta was certain to come, the Athenians swallowed the bait and took side with Corcyra.

So did the Athenians intervene in the war between Corcyra and Corinth. Although they just came short of full naval engagement with Corinth, the ensuing hostility between the Athenians and the Corinthians were hardly curable. Then, as a measure of precaution, the Athenians sieged Potidaea, a colony of Corinth but an ally of Athens, for the fear of revolt, which in time became reality. Athens also prohibited Megara, a Spartan ally located near Athens, from using any port of Athenian empire and Athenian market for commercial activity, the first economic sanction in the history of international relations. The Corinthians and Megarians appealed to Sparta for war of vengeance, which Sparta accepted – so the war erupted.

The first two or three years of war were waged in the way that the ancient Chinese Sun Tzu had prescribed – winning without battle. While the Spartans laid waste to Attica, outside of the Walls, the Athenians sent to their fleet around the Peloponnese to lay waste to Spartan land – a war of attribution avoiding direct fighting and hoping the enemy to come to terms. But due to the logic of escalation and unforeseen events during the course of war, the war got intensified and uglier. In the seventh year of the war, 425 BC, the Athenians recorded a landmark victory – in the island of Sphacteria near Pylos, the Athenians engaged the first ever land battle with the best of Spartan warriors, and defeated them. They killed hundreds of them and took more as prisoners. That put the warring parties into peace – a temporary and but “false peace” in 421 BC (Kagan 2003).

There was a five-year period of neither war nor peace before the Athenians ventured them into a fateful, eventually ill-fated, expedition to the island of Sicily. Domestic
political turmoil, luck and accidents, or the god’s will, and eventually Spartan intervention led to decisive Athenian defeat. The rest of the history was already written. Athens experienced internal political upheavals, and successive defeats, until they finally surrendered to the Spartans, who at last destroyed the Long Walls and ended the Athenian empire in 404 BC.

V. Rereading the History

As I alluded before, simplification of history in favor of theory is problematic and history needs to be read again and again in order not to lose its nuanced details and take lessons.

1. A Preventive War by the Defending Hegemon in Decline?

The most powerful statement in the entire book is that “what made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta,” and that the Spartans voted in favor of war “because they were afraid of the further growth of Athenian power” (Thucydides 1954: 49, 97). The question is if the fear of the Spartans for the growth of Athenian power was strong enough to make the war inevitable, and if the war was a “preventive” war initiated by the Spartans to forestall further growth of Athenian power.

The first point was contested by Donald Kagan (1969) who noted that the height of Athenian power was not when the war actually broke out in and around 431 BC, but a couple of decades before when the Athenians conquered and subdued most of Boeotia and the isthmus where Megara and Corinth were located. After that, Athenian power was in steady decline with the defeat in Boeotia, revolt in Euboea, and failure in Egypt, all of which led the Athenians to accept the thirty year peace treaty with the Spartans in 445 BC. For ten years after that until the Corcyraean crisis, there was no significant activity on the part of Athenians to increase its power much further.

Second, it was not “fear” but “honor” that led the Spartans to declare war on Athens (Lebow 2003: 101-03). Archidamus, the king, alone properly appreciated the power of Athens, but instead of arguing for a preventive war in order to forestall its further growth, he argued for time and patience to get properly prepared for the war. Other Spartans were simply offended by Corinthian charge of timidity and Athenian arrogance. Honor and anger were the emotions, not fear, which caused the Spartans to declare war.

Third, it was true that the war started with Peloponnesian invasion of Attica in 431 BC so as to make the war called “Peloponnesian War.” But it was not an outright invasion or all-out attack out of blue. There had been ample exchanges of diplomatic activities on the both parts, with at least three attempts on Spartan initiative to settle the issue diplomatically. In the allied congress at Sparta, where Corinth and other

\[5 \text{ Later in the war, after Nicias’s Peace in 421BC, Thucydides called the war “Attica War” (Thucydides 1954: 363).} \]
allies sued for war, and even the Athenians were given opportunity to defend their causes, Athenian speech was more provocative than appeasing.

2. Athenian Challenge out of Dissatisfaction with the Status Quo?

The Athenians have long been frustrated with the lack of prestige that lagged behind their power, which they thought to have had. Even during the Persian War of 480 BC, the Athenians were upset that the commander-in-chief for the naval operation, where the Athenians provided most of the ships, was a Spartan. In 469 BC, when the Spartans were struggling with the worst uprising by the Helots, the Spartans invited the Athenians for help in siege operation, for which the Athenians were famous. Upon their arrival, the Athenians heard from the Spartans that they would have to go back, simply because they were not needed any more. It upset the Athenians so badly that they ostracized Cimon, their war hero and a pro-Spartan general, into exile.

Despite their contributions to the common Greek causes against Persians, their daring character and military prowess, and their wealth, the Athenians had been frustrated with the general lack of respect, which they thought they deserved. In 448-447 BC, Pericles initiated an innovative diplomatic venture. He proposed a pan-Greek international conference in Athens at Athenian expenses to restore lost temples and to fulfill the oath they made during the Persian War. He selected twenty well-respected Athenian citizens for envoys and dispatched them to the entire Greek world. On the conference day, no city sent their representatives because of Spartan interruption. Pericles and the Athenians were deeply hurt (Plutarch 1990: 184-85). They might have been determined since then that they needed to display military power in order to gain due respect.

3. Second-tier Great Powers and the Role of Instigators

It was more with the Corinthians than with the Spartans that the Athenian interests collide with the most. It was probably because Corinth had long been prosperous and established the sphere of influence – Corcyra was its colony and so was Potidaea, which provided first cases for complaints. It was Corinth who called up the allied conference in Sparta and challenged the Spartans for their reluctance to fight wars. It was also the case that Corinth was not just an ally of Sparta over which the Spartans possessed full control. Corinthian power was too strong or important for the Spartans to ignore and to lose to Argos, a rival state in the Peloponnese. Or, its geostrategic location was simply too important for the Spartans to let it fall into the hands of Athenians. And by taking full advantage of such strategic and geographic positions, the Corinthians exploited Spartan power in order to defend or expand their interests.

4. Minor Powers

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6 In their speech to the allied conference at Sparta, Corinthians threatens possible defection from the alliance with Sparta: “Do not force the rest of us in despair to join a different alliance (I.71)” (Thucydides 1954: 77).
The war, or the possibility thereof, between Sparta and Athens, destabilized the entire Greek international system. There were three types of local conflicts, which were precipitated by and in turn exacerbated the hegemonic conflict between two great powers. The first was civil wars. By the time, in most or all of Greek states, internal political struggles were in full swing. People were divided into two political parties—the one for oligarchy by a few aristocrats and the one for democracy by the masses. Without the feud between Sparta and Athens for potential patron, those internal power struggles could have been resolved with little bloodshed. But as vividly described by Thucydides with the Corcyraean example (Thucydides 1954: 236-45), internal political rivalries went into fierce armed struggle with possible or actual intervention by the competing great powers, and/or the expectations of such intervention on the part of the locale.

The second was interstate wars among old rivals in Hellas or even among foreigners. The Thebans annihilated the Plataeans in their neighborhood; the Acarnanians fought the Ambraciots, all because of possible and actual intervention by the great powers.

The third was revolt by allies, or subordinate states in the Athenian empire. Expecting that the Athenians would not be able to come in full force due to the ongoing war with Sparta, and that the Spartans would come into help either directly or indirectly by attacking the Athenians elsewhere, the Mytilenians revolted from Athens, which in the end caused the loss of their state.

In the hegemonic struggle between the great powers, the anticipations of help that instigated local conflicts were not out of ground. The great powers indeed did intervene in most of those conflicts in order to defend or to expand their power, where the distinction between defending and expanding was often blurred. Thereby, nearly all the states in Hellas either voluntarily or involuntarily took side with either side; war got extended and intensified, casting bloodshed everywhere, creating and deepening hostilities and animosities.

5. Hubris and the Causes of Athenian Imperialism

One of the things that attracted my attention most was the cause of Athenian imperialism, and in due course, the “Athenian thesis” of power politics. The rise and fall of, hence the tragedy of Athenian empire was directly related to this. While many factors including the commercial and naval activities by and daring characters of the Athenians are listed, the most fundamental cause I think is the hubris that the Athenians suffer from collectively. Hubris is a Greek word referring to arrogance of the successful and powerful. It makes people to feel that they deserve the good fortune they enjoy (nothing to be grateful to luck or god); that their success is the result of their (extraordinary) capabilities and will continue as long as they maintain the capabilities; that they are special compared to other people in terms of their capabilities and privileges they enjoy.

In their assessment of the war with the Spartans, and on the expedition to Sicily, Athenians suffered from hubris collectively. Athenian hubris had multiple sources: domestic democracy, which gave the people to elect politicians and ostracize the
most powerful; their privileged position vis-à-vis other people within their empire; and their early success in the war in terms of the victory in Pylos. These are combined to lead the Athenians to dangerous and ill-fated expedition to Sicily. The tragedy of the rise and fall of Athenian empire, in my reading, is rooted in the psychology of hubris. It is interesting that the Athenians themselves recognized the danger of hubris as expressed in Cleon’s speech on the Mytilenian debates: “when great prosperity comes suddenly and unexpectedly to a state, it usually breeds arrogance (III.39)” (Thucydides 1954: 215). But with the death of Pericles due to plague, political leaders in Athens, instead of leading the mass, became “demagogues” or populist, and led by the mass and the collective hubris into reckless policies (pp. 163-64).

6. Accidents and Fortunes

In social affairs, things are hardly preordained and accidents and fortunes play great roles in the course of history. Both Athenians and Spartans were well aware that, as evident in numerous speeches. But throughout the history, nothing was so accidental than the plague, which erupted in the second year of the war, killing a third of entire population and, most of all, its brilliant leader who designed the war from the first place, Pericles. In emphasizing the role of accidents and fortunes, Thucydides can hardly be regarded as a neorealist or a structural realist.

7. Thucydides and the Complex Realism

According to Doyle (1997), portraying Thucydides as a structural realist is misleading. Rather he should be regarded as a complex realist who puts equal and significant weights to system-level, state-level, and individual-level variables in explaining interstate politics. It is not, however, the multiplicity of the variables, but the interactive effects of those variables at different levels that which made Thucydides’ realism a complex one.

Indeed, the biggest lesson I take from the Thucydides’ history is the complexity of social world and history. Complexity was the keyword in another “canonical” book written by Keohane and Nye (1977). With the advent of complexity theory, it gained wider publicity both in the U.S. (Jervis 1997) and in South Korea (Ha 2011). In his book on soft power, Nye (2004: 4) envisioned a world with three dimensional chess board: military, economic, and socio-cultural. Ha (2011) provides a bit more sophisticated vision of world politics in terms of the four-pillared Dabo tower model of world politics. In his vision, four pillars represent security, prosperity, culture, ecology issues that are engrained on the base of knowledge and controlled by politics. Having been interested in security affairs, I see a world that is somewhat unbalanced among those areas, with more weight on security issues, particularly in East Asia, just as Mearsheimer sees it.

In security issues alone, however, Thucydides portrays a dynamics that is more complex than a neorealist might see it. The Peloponnesian War was not just a bilateral war between two hegemonic powers, but a system-wide war where other powers, second-tiered or even minor, played significant roles in the outbreak and process of the war. The complex picture I read in the History looks like this.
First, there are *horizontal* moves and interactions between great powers in terms of balance of power and emotions (of love and hate, fear and honor). Second, there is *downward vertical* causal effect of the great power politics upon local politics. Sensing and counting on changes in the great power politics, politics in the locales becomes flamboyant. Third, there is *upward vertical* causal effect of local politics upon the great power politics. Great powers become sensitive to the outcome of local conflicts and their impact upon the bilateral relations and balance of power, and inclined to intervene so as to manage and change such impact.

VI. Conclusion:
Implications for the Future of U.S.-China Relations and East Asian Security

In thinking of the future of U.S.-China relations, people, laymen and experts alike, tend to approach it from the vantage point of view of structural realism: rivalry and conflict between top two powers are inevitable and the relationship between a stagnant reigning hegemon and a fast growing challenger is the most unstable. While such a tendency seems to have been influenced by (a casual reading of) Thucydides, a careful reading of Thucydides’ *History* reveals that social affairs and human history progress refutes such a deterministic view.

First, nothing in the bilateral relations between the reigning hegemon (the U.S.) and the rising power (China) is preordained toward conflict. There are two reasons for this: first, it is far from certain where the balance among various factors at various levels – security, economy, culture, and environment – is heading to; and second, even if there is disproportionate weight in favor of security issues, it is still far from certain that the U.S. and China are heading into confrontation. For, social affairs are far more complex than most of theories in social sciences presuppose. This is all the truer in International Relations.

Analogy from historical examples is misleading analytically – e.g., the analogy from the Peloponnesian War to the Cold War, and to future U.S.-China conflict – in terms of the multiplicity of the causal factors and the complexity among them. Analogy from historical examples is misleading practically in that it could lead to either self-defeating or self-fulfilling prophecies with respect to the contemporary history.

Second, minor powers in great power politics play greater roles than what neorealist suppose. As much as the great power politics is affected by politics in the locales, there is ample room in which local, minor powers play roles in making and changing the history. There could be two ways in which local powers affect the great power politics and systemic outcomes. The first is *active* ones. That is, minor powers, if they are given chances, may try to instigate open conflicts between great powers, as Corinth did. They may do so in their attempts to maximize their interests, knowing or not knowing the full consequences of their own actions. And even the greatest power can hardly have complete control over their actions. The second is *passive* ones. Minor powers simply pursue courses of action that the circumstances may seem to compel them with no intention to affect great powers politics. In the myriad of factors that great powers may take into consideration, such behavior of local, minor powers may affect the decision calculus of great powers, which determine their respective
behavior and the international outcome in turn.

Third, there is a complex interaction between the system-level variables and the state-level variables. As alluded already, great powers at the system level make decisions as much with consideration of other powers’ behavior as other, minor powers do with their consideration of great power relations.

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