

# The Pacific and Thucydides in the 'Age of Energy Descent'

*The big blocs are taking positions to maintain their hegemony in a world with fewer resources and in which the rules of the game will be different*

Juan Bordera – Antonio Turiel

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**A**lthough the Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to place the centre of the theatre of operations in Eastern Europe, something is happening a little further away from the spotlight, as if behind the scenes. Something vital. The shift of the world's centre of power from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. A shift that will paradoxically coincide with an increase in the potential for a large-scale military - even nuclear - conflict in an era marked by energy decline. All is well and good.

A few months ago, the Biden Administration released the Indo-Pacific Strategy<sup>1</sup> document in which they declared: "No region will be more important to the world and to Americans than the Indo-Pacific". China has recently concluded a defence and security agreement with the Solomon Islands, an insignificant deal, but one that has made both The United States and the Australians nervous.

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<sup>1</sup> ↪ [Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States](#), February 2022.

These events, which are a dangerous trend, have already been analysed by Rafael Poch and Xulio Ríos, who recently warned of the growing risk of conflict in Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> Olga Rodríguez has also addressed the issue, pointing out in this article<sup>3</sup> that "the inertia towards a framework of war, as if irreversible forces of history were leading us to it, is avoidable". We could not agree more with this statement, and what better way to do so than to identify what these forces are to try to understand them and thus defuse their apparent irreversibility.

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## The Thucydides Trap 2.0

The Thucydides Trap is a concept created in 2015 by U.S. political scientist Graham Allison.<sup>4</sup> It refers to the conflict between Athens and Sparta - recounted by Thucydides in History of the Peloponnesian Wars - as a way of explaining the dilemma between a hegemonic but declining power (Sparta - United States) and a rising power (Athens - China). The fear that the rising power might become dominant supposedly led Sparta to launch a war against Athens, which it won, thus preventing the rise of its rival, albeit at a high price in the form of attrition.

Is Russia the real U.S. rival? No, of course not. It is China. The war in Ukraine, Thucydides notwithstanding - and especially not the U.S. hawks - could be the prelude to a larger conflict to prevent the final rise of an emerging power that already dominates the industrial and economic sectors. It lacks the military, still very clearly on the side of the Atlantic organisation. The fact that we live in a nuclear age does not diminish the risk that NATO - which meets in a month in Madrid - will consider this option.

Another - probably the most important - factor to consider in this story is energy. The US is a big energy consumer. So is China. In fact, it overtook the US about a decade ago as the world's largest energy consumer. And in both countries, energy consumption is growing steadily. Normal: numerous studies, such as those by the economist and Sorbonne professor Gaël Giraud, have shown that the supposed dematerialisation of energy is just a myth, that if we want to continue to grow economically, the consumption of materials and energy has to grow, here or wherever we have relocated the factory that supplies us with products.

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But it turns out that the availability of energy on this planet is finite and that the non-renewable energy sources (oil, coal, natural gas and uranium), which provide 90% of our primary energy consumption, have reached their limits. With mines and deposits as good as those we depleted in the preceding decades, fossil fuels and uranium will no longer grow. Worse than that, it will fall sharply during this decade, which has already begun to be felt, and how: power cuts in China due to lack of coal, lack of diesel and paraffin for aircraft on the US East Coast, fuel inventories at record lows everywhere, rising prices across the board, the green EU increasing the share of coal in the mix...<sup>5</sup>

The big power blocs are taking positions to maintain their hegemony in a world with fewer resources and in which the game's rules will be different. Russia, for historical reasons, looked to Europe and therefore viewed NATO's expansion

<sup>2</sup> ↪ Xulio Ríos: [¿Puede Taiwán acabar como Ucrania?](#) — CTXT, 21 de abril de 2022

<sup>3</sup> ↪ Olga Rodríguez: [La Guerra y los Patios Traseros](#) — El Diario, 3 de mayo de 2022.

<sup>4</sup> ↪ Graham Allison: [The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?](#) — The Atlantic, 24 September 2015.

<sup>5</sup> ↪ RTVE: [Bruselas lanza su plan para cortar la dependencia energética de Rusia potenciando el carbón y las nucleares](#), 18 de mayo de 2022.

into Eastern European countries with suspicion. Europe, for its part, looks primarily to Africa, as evidenced by the French-sponsored military operations in the Maghreb or the German government-sponsored plans to produce green hydrogen for Germany in Morocco, Namibia and the Congo. China also has interests in Africa but is looking even more towards Southeast Asia, aiming to extend its sphere of influence and win the race against its great regional rival India, which is still too self-absorbed in its grandeur and enormous cultural and ethnic diversity. What about the U.S.? Where is the U.S. looking to in the Age of Energy Decline?<sup>6</sup>

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The U.S. should naturally look to South America but is reluctant to abandon its role as a planetary empire. With over 800 bases in more than 70 countries, the U.S. "amigo" still has interests spread across the globe. And while the Europeans' African expansionism does not keep them awake at night, they are very concerned about Russian ambitions in Europe and even more about Chinese ambitions in Southeast Asia. That is why the U.S. has begun to turn its attention to the Pacific, with an increasingly declared intention to make the Pacific no longer live up to its name.

An important part of the US strategy focuses on protecting Taiwan, a critical location as one of the two countries (the other being South Korea) home to the most advanced state-of-the-art microchip factories. China has never hidden its interest in regaining control of what it considers a rogue island, part of its national territory. Hence the US military manoeuvre game replicated with Chinese military manoeuvres over the past few months. And recent statements by Biden during his visit to Japan - as if seeking complicity in a place that is no accident - have added a little more spice to the matter: "We will defend Taiwan if China attacks it".<sup>7</sup>

Due to the escalation of tension, another essential part of US strategy is alliances in the area: AUKUS, the recent entente with the United Kingdom and Australia, which also views with suspicion the unstoppable advance of Chinese political influence on its north-western flank and with which it also coincides in QUAD: another military alliance - in this case, a revived one - that includes India and Japan.

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And yet China is already waging its war of conquest in a relatively bloodless manner: the first victim has been Sri Lanka, which welcomed Chinese investments in ports and other infrastructure with open arms and now has China as its main creditor and negotiator in defining the conditions for the economic and political settlement of the grand Indian Ocean island. But Sri Lanka is not the only country in Chinese hands, just the first to fall: China's New Silk Road strategy, financing new infrastructure in other countries with apparently advantageous but, in practice, unpayable credits, given their high amounts, is paying off handsomely.

Although its strategy of dominance is more commercial than military, China is well aware of the Thucydides Trap and knows full well that the US will not stand idly by as it continues to move up the ladder towards hegemony in its region, and so it continues to rearm and flex its military muscle when necessary. And while the US is more committed to physical intimidation, it is also playing some of its cards with subtlety, hoping to strangle China's access to precious and

<sup>6</sup> ↪ Antonio Turiel / Juan Bordera: [La primera guerra de la 'Era del Descenso Energético'](#) — CTXT, 18 de marzo de 2022.

<sup>7</sup> ↪ Público: [EEUU amenaza a China con una "intervención militar" si toma "Taiwán por la fuerza"](#), 23 de mayo de 2022.

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increasingly scarce resources: hence all the problems with Australian coal that China seized for months or Japan's recent protests over China's exploration in the China Sea.

All this dizzying slow-motion train wreck is the logical consequence of an illogical attitude: that of trying to maintain infinite growth on a finite planet. An idea that is not only wrong but suicidal. An idea that can lead us to many other wars. New Ukraines will have to succumb to the horror of the most harmful and dangerous idea this planet has ever known: that of infinite growth.

Is there anything more stupid than war? You bet there is: a war when resources are rapidly dwindling and when the only possible response to the ecological challenge before us is a shared, cooperative one.

## The Only Solution to Thucydides' Trap

If we are to solve this mess, we have to recognise the hypocrisy of the West: on the one hand, we regard any slight gesture, such as the Solomon Islands agreement, from a less expansionist China - at least militarily - as a threat to our security. On the other hand, NATO's expansion has been spectacular over the past 30 years. And then we are surprised that a country that has been invaded twice in the last 200 years by European armies (Napoleon and Hitler) fears that there may be a third invasion, and the third time, we already know. Even Pope Francis understands this perfectly well and is not afraid to say that the war in Ukraine may have been provoked by "NATO barking at Russia's door".<sup>8</sup>

Does this mean that NATO is the bad guy and Putin an innocent novice? Not at all. Putin is an authoritarian, liberticidal satrap, and the invasion cannot be justified in any way. The solution to the Thucydides Trap is precisely that, to get out of the Manichean schemes of "good guys and bad guys", assume the complexity of geopolitical and international relations, and start recognising that it will be impossible to face the challenges we face as a civilisation if we think about continuing to grow. When space or energy resources are finite, you might as well stop growing unless you intend to crush those next door.<sup>9</sup>

It is time to cooperate to face the global prisoner's dilemma posed by the climate and energy crises, an entanglement in which we are all involved and from which wars are not the way out. The Thucydides Trap 2.0, it is clear, will have no winner. In the Autumn of civilisation all are twilight powers. There may be a side that loses less, yes, but the risk of total mutual destruction did not exist in the days of the Peloponnesian Wars. The only peaceful option is for the dominant power to renounce military domination of the ascendant and the ascendant to be generous to the one that gives it space without war.

We need to imagine politics without blocks. We do not need familiar recipes or soft reforms. We need a huge change in a short time, but one that is still possible. Let us heed Tolstoy, who knew something of wars and peace when he wrote "we think all is lost when we are made to leave our usual path, but that is precisely where the new and the good begins".

<sup>8</sup> ↪ Anna Buj: [El Papa dice que quizás los "ladridos" de la OTAN han causado la invasión](#) — La Vanguardia, 6 de mayo de 2022.

<sup>9</sup> ↪ Juan Bordera: [¿El crecimiento del fascismo o el fascismo del crecimiento?](#) — 12 de diciembre de 2021.

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