

ADVISORS AND IMPLEMENTERS OF SOLUTIONS AGAINST RISKS AND THREATS



TRUMP XI AND THE THUCYDIDES MESSAGE

Diplomatic courtesy can carry a firm strategic message. Xi Jinping's engagements with Donald Trump in 2026 invite precisely that reading: Beijing wants a stable relationship with Washington, but one that recognizes China as a major power entitled to influence the terms of coexistence. The question is whether appeals to peace also convey an expectation that the United States must accommodate China's growing power.

There is evidence for this interpretation. It does not establish that China has surpassed the United States or that Xi privately intends war. It suggests something more specific: the language of stability can also serve a negotiation over status, influence, and strategic limits.

The meetings and the message

The chronology matters. Xi explicitly invoked the Thucydides Trap during Trump's visit to Beijing on May 14, 2026. Xi subsequently visited Washington, where the two presidents held talks at the White House on September 24. These were separate meetings within the same diplomatic effort, rather than a single visit (Xinhua 2026; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2026).

In Beijing, Xi asked: "Can China and the United States overcome the Thucydides Trap and create a new paradigm of major-country relations?" The question presented cooperation as a shared responsibility while placing the encounter within the historical problem of relations between rising and established powers (Xinhua 2026).

That framing is consequential. It invites Washington to see China as a central participant in determining international stability. It also allows Beijing to portray resistance to its rise as a potential source of conflict. This is an analytical reading of the statement, rather than an explicit admission of Chinese intent.

What the Thucydides Trap actually means

The concept draws on Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, particularly his explanation that the growth of Athenian power and the fear it generated in Sparta helped bring about war. Graham Allison developed the modern **Thucydides Trap framework to examine the pressures that arise when a rising power threatens to displace an established one**. It is an analytical framework, not a formal Chinese military doctrine or an accepted law of international politics (Harvard Kennedy School 2026; Misenheimer 2019).

Harvard's Thucydides's Trap Project identified sixteen historical cases of such competition over five centuries, twelve of which ended in war. Those findings belong to the project's selected historical cases. They do not constitute a calculated 75 percent probability of a US–China war. Applying that ratio as a forecast would confuse a historical comparison with a predictive model (Belfer Center n.d.; Chan 2021).

The useful warning concerns how competition develops. A rising state may interpret existing constraints as an effort to deny its legitimate position. An established state may view the challenger's demands as evidence of expansion. Measures intended to protect security can then deepen the other side's sense of threat. The danger lies in how leaders interpret and respond to these pressures, rather than economic growth automatically producing war (Desch 2025).

The reference was already part of Xi's diplomatic vocabulary before Trump's presidency. In Seattle on September 22, 2015, Xi rejected the trap as an unavoidable reality, while warning that repeated strategic miscalculation could create such traps. Its use in 2026 belongs within a longer Chinese discussion about managing relations with the United States (Xi 2015).

Courtesy and strategic firmness

Xi's diplomatic tone should be assessed alongside the substance of his position. A restrained manner neither proves peaceful intentions nor demonstrates concealed aggression. A stronger assessment examines public statements, negotiating demands, operational behavior, and subsequent implementation.

William Alan Reinsch's CSIS commentary, *"A Summit of Equals,"* offers a reading close to this article's central argument. Reinsch interprets Xi's Thucydides reference as a reminder that Beijing regards China's rise as inexorable and expects the United States to adjust. In his analysis, the proposed relationship of constructive strategic stability implies recognition of equality between the two powers (Reinsch 2026).

This interpretation gives the reference a purpose beyond historical reflection. By presenting the relationship as a test of whether an established power can coexist with a rising one, Beijing can seek recognition of its status while placing pressure on Washington to demonstrate restraint. Yet this framing leaves a difficult question unanswered: which Chinese demands represent reasonable accommodation, and which would compromise the security or political choices of other countries?

Cornell University's Allen Carlson adds a less reassuring assessment. Discussing the May meeting, he observed that Xi asked whether the two countries could escape the trap without affirming that they would. Carlson linked that uncertainty to Xi's warnings concerning Taiwan and concluded that the underlying tensions were unlikely to disappear (Cornell University 2026).

The Washington visit

The Chinese government's account of the September 24 White House talks emphasized strategic stability, cooperation, managed differences, equality, and mutual respect. The same account recorded Xi's insistence on China's position concerning reunification and territorial integrity, together with his request that Washington oppose Taiwan independence and handle the issue cautiously (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2026).

This combination supports a qualified assessment: Beijing's appeal for stability coexists with firm political conditions. The statement documents China's official position; it does not independently validate its territorial claims or reveal everything discussed privately.

Edgard D. Kagan's pre-visit CSIS analysis also identified the potential political value of American language about Taiwan. He argued that Beijing could benefit from Trump repeating Xi's framing even without a formal US policy change, because such statements could weaken confidence in Taiwan and affect its leadership's position (Kagan 2026).

Words therefore matter, but ceremonial warmth alone is an inadequate measure of strategic progress. A meaningful assessment asks whether either side changed its conduct, clarified commitments, or reduced opportunities for miscalculation.

Britain and the United States

The British–American comparison is relevant because it provides an example of accommodation without a war for supremacy. However, the transition did not occur at a single moment around 1900. In the Belfer Center's account, American economic output surpassed Britain's in the early 1870s, while naval capabilities, regional influence, and global leadership changed on different timelines. Economic overtaking and comprehensive strategic predominance were separate developments (Belfer Center n.d.).

A concrete example of negotiated adjustment was the Hay–Pauncefote Treaty, signed on November 18, 1901. It superseded the earlier Clayton–Bulwer arrangement and permitted construction of an interoceanic canal under American auspices, giving the United States exclusive regulation and management rights subject to the treaty's conditions. This was a specific accommodation of American influence, rather than an announcement that Britain had surrendered its global position (United States and Great Britain 1901).

The analogy helps explain why China might find accommodation attractive as a diplomatic theme. Its limits are equally important. Historical precedent does not establish that Washington should accept every Chinese demand, or that other states should have their interests negotiated away. Taiwan and US allies possess political interests and agency of their own. A settlement that reassures two major powers while exposing others to coercion would remain unstable.

Why the framework needs scrutiny

Steve Chan's peer-reviewed critique identifies selection bias, problems in measuring power, and insufficiently specified causal mechanisms in applications of the Thucydides Trap. He argues that conflict can arise from causes beyond a shift in relative power, and that the analogy can obscure human agency or contribute to a self-fulfilling expectation of confrontation (Chan 2021).

Alan Greeley Misenheimer's National Defense University study likewise challenges the claim that Thucydides establishes an inevitable war between rising and ruling powers. *It directs attention toward leadership and political dynamics that influence whether competing interests produce negotiation or violence* (Misenheimer 2019).

Michael C. Desch offers another reading in The Chinese Journal of International Politics. He interprets Thucydides as supporting restraint and moderation, arguing that prudent leadership and a balance of power leave room for avoiding war. The classical account therefore supports a debate about strategic choices, rather than one uncontested prescription for confrontation (Desch 2025).

The global risk implications

1. *For risk assessment, the practical issue is what could turn rivalry into a crisis. As an analytical recommendation, monitoring should concentrate on observable changes: military activity around Taiwan, restrictions affecting trade and technology, interruptions to diplomatic or military communication, and changes in declared political limits. These indicators help test whether reassuring language is accompanied by reduced exposure.*
2. *Organizations with relevant exposure should assess scenarios separately. A prolonged diplomatic dispute, additional export restrictions, and a military confrontation would create different consequences and require different decisions. Planning should identify dependencies, decision thresholds, and accountable leaders rather than assume that a cordial summit has resolved structural disagreements.*
3. *The defensible conclusion is that Xi's Thucydides reference can be understood as both an invitation to avoid conflict and a demand that China's status receive greater recognition. Reinsch's interpretation supports that reading. It remains a claim about the strategic meaning of diplomatic language, not proof that American decline or Chinese supremacy is predetermined.*

The British–American precedent demonstrates that accommodation is possible. It does not settle the terms of accommodation today. The decisive test will be whether Washington and Beijing can define workable limits, sustain credible communication, and manage disagreements without treating compromise as surrender or coercion as an entitlement of great power status.

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