

## Tirpitz's Trap

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## TIRPITZ'S TRAP

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*Jeremy Stocker*

**H**istorians and strategists long have been aware of “one of history’s deadliest patterns”: Thucydides’s Trap.<sup>1</sup> The Greek writer after whom the trap is named observed in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*: “It was the *rise* of Athens and the *fear* that this instilled in Sparta that made war *inevitable*.”<sup>2</sup> In a recent work the Harvard academic Graham Allison used a historical survey of instances of established powers being challenged by rising powers, to ask whether China and the United States can avoid Thucydides’s Trap.<sup>3</sup> Allison identifies sixteen instances (not including Athens and Sparta) of rise versus rule. In twelve of them, the result was war.<sup>4</sup>

One of Allison’s case studies is examined in more detail by a Chinese military writer, Colonel Xu Qiyu.<sup>5</sup> Xu shows how the rise of the newly unified Germany was mishandled by its leaders after the architect of unification, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, left office in 1890. Germany’s growing industrial and financial strength was married to inept diplomacy that succeeded in so alarming the other European powers, including Britain, that Germany largely became isolated and encircled in the early years of the twentieth century. In the ensuing world war, Britain defeated Germany’s maritime challenge and the imperial regime was overthrown.

Xu is careful to avoid drawing an explicit parallel with his own country’s rise and its relationship with today’s established great power, the United States. But Allison wrote the foreword to the English translation of Xu’s work and there is a reference to China in the dust-jacket abstract. Xu’s implicit message is therefore clear: China should not follow imperial Germany’s example and must avoid Thucydides’s Trap.

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Contests between rising and established powers are not always the whole story, however, as the Peloponnesian and Anglo-German examples both demonstrate. These were also disputes between continental and maritime powers. The late Colin Gray observed: “There is a historical pattern to the repeated success of great sea powers over great land powers that defies dismissal as mere chance.”<sup>6</sup> Sometimes there is a further dimension to a continental-versus-maritime contest: when a continental power challenges an established maritime power at sea—in other words, in the latter’s domain. This was, to some extent, the story of the Soviet Union’s unsuccessful challenge to the United States in the Cold War.<sup>7</sup> It was also the nature of Germany’s challenge to Britain in the years before 1914.<sup>8</sup> This, then, is Tirpitz’s Trap.

### TIRPITZ BUILDS A FLEET

Alfred von Tirpitz, State Secretary of the Imperial Naval Office, was the architect of the Imperial German Navy and its challenge to the naval hegemon of his day, Great Britain. As a young man he joined the small Prussian navy just as Prussia’s prowess on land was bringing about German unification in three short wars against Denmark, then Austria, and finally, in 1870–71, France. Such naval strength as Prussia possessed was quite irrelevant to these victories and their momentous outcome: the creation of a unified German empire under Prussian leadership. At the time of Prussia’s defeat of France, Tirpitz was serving at sea, but his ship hurried home at the outbreak of war to avoid destruction at the hands of the much stronger French fleet.

Germany’s land frontiers gave the Prussian army direct access to its neighbors, allowing the Prussians easy victories on land. The strategic reality of Germany’s central, even commanding, position in Europe was unchanged forty-five years later and might, it could be argued, have been the key to victory once again. But by 1914 Germany was trying to be not only the greatest land power in Europe but also its second-greatest sea power. As a result, it faced a powerful coalition of maritime and continental powers rather than only isolated countries it could pick off in turn.

Admiral Tirpitz himself, similar to his contemporaries Admiral John Arbuthnot “Jacky” Fisher in Britain and Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan in the United States, never achieved much of note as a seagoing commander. But, like Fisher, he possessed outstanding political and administrative skills and, like Mahan, was a sea-power theorist, albeit a greatly inferior one. Through a combination of hard work, astute positioning, and fortunate circumstances, Tirpitz rose to be appointed as State Secretary of the Imperial Naval Office—the political head of the Imperial German Navy—in 1897. The patronage of Kaiser Wilhelm II was instrumental in Tirpitz’s appointment and subsequent influence.<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm was a

classic navalist, enthused by the impressive fleet reviews and other trappings of sea power of his British cousins but with little idea of the actual strategic utility of a large fleet. His growing navy was described by some as a “mechanical toy,” and to Winston Churchill (at the time First Lord of the Admiralty) it was a “luxury fleet,” divorced from Germany’s real security needs.<sup>10</sup>

Within months of his appointment, Tirpitz had maneuvered his imperial master and the German parliament (the Reichstag) into approving a huge naval-expansion program that was aimed increasingly, explicitly, at Britain (to begin with, Russia and France were the assumed opponents). In France, repeated naval defeats at the hands of the Royal Navy in the eighteenth century led to ideas of *guerre de course* (war on commerce). The Jeune École (Young School) argued that directly challenging Britain’s dominant battle fleet with a weaker one was futile.<sup>11</sup> Instead, France should attack British commerce, while trying to negate British naval dominance by what today we would call asymmetric means: using new technologies such as mines and torpedoes.<sup>12</sup>

The kaiser himself initially favored a fleet of cruisers for a worldwide naval presence that might be used for commerce raiding, but Tirpitz persuaded him that a truly great maritime power should have a battle fleet. Tirpitz rejected the ideas of the Jeune École as embodying the strategy of a weaker power. In the crudely social Darwinist atmosphere of the time (survival of the fittest), Tirpitz wrote, “There are 4 world powers. Russia, England, America, and Germany. Because 2 of these world powers can be reached only by sea, state power at sea moves to the fore.”<sup>13</sup> Allied to world power was *Weltpolitik* (world politics), sometimes expressed as a desire for Germany’s “place in the sun.”<sup>14</sup> Only sea power could express Germany’s world-power status beyond the confines of Europe. Xu summarizes these ideas very well in a simple formula: “High Seas Fleet = overseas interests = being a global power.”<sup>15</sup>

This desire to be more than just Europe’s dominant land power presented Germany with an irreconcilable dilemma. Britain was the world’s dominant sea and colonial power. As an island nation it lacked land borders with its European neighbors, so it did not need to maintain a large army in Europe (its army in India was supported largely by India itself). Britain therefore could devote most of its military spending to its navy.<sup>16</sup> Germany, surrounded by significant land powers on the continent of Europe, could not do the same. German naval spending never exceeded 50 percent of that of Britain, and it achieved even that proportion only in the years 1908–12.<sup>17</sup> The basis of German security always would rest on its army, and spending on the navy rarely exceeded 50 percent of the sum spent on the former.<sup>18</sup> German influence in the wider world was the result of not its naval strength but its economic prowess and its commanding position at the heart of Europe, when Europe itself was the heart of world affairs.

Germany's geographic position added to these conflictual priorities. In land-power terms, its internal lines of communication, especially its railways, were a strategic advantage. In sea-power terms, Germany's limited and constrained access to the high seas was a profound disadvantage, especially because it was the British Isles themselves that commanded Germany's limited egress to the world's oceans, much as they had Dutch access 250 years before.

Nonetheless, Tirpitz was determined to challenge Britain at sea in pursuit of *Weltpolitik* and Germany's wider greatness. Half a century later, the Russian admiral Sergey Gorshkov understood that to use a navy to pursue world politics, that navy had to go out into the world.<sup>19</sup> Tirpitz took a different approach; *Weltpolitik* would be conducted from the North Sea. He had a "whiff of Mahan" but needed to adapt Mahan's ideas to Germany's dismal maritime geography and an opponent whose naval strength he could not match.<sup>20</sup> The result was his infamous *risk theory*: "Germany must have a fleet of such strength that, even for the mightiest Naval Power [i.e., Britain], a war with her would involve such risks as to jeopardise its own supremacy."<sup>21</sup> The idea that an inferior power can deter a stronger one is neither original nor necessarily mistaken. It is a variation of the "fleet in being" concept, which stresses how an inferior fleet can influence a stronger opponent, merely by virtue of its existence.<sup>22</sup> The Nazi employment of the battleship *Tirpitz* during the Second World War was an example of just this approach.<sup>23</sup>

However, Tirpitz, drawing on both Prussian military tradition and his (selective) reading of Mahan, argued in favor of the offensive—a position at variance with the "fleet in being" requirements of the risk theory, unless it was merely the *threat* of the offensive that would make the risk effective.<sup>24</sup> This offensive would be conducted in the North Sea (within range of German naval bases). "Though not for a second do I harbour any doubts that even in this case England will emerge victorious, however, a rather unpleasant complication would arise from the little war against Germany."<sup>25</sup> This was, of course, a strategy *for defeat*, which makes sense only if it was, in effect, a deterrent bluff. Tirpitz later expounded on his thinking behind this approach: "For Germany, England is at present the most dangerous opponent at sea. It is also the opponent against whom we most urgently need a certain measure of naval power as a political power factor. . . . The military situation against England requires as great a number of battleships as possible."<sup>26</sup> But there was no "military situation against England" until Tirpitz and the German government created one.

### *Naval Arms Race: Phase 1*

Germany's naval arms race with Britain came in four phases—and Germany lost each of them. First, there was (by the standards of the day) a conventional

challenge in what later came to be known as predreadnoughts. What is sometimes called the “Tirpitz Plan” was initiated by navy laws in 1898 and 1900 that secured Reichstag support (and therefore funding) by conceding strict financial limits. The 1898 law aroused little alarm in Britain, but the 1900 law, which doubled the proposed fleet, started the first naval race. The projected fleet would comprise thirty-eight battleships and fourteen large cruisers, a force outnumbered only by the Royal Navy. But to maximize numbers within budgetary constraints, Tirpitz had to keep unit costs down. This meant assuming no significant technological innovations (which would increase costs) *and* building ships that generally were somewhat inferior to their British contemporaries because they were smaller and less heavily armed.

Had the dreadnought revolution not intervened, the planned fleet would have been achieved by about 1913. Assuming that British construction continued at an even pace, by the same date the Royal Navy would have possessed sixty to seventy battleships and a similar number of large cruisers. The Tirpitz Plan therefore was planning for quantitative *and* qualitative inferiority as a basis on which to challenge Britain in the North Sea. Although there is some evidence that Tirpitz ultimately was planning to match British numbers, for many years to come Germany was facing insurmountable odds.<sup>27</sup> Tirpitz, however, thought he could finesse this problem, as he assumed that Britain's worldwide interests would prevent it from concentrating all its naval strength in home waters, giving Germany the chance of local parity. He also intended to pick off elements of the British fleet under local conditions that favored Germany. These hopes relied on Britain not reacting to the German challenge and, if war came, acting as Tirpitz assumed the Royal Navy would. Instead, in 1902 previously isolationist Britain signed an alliance with Japan that secured its interests in the Far East. Two years later, the Entente Cordiale with France resolved a number of colonial disputes, led to much improved bilateral relations, and later allowed Britain to leave Mediterranean security largely to the French. Increasingly, a pivot to the North Sea occurred, in spite of Tirpitz's expectations; Britain had to prioritize a threat so close to home over its more-distant interests.

### *Naval Arms Race: Phase 2*

Then, in 1906, things got worse for Germany, as Britain took the initiative. In October 1905, Admiral Fisher (the Royal Navy's First Sea Lord, or professional head) had laid down a new type of battleship, HMS *Dreadnought*. Faster, with turbine engines, and more heavily armed, with ten twelve-inch guns, it rendered all existing capital ships at least obsolescent, if not obsolete.<sup>28</sup> The new ship was commissioned just fifteen months later, upsetting all Tirpitz's planning assumptions and starting the second phase of the naval race. The Tirpitz Plan relied

on keeping unit costs down to maximize numbers, but the new, larger type of battleship was significantly more expensive—about 50 percent more, in fact.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, Tirpitz was forced to follow the British lead, as otherwise his new ships would be outdated even before they were commissioned.

It might be thought that by starting a new naval arms race from scratch, Fisher was squandering the existing British lead. In fact, the opposite happened. Once Germany stopped building predreadnoughts, the existing British advantage in these ships was frozen at forty-one to twenty-five (somewhat inferior) German vessels. Until both sides acquired a significant number of dreadnoughts, this British lead would continue to matter. Second, Fisher had stolen a march on Tirpitz, who had to play catch-up in the new type. By the time the first four German dreadnoughts entered service in 1910, the Royal Navy already had ten such ships. Indeed, during a two-year period (1908–10) when Anglo-German naval tensions were at their height, Germany commissioned not a single new capital ship, as it shifted design and production from the old type to the new.

Although German ships were superior in some particular respects, such as watertight integrity and stereoscopic range finders, British ships overall led their rivals in the key characteristics of speed and firepower. It was not until 1912, six years after construction of *Dreadnought*, that Germany commissioned its first turbine-driven battleship.<sup>30</sup> By the time Germany moved from eleven-inch to twelve-inch guns, Britain had moved on to 13.5-inchers, which fired a heavier shell over greater ranges.<sup>31</sup>

### *Naval Arms Race: Phase 3*

In 1912 Britain began the third phase of the naval arms race: the superdreadnoughts. The five *Queen Elizabeth*-class battleships ordered that year carried fifteen-inch guns that fired a shell twice the weight of any German gun then in service. They also introduced oil-fired boilers and were capable of speeds up to twenty-five knots. Tirpitz's program for 1912 comprised just two twenty-one-knot ships, armed with twelve-inch guns. By the time the Battle of Jutland was fought in May 1916, Britain had eight fifteen-inch-gun battleships; Germany had none. By the same date, the total weight of the British Grand Fleet's broadside was 464,500 pounds to the German High Seas Fleet's 176,500 pounds—a 2.5 : 1 advantage.<sup>32</sup>

The year 1912 was significant for another reason. At a war council in December, Tirpitz had to admit to the army leadership and to Wilhelm that, despite all that had been spent on it, the navy still was not ready for war. He also was being criticized within his service for prioritizing new construction over training, readiness, infrastructure, and maintenance. Hitherto, the army had raised little objection, at least publicly, to ever-rising expenditure on the navy, but Germany's increasing isolation and growing international tensions (largely a result of

aggressive and inept German diplomacy) meant that the prospect of war seemed to be growing. Russia was fast recovering from defeat and revolution in 1905, and Germany's efforts to drive the (by now three) Entente powers apart had had the opposite effect. Germany was spending roughly equal amounts to counter each of its three potential enemies.<sup>33</sup> It faced the prospect, not merely of a two-front war on land against Russia in the east and France in the west, but of a three-front war that would include Britain at sea.

It was clear, even to Tirpitz in his more clearheaded moments, that Germany had not won, and could not win, the naval arms race with Britain. Tirpitz's political ally Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow had observed in 1908 that "we cannot weaken the army, for our destiny will be decided on land."<sup>34</sup> This was echoed in 1911 by the Prussian war minister, who told Bülow's successor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, "The fate of the Hohenzollern crown . . . rests upon either victory or defeat of the German army."<sup>35</sup> The year 1912, therefore, brought the peak of expenditure on the navy in relation to that on the army. The army bills of 1912 and 1913 saw a two-thirds increase in spending, while that on the navy remained almost constant—just as the superdreadnought race began.<sup>36</sup> The following year, and after much hesitance, Tirpitz announced that a British proposal of a 16 : 10 ratio in capital ships was acceptable. It remained to be seen whether such a position of entrenched inferiority (remembering also that German ships generally were smaller, slower, and less heavily armed) was sufficient to meet the requirements of the risk theory.

When war broke out in August 1914, the High Seas Fleet could not overcome the combination of inferior strength and geographic disadvantage. Within days, it effectively was confined to its own harbors, the Baltic, and the southeast corner of the North Sea, while the Royal Navy blocked the exits from the North Sea off Dover and the north of Scotland. Britain's essential strategic objectives at sea—the containment of the German fleet and the establishment of an economic blockade—were achieved within days of the outbreak of war. The one serious attempt to break this confinement, at Jutland in May–June 1916, despite some German tactical success, resulted in a confirmation of the status quo: "The German Fleet has assaulted its jailor, but is still in jail," as an American journalist wrote at the time.<sup>37</sup> The High Seas Fleet spent most of the war in its harbors, as irrelevant to Germany's victory or defeat as it had been half a century before.

As early as the end of 1914 it was apparent to Germany's leaders—including Tirpitz—that Britain's maintenance of a distant blockade beyond the effective reach of the High Seas Fleet (never mind the effect of German numerical inferiority) meant there was little prospect of a successful offensive. Ambitions for *Grosskrieg* (big war) were replaced by plans for *Kleinkrieg* (small war). Elements of the High Seas Fleet would attempt to engage elements of the British Grand



Fleet under favorable circumstances to whittle down their strength. But as Tirpitz himself observed, “[P]artial successes do not appear to be very probable in the future.”<sup>38</sup> Inconclusive engagements such as the Battle of Dogger Bank in January 1915 seemed to confirm this view.

#### *Naval Arms Race: Phase 4*

Germany, therefore, now embarked on the fourth phase of its naval race with Britain. Tirpitz became a belated convert to *guerre de course*, to be conducted not by cruisers but with submarines. But thanks to his earlier neglect of U-boats (which he regarded as weapons of the weak) the German navy had a quite inadequate number to perform the task it now was assigned. A first attempt at unrestricted submarine warfare soon was abandoned in view of the international outcry that followed the sinking of the liners *Lusitania* in May 1915 and *Arabic* in August of the same year.

Unrestricted submarine operations resumed in January 1917 (by which time Tirpitz was out of office), in part in response to stalemate on land and in part because Jutland had confirmed stalemate at sea. Germany now had a much larger U-boat force that might prove decisive, with 120 boats immediately available. By April 1917, 167 Allied merchant ships were being sunk for every U-boat lost—a rate that was quite unsustainable for Britain. However, the belated introduction of the convoy system reduced the loss rate to manageable proportions, and this go-round, unrestricted submarine warfare played a role in bringing the United States into the war. German submarines therefore helped to add to Germany’s enemies just as German battleships had done a decade earlier.

But the success of German submarines did show what might have been possible had Tirpitz devoted more effort to them earlier. Not only did they sink twelve million tons of Allied shipping, but they also accounted for more Allied warships than did the much more expensive battle fleet: a total of ten battleships (primarily predreadnoughts), thirteen cruisers, and twenty-one destroyers.<sup>39</sup> Tirpitz was right that submarines were the weapon of the weak, but Germany *was* weak at sea—geography made it so. And submarines (plus mines) were the only means whereby a nearly landlocked, inferior naval power could attempt to blockade its more powerful and insular maritime opponent.

Whether an earlier German commitment to a submarine- and mine-based *guerre de course* strategy could have been decisive lies in the realm of counterfactual speculation. Likewise, so does the possibility that if the resources and manpower devoted to the navy before 1914 had been used to boost the army instead, it might have provided the critical edge to secure an early victory in 1914. After the war, army officers claimed that the navy “ate up all the funds.”<sup>40</sup> Both claims miss the point slightly. The High Seas Fleet was not meant to fight Britain but to threaten it. The risk theory, beyond providing a strategic justification for a

navalist project, was meant to secure leverage. It failed because it was instrumental in creating the very threat it was supposed to deter.

### A MODIFIED TRAP

The Tirpitz Plan also was counterproductive to what its author perceived to be its aims. In 1910, Sir Eyre Crowe, a British diplomat specializing in German policy, wrote: "It is not merely or even principally the question of naval armaments which is the cause of the existing estrangement [between Britain and Germany]. The building of the German fleet is but one of the symptoms of the disease. It is the political ambitions of the German government and nation which are the source of the mischief."<sup>41</sup>

We now know that Germany, contrary to appearances at the time, was not seeking continental, never mind global, hegemony. Actually, it was becoming more fearful as its enemies became stronger, more resolute, and more numerous. It was the mistake of German policy to give a more malign impression than was its intention, in part because while intentions cannot be measured, capabilities can be. And capabilities, in turn, can suggest intentions.

A recent article on *Foreign Policy* magazine's website argues that the central tenet of Thucydides's Trap is wrong.<sup>42</sup> While acknowledging that the rise of new powers is destabilizing, the article's authors, Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, believe that the trap occurs when a state's rise falters—when its future ceases to look brighter than its past and its present. Until then, a rising power has everything to gain by biding its time. Their analysis reflects an old aphorism: that empires are at their most dangerous when in decline. It is when time runs out, Brands and Beckley argue, that a hitherto rising power may lash out, or at least act before its position in relation to its rivals starts to deteriorate. Yet this is, perhaps, not a disavowal of Thucydides's Trap but rather a redefinition of it.

This idea seems to fit imperial Germany in 1914. Germany's role in the outbreak of the First World War remains contested by historians, but it seems clear that a perception of a deteriorating diplomatic and strategic situation made German leaders somewhat fatalistic and ready to contemplate war.<sup>43</sup> As the chief of the German General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke, put it in May 1914, "[T]he sooner the better."<sup>44</sup>

Nor can we say that Tirpitz's Trap was responsible for bringing about war, or even merely for ensuring that when war did come Britain would be among Germany's enemies. The Tirpitz Plan was but part of Germany's quest for world power and the aggressive diplomacy that went with it. Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg himself understood "the earlier errors: a Turkish [Balkan] policy against Russia, Morocco against France, fleet against England, all at the same time—challenge everybody, get in everyone's way and actually, in the course of all of this, weaken nobody."<sup>45</sup>

By 1914 the most acute phase of the Anglo-German naval race was over, as Britain had shown conclusively its ability and willingness to outspend Germany, and the latter had begun to refocus resources on its army. Germany's naval challenge to Britain had played a role in increasing tensions between the two nations and in pushing the latter toward accommodations with France and Russia, but the naval competition played no part in the actual descent to war in 1914. Tirpitz himself also was entirely correct to observe later that "if Germany's armies had marched into Belgium and France, indeed if we had wrestled successfully with Russia and France, a Germany without a fleet would still have had England for an enemy. In keeping with her traditional policy, England would never have suffered our superiority on the Continent, even if she had had no formal *ententes* with the other Powers."<sup>46</sup>

That Tirpitz was seeking to absolve himself from responsibility for the calamity that had befallen Germany (he was writing in 1919) does not invalidate this judgment. Tirpitz's Trap—his continental-based maritime challenge to a maritime rival—was rather a matter of its opportunity cost. What might Germany have done better with the resources allocated to a futile and self-defeating naval challenge to Britain? It produced, perhaps, less a luxury fleet than a liability fleet. It was an example of "sub-optimal arming" that left Germany less secure in 1914 *with* a battle fleet than it had been in 1900 *without* one (or only a small one).<sup>47</sup> And if the Imperial German Navy was but part of the increasing militarization of international relations prior to the outbreak of war, it certainly contributed to the tensions that were unleashed in the summer of 1914.<sup>48</sup>

### THE TRAP RETURNS

Tirpitz's Trap appeared again in the second half of the twentieth century. The rise of the Soviet navy under its architect Admiral Sergey Gorshkov was part of the Soviet Union's worldwide strategic rivalry with the United States and its allies. But it consumed so many national resources that the skeptical Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party between 1953 and 1964, described the navy's ships as "metal eaters."<sup>49</sup> Gorshkov tried to answer the same question as Tirpitz: What is needed to become a great sea power?<sup>50</sup> His answer did not repeat Tirpitz's mistake in trying to match a stronger rival with a similar but smaller fleet. He *did* create that hardy perennial of naval strategy—a balanced fleet—but the balance was very different from that of his maritime opponent, the U.S. Navy. Lacking carriers but with huge fleets of submarines and coastal combatants, it was tailored better to Russia's geostrategic position and also contained a number of impressive cruisers and large destroyers able to go out into the world in pursuit of peacetime diplomatic influence—a Russian version of *Weltpolitik*.

But Gorshkov's greater strategic realism could not overcome two factors that Russia shared, and continues to share, with Germany: its constrained access to the world ocean and its fundamental reliance on its army, not its navy, for security.<sup>51</sup> In two senses, his challenge was even greater. Germany only had to build a single fleet; Russia needed and continues to need four widely separated fleets (Northern, Baltic, Black Sea, and Pacific). And Tirpitz's opponent was but a short distance away, on the other side of the North Sea, while Gorshkov's rival was oceans away. In 1974, Clyde Smith wrote that "[t]he Soviets will continue to work under the strategic hardships of unfavorable geography which both fragments and encloses their naval power."<sup>52</sup> That remains true of Russia today.

Tirpitz's naval rivalry with Britain was part of a wider strategic estrangement, and so it was with Gorshkov's naval challenge to the United States. Neither navy could prevent national defeat and regime change, in the First World War or the Cold War, respectively. Both may have contributed to those defeats by intensifying a strategic competition neither state could win and consuming resources that might have been spent better elsewhere. Both played a weak maritime hand and lost.

What, then, of the traps in the 2020s? Colonel Xu and Dr. Allison are not the only writers to worry about the German precedent. At the end of 2021, the Cambridge historian Robert Tombs wrote,

[P]erhaps most dangerous [in international relations] is when a potential aggressor thinks that time is running out. Since 1870, Germany had been a rising force, economically, culturally, and militarily, and so its rulers saw no reason to seek trouble.

But by the 1900s, the country's rise had stalled, and Germany's chances of becoming one of the leading world powers was slipping away. Its rivals seemed to be "encircling" it, and preparing for war. The German army and its Austrian allies believed in 1914 that they could still win, and quickly; but only for another couple of years. . . .

. . . China until recently appeared to be in unstoppable ascent. But now its economy is stalling, its population ageing, and (like Germany before 1914) it has alarmed its rivals. Its rulers may be starting to feel "encircled," as America, Japan, India, and now Britain start to react.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, parallels can be drawn too closely, and while history may resonate it does not repeat. Any war can be prevented if the right decisions are made by the protagonists. But "[t]he mood in Beijing is a strange mix of confidence, hubris and paranoia."<sup>54</sup> The same might have been said of Berlin in the period 1900–14. Thus, we (and the Chinese) have been warned; *peak* China may be a greater danger than *rising* China.

That brings us to the rise of the Chinese navy, one that has been as rapid and impressive as that of the Imperial German Navy over a century ago. While the prospects of China matching the U.S. Navy within any sort of foreseeable time-scale seem remote, that is unlikely to be Beijing's intent anyway. The Chinese leadership probably believes, with reason, that America's worldwide commitments mean that—the pivot toward Asia notwithstanding—the United States never will concentrate its entire naval strength against the People's Republic of China in the event of conflict or confrontation.

China (like India today and, before them, France) enjoys much less-constrained access to the world ocean than Germany or Russia. But all three states have extensive land frontiers to which they must pay attention. The People's Republic no more can prioritize the sea than could imperial Germany or Soviet Russia. Tirpitz's Trap serves as a warning of the consequences of challenging a maritime rival at sea, while retaining the commitments inherent in a continental state with strategically significant land borders and powerful neighbors.

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#### NOTES

1. "Thucydides's Trap," *Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, [www.belfercenter.org/](http://www.belfercenter.org/).
2. Thucydides, quoted in Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2017). Emphasis in original.
3. Allison, *Destined for War*.
4. *Ibid.*, app. 1.
5. Xu Qiyu, *Fragile Rise: Grand Strategy and the Fate of Imperial Germany, 1871–1914*, trans. Joshua Hill (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
6. Colin S. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. ix.
7. Although, interestingly, the competition at sea is scarcely featured in many histories of the Cold War. See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).
8. This comparison is drawn in the author's recent book: Jeremy Stocker, *Architects of Continental Seapower: Comparing Tirpitz and Gorshkov* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2020).
9. The most comprehensive biography of Tirpitz is Patrick J. Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2011).
10. Holger H. Herwig, *"Luxury" Fleet: The Imperial German Navy 1888–1918* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980).
11. Until the 1904 Anglo-French entente—itsself a reaction to aggressive German diplomacy—Britain and France were serious colonial rivals.
12. For a fuller discussion of *guerre de course*, see Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 59–62.
13. Alfred von Tirpitz, "Notes on His Report to the Sovereign on the Amendment to the Navy Law," 28 September 1899, in *The Naval Route to the Abyss: The Anglo-German Naval Race 1895–1914*, ed. Matthew S. Seligmann, Frank Nägler, and Michael Epkenhans (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate for Navy Records Society, 2015), pp. 55–58.
14. James R. Holmes, "Mahan, a 'Place in the Sun,' and Germany's Quest for Sea Power," *Comparative Strategy* 23, no. 1 (2004), p. 27.

15. Xu, *Fragile Rise*, p. 198.
16. The exception to this was a brief but large increase in spending on the army as a consequence of the Boer War, 1899–1902.
17. David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), p. 6.
18. Herwig, “Luxury” Fleet, p. 75.
19. Stocker, *Architects of Continental Seapower*, p. 187.
20. Patrick J. Kelly, “Strategy, Tactics, and Turf Wars: Tirpitz and the Oberkommando der Marine, 1892–1895,” *Journal of Military History* 66, no. 4 (October 2002), p. 1059.
21. “Draft of an Amendment to the Act concerning the German Navy of 10 April 1898, including Justification and Annex II,” 25 January 1900, in Seligmann, Nægler, and Epkenhans, *The Naval Route to the Abyss*, pp. 59–80.
22. Till, *Seapower*, pp. 180–86.
23. William H. Langenburg [Rear Adm., USNR], “The German Battleship *Tirpitz*: A Strategic Warship?,” *Naval War College Review* 34, no. 4 (July–August 1981), pp. 81–92.
24. Alfred von Tirpitz, “Tactical and Strategic Orders of the Naval Command of the Navy No. IX [Dienstschrift IX],” 16 June 1894. English translation in Stocker, *Architects of Continental Seapower*, app. 1.
25. Rear Admiral Tirpitz to General von Stosch, 13 February 1896, in Seligmann, Nægler, and Epkenhans, *The Naval Route to the Abyss*, pp. 37–41.
26. “General Criteria for the Establishment of Our Fleet According to Ship Classes and Ship Designs,” June [July] 1897, in Seligmann, Nægler, and Epkenhans, *The Naval Route to the Abyss*, pp. 42–48.
27. See Stocker, *Architects of Continental Seapower*, pp. 109–10, for more details.
28. For details of HMS *Dreadnought* and all subsequent British and German dreadnoughts, see Randal Gray, *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1906–1921* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1985).
29. The last German predreadnoughts cost 24.5 million German marks, the first dreadnoughts 38.4 million. See Herwig, “Luxury” Fleet, pp. 44, 61.
30. Until 1912, German battleships continued to use steam reciprocating engines that were bulkier and produced less power.
31. Britain maintained a similar lead in large armored cruisers, also known as battle cruisers.
32. Stocker, *Architects of Continental Seapower*, p. 114.
33. Robert S. Ross, “Nationalism, Geopolitics, and Naval Expansionism: From the Nineteenth Century to the Rise of China,” *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 4 (Autumn 2018), p. 18.
34. Quoted in Michael Epkenhans, *Tirpitz: Architect of the German High Seas Fleet* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008), p. 41.
35. Seligmann, Nægler, and Epkenhans, *The Naval Route to the Abyss*, p. 283.
36. Britain ended up with ten superdreadnoughts, Germany just two.
37. Paul G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), p. 328.
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