

Thucydides' theory of decision-making

Introduction

Through his observation, Thucydides was the first who tried to record and interpret decisions based on actual data. Moreover, he is the first in the human history of knowledge that systematically answers the four primary scientific questions: who, why, how and when.

In the work of Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, Ilias Kouskouvelis detects a theory of decision-making.

We can name it a theory due to the existence of the following conditions: a) reduction, b) generalization, c) a depiction that clearly manifests repetition in the future and d) suggestion of chains based on which the decisions are taken.

Therefore, this theory shows Thucydides' thoughts regarding the reasons based on which people, either individually or inside a group, make decisions.

He answers primarily to these two questions: 1) why people choose to claim and take over power (as authority, command), and why do they want to maintain it when they get it? 2) How do people, including those who exercise authority, decide, and why and how do they end up to decisions that lead them to danger.

Thucydides theory on decision-making is centred on a combination of human nature, need, authority, emotions, passions, and luck, which result in decisions.

The person who makes a decision does not decide inside a vacuum but inside an environment that influences the process of deciding.

For Thucydides, need and human nature are the two fundamental and more decisive factors of a decision.

Contrary to human nature, need has an objective character since it is created by variables that are out of the decision-makers control.

In the Peloponnesian war, there are more than a hundred cases in which Thucydides quotes to need.

Causes that generate need:

- 1) external threats
- 2) hegemony
- 3) poverty (economic factors)
- 4) war

- 5) Space
- 6) negative balance of power
- 7) the unexpected
- 8) natural phenomena
- 9) chance
- 10) lack of time

The power of need is enormous. It determines decisions so that it does not leave margins on the decision-maker to make a different choice.

Because in situations of need, like this now, every calculation is futile and what one requires is to deal with the danger immediately.

Need affects decisions and history itself. Thucydides was aware of that and took into consideration in his analysis of international politics of his time the role on need. Furthermore, in his research on decision-making, he combined the, in a large part objective, determinant of need with the subjective factors.

1st dimension

1st question that Thucydides tries to clarify:

Why do humans decide to claim and take over power/authority, and why do they want to maintain it when they get it.

Answer -> three variables:

- 1) Fear
- 2) Honor
- 3) Interest

Passages that provide the answer: A.3,75 and A.76.2.

The first one is the Athenians' answer to the Lacedaemonians during the negotiations before the start of the war when the latter blamed them for taking over their hegemony. Athenians reminded them of the Persian danger, that the Spartans dropped out of their own hegemony and the fact that they did not impose themselves through violence, but the allies offered them to take over the hegemony of the Greeks:

“Due to this fact, we were first forced to form our hegemony at this point, first out of fear, then for honour and later for our interest”

The second concerns the proceeding of the negotiations after Athenians explained why they assumed power and why they refused to renounce it. They argue that Spartans would be forced to do the same actions had they undertaken the leadership.

“We have not done anything different from human nature, accepting the hegemony offered to us and now refusing to abandon, frustrated by the three highest causes: honour, fear and interest”

Combining the two passages, the following structure of thought and, therefore, theory of decision-making emerges. The principal causes or incentives for the decision are 1) need (objective factor and connected with the environment of the decision-maker) and 2) human nature (subjective factor). Thereupon, the three elements of honour, fear and interest act as boosters either simultaneously or separately.

Therefore, the first dimension of Thucydides' theory on decision-making can be expressed as follows: humans, due to their nature, need and interest, fear, honour, undertake the development and maintaining of authority/leadership. Each of these causes can operate separately, in different combinations or all together.

2nd dimension

The second dimension of Thucydides' theory concerns how, why, and when decision-makers end up making wrong decisions that lead to dangers. There are five variables: audacity, arrogance, rage, hope and luck. These do interconnect with the other variables presented in the previous parts.

The passage that provides the answer: C.45 4-7

“Out of audacity created by need due to poverty, out of greed, produced by hubris, the self-confidence of power or passions that each time invincibly possess them, humans undertake risks. In any case, desire and hope - the first precedes, the other follows, the first plans the intrigue, the second submits the idea that luck will help- harm the most and, even though they are invisible, they are more powerful than the visible evils”

“Alongside them, luck does not contribute less in leading humans to conceit because, sometimes, it is unexpectedly presented and pushes some to risk the greatest goods, such as their freedom or their authority over others, since, alongside others, each one overestimates his power. Simply put, it is impossible, and it is foolish for someone to believe that human nature can be deterred either by the laws or by any other fear when desired to do something”

Conclusion

The theory presented in the previous parts can be summed up to the following: humans, due to their nature, need and due to interests, fear and honour, seek to acquire and preserve power/authority.

Moreover, humans, due to their nature, need, and power in a possible combination with luck, circumstances and arrogance dare, become obsessed, become greedy, and have unfounded hope resulting in them being led to wrong decisions and danger.

The first dimension explains the behaviour of people concerning power, while the second explains why people (not only because of the will for power) get involved in risky situations which have costly consequences.

Therefore, Thucydides' theory provides an answer to the question of why people in general and particularly decision-makers make wrong decisions. This theory is predominantly subjective, i.e. it focuses mainly on the personal characteristics of those who make decisions.

Source:

Ilias Kouskouvelis (2018) Thucydides on Choice and Decision Making: Why War Is Not Inevitable