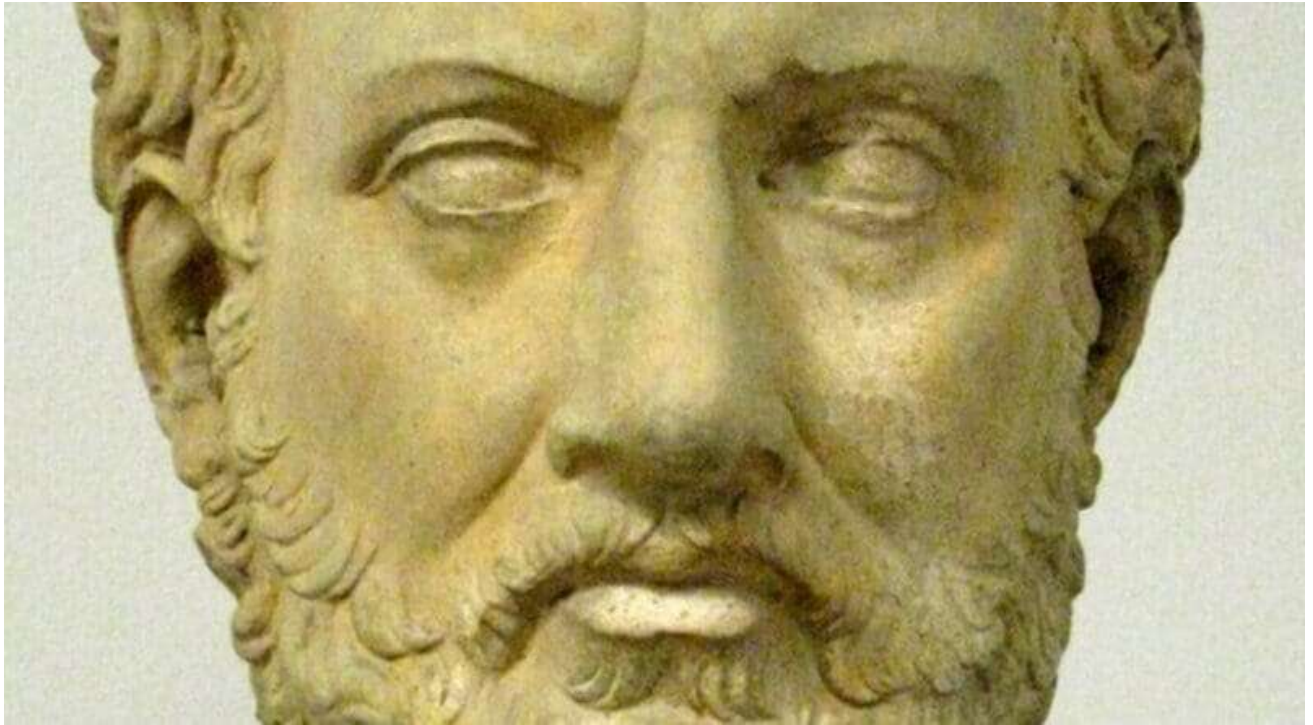




Bust of Thucydides. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

Reversal Of Thucydides' Maxim: Asymmetric Resistance Redefines Power In The 21st Century – OpEd

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By [Colonel Shashank Ranjan \(retired\)](#)

Key Takeaways

- **Thucydides' maxim is being challenged in modern conflicts:** In the Russia-Ukraine and US-Israel-Iran wars, relatively weaker states have demonstrated significant agency and resilience, proving that military and economic superiority no longer guarantee easy victory.
- **Ukraine and Iran have used asymmetry effectively:** Ukraine leveraged drones, innovation, and Western support to resist Russia, while Iran used proxies, ballistic missiles, and strategic alliances to project power despite conventional disadvantages.
- **Global alliances and technology have shifted the balance:** Weaker powers can now weaponize diplomacy, international solidarity, and low-cost asymmetric tools (e.g., cheap drones vs. expensive interceptors), redefining success in modern warfare beyond traditional conquest.

The ancient historian and general, Thucydides famously observed, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” For millennia, this grim aphorism has served as the cornerstone of realism in International Relations. The contemporary battlefields of Eastern Europe and the West Asia however, have given a twist to Thucydides' narrative. The ongoing Russia – Ukraine and Iran – US-Israeli wars are not merely exceptions to what Thucydides observed, but are fundamental refutations of the same. By leveraging several factors, relatively weaker powers have demonstrated that military and economic muscularity are no longer a guarantee of victory in the strategic terms.

The Ukrainian resistance against the Russian invasion serves as the primary case study in this paradigm shift. According to realism, Russia—possessing a military budget nearly ten times that of Ukraine, a vast nuclear arsenal, and a manpower advantage—should have been able to dictate terms within weeks after the launch of the so called ‘special operations’ in February 2022.

However, more than four years into the conflict, Ukraine remains a sovereign entity, having successfully defended itself. Ukraine at present is dominating the war as challenges for Russia become insurmountable. This success is not attributable to military parity, but to a superior and innovative application of asymmetry. Ukraine has been countering Russia in multiple domains, with its drone capability leading the charge. The active battlefield has proven to be a test bed for Ukraine to constantly improve its arsenal. To add to Ukraine’s advantage has been the lukewarm US support during Trump 2.0 that left Ukraine with no option but to innovate and enhance its capabilities.

Similarly Iran’s relentless resistance illustrates a different facet of the same principle. While Iran does not possess the conventional parity to challenge Israel’s air superiority or the US Navy’s carrier strike groups, it has cultivated a strategic depth and deterrence, compelled by the hardships from the decades of sanctions. Iran’s utilisation of proxy forces, its development of ballistic missile technology to include hypersonic missile and its expansive drone program have enabled it to project power and penetrate advanced defence systems during retaliatory military strikes against Israel and the US assets in the region.

The modern wars of earlier generation were about precision that meant a handful of missiles, stealth bombers or fighter jets. Now it means a one-way drone built from commercial parts and launched in swarms. What used to require a great industrial nation’s capacity can now increasingly be assembled, adapted and scaled by much smaller states. The new arithmetic of conflict is turned on its head, playing to the advantage of weaker powers. A Shaheed drone of Iran costs around \$ 35,000, while a Patriot interceptor of the US costs about \$ 4 million. The war dynamics have changed, due to the new arithmetics.

Crucially, the changing nature of global alliances further invalidate Thucydides’ dichotomy. During the times and contexts of Thucydides, weaker states often stood alone. Today, Ukraine has the support of western powers, including the US, irrespective of setbacks. In addition, the severe economic sanctions against Russia, driven by western countries have had a major role in tilting the strategic balance in favour of Ukraine. Similarly, Iran has leveraged its geopolitical position to build alliances with Russia, China, and regional partners, breaking out of diplomatic isolation and securing critical economic and military partnerships. During the course of funeral ceremony of the slain Supreme Leader, Iran regime demonstrated its strength through the presence of large number of world leaders – to demonstrate that they are not isolated in the context of war. The ‘weak’ are no longer helpless observers but are capable of weaponising global diplomacy to their advantage.

However, to claim that the weak have utterly triumphed would be an over simplification. Ukraine and Iran have achieved strategic survival and inflicted significant damage to

respective adversary, but they have also suffered catastrophic costs. This reality tempers the narrative of victory but does not invalidate the argument against Thucydides' maxim that the weak suffer without agency. In the current context, Ukraine and Iran have actively chosen to accept suffering as a consequence of resistance, rather than as a passive punishment for inferiority. They have retained their agency, reshaped global order, and fundamentally altered the security calculus of their adversaries.

The wars discussed above signify end of the era of unbridled power politics. Thucydides' observation was a product of its time, where victory was defined by the annihilation of the opponent's army and the occupation of their land. The modern wars redefine the metrics of success. The weak, armed with resilience, technological parity, and international solidarity, have discovered that they do not have to suffer quietly; they can, instead, force the strong to reconsider what they can truly do. Historian Timothy Snyder pitches this at one level higher when he argues in favour of weaker powers emerging victorious against the tyrannical and stronger adversary as essential to preserve global democracy and maintain international stability.



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Colonel Shashank Ranjan is a retired Indian Army Infantry Officer. He served for almost 15 years in the Counter-Insurgency / Counter- Terrorism environment in Jammu & Kashmir and in the NorthEast Region. Col Ranjan was a Research Fellow with Indian Army's think tank, Centre for Land warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, and is currently an Associate Professor with OP Jindal Global University and a PhD scholar.