

The Sicilian Trap: Why Is Russia Doomed to Fail in Ukraine-Celil Yiğit



What if a great power tries to eliminate relatively weak actor rather than compete with peer adversary while in a great power rivalry? In 415 BCE, the largest fleet in Athenian history began its expedition of Sicily. The original plan at the Sicilian expedition was to help Athenian allies (Thucydides, 2009, 310-311). But it turned into a full scale invasion. Neither the pandemic that killed Pericles, nor Sparta's superior ground forces were sufficient to stop Athens. It was the miscalculated expedition to the relatively weak target - the Sicilian expedition- that brought defeat to Athens in Peloponnesian Wars. Athenians lost more than 40,000 men and more than 200 ships together with their prestige (Brice 2013).

Great powers usually neglect their adversaries

and tend to focus on relatively weak targets. These great power interventions against relatively weak targets may sometimes turn out to be self-defeating what I call the 'Sicilian Trap'. The Sicilian Trap is a perilous quagmire that some states may even lose their great power status too. In addition, although the great powers return victorious from this kind of intervention, it will not be easy for them to recover from the wounds inflicted by the Sicilian Trap.

The Sicilian Trap is a Realist concept that tries to explain some failures of great powers' behaviours. So, it is an alternative explanation to some contemporary [Realists' stories](#). My theory rests upon a mere assertion that states are irrational actors and they always prone to fall into traps. This does not mean that states are leading by irrational people or policy makers are taking unplanned decisions. It means that war in itself is an irrational behaviour and also a very costly trap (Bueno de Mesquita, 1981). States do not consider stability or world peace as they mainly focus on their self-interest. Therefore, states are helpless nothing but running towards traps, which leads to catastrophic consequences.

On February 24th, Russia launched a military campaign against Ukraine. The main goal of the Russian invasion was presented as "[saving Ukraine from the West](#)" like the Athenians who tried to save allies in Sicily. Whether it is West's [fault](#) or Putin's [delusion](#); today, Russia is walking into the Sicilian Trap that may eventually inflicts great harm on its grand struggle. Russia's grand struggle has always been to be the West's balancer or the West has always been its holder. The West was France in 18th century, Britain in 19th and the US in 20th and 21st centuries for Russia. Nonetheless, Russia is on the verge of losing its status. Whether Russia wins or loses in Ukraine, this invasion will be the final nail in its coffin. China has already begun to take this position which is being an main adversary of the West. Let me briefly elaborate with few specific points.

Unnecessary fight: First and foremost, Russian invasion of Ukraine is an unnecessary fight. As The Athenian General Nicias, opposed to The Sicilian expedition, argued that “if we meet some serious opposition and fail, our enemies (Spartans) will be quick to make their attack” (Thucydides, 313). Ukraine would not be a member of NATO anyway. I don’t think many NATO members including France and Germany let Ukraine join the alliance too. Because it means a serious fight that might end with nuclear annihilation. So, Russia should have to compete with the EU, Turkey, Japan, the US and even China rather than nibbling on so-called weaker target Ukraine. On the one hand, [Japan will begin to take a tougher position on the disputed Kuril Islands](#), on the other hand, economically and politically, China will try to make Russia more dependent on itself.

Power and energy vacuum: A war or conflict always drain power and energy of warring parties. Beside economic and political sanctions, Russia losing its power in the battlefield too. Russia has lost approximately more than 10,000 military personnel, 200 tanks, 1,000 armoured vehicles, 40 SAM, 150 fighter jets and helicopters till now. Coercion, compellence, blockade, sanctions and other non-military actions are easier, wiser and cheaper than using military force. So, Russia is rapidly losing its power and prestige. In other words, while Russia trying to be a polar power, it is becoming a middle power. Obviously, Russia will miss its Cold War days.

Waking sleeping beauty: The EU, in a dream of prosperity and peace, is waking up to the forgotten reality of international politics. An aggressive military might may rouse former empires of Europe. Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine may not be enough to [constitute an EU military might](#). However, European powers are tending to increase their military spending to meet NATO standards. Especially Germany reserved a huge amount of fund (100 billion \$) to procure military assets including 5th generation fighter jets and drones.

Balance of aliens: States have balancing instincts. When a more irrational actor emerges, others converge rapidly in order to survive. It does not matter whether they are former enemies or autocrat and democrats. During cold winters cats and dogs cuddle and hug each other. For example, [Turkish and French navies conduct joint exercises](#) amid [Greece Prime Minister visits Turkey](#). Russia is achieving the mission impossible: a united Europe.

At the end, nobody should expect a new Cold War. At least Russia, with its disastrous campaign will not be a polar power anymore. Many analysts thought that the invasion of Ukraine is the first step of [Russian aggression towards Europe](#). I argue that we do not need [Munich analogies](#). The invasion of Ukraine does not mean [Russia's return to the great power politics](#); it will be the end of the Russian myth. Strictly speaking, compared to the other Realist explanations, especially [Mearsheimer's](#), the Sicilian Trap is what an alternative Realist story looks like.

Brice, Lee L. 2013. "The Athenian Expedition to Sicily." Pp. 622-41 in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*, edited by B. Campbell and L. A. Tritle. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce. (1981). *The War Trap*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Thucydides (2009). *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War*. Hammond, M., & Rhodes, P. J. (Eds.). (Oxford World's Classics). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[i] The Sicilian Trap is an extensive self-funded project that has more than 15 cases including Russian invasion of Ukraine.



Celil Yiğit is a “Political Science and International Relations” PhD candidate at Yildiz Technical University. He has MA degree from Yeditepe University and BA from Marmara University. As a self-proclaimed student of Realism, his main areas of interest are IR Theory, Great Power Politics and Stability of International Politics. He is currently trying to develop a Realist theory of International Politics.

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