

Great Power Competition in the Age of Islam

Contemporary Lessons from the Ottoman–Safavid Rivalry

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Abstract: Proponents of Thucydides’s Trap warn that conflict between a rising power and an established power may be impossible to avoid. The Ottoman-Safavid rivalry 500 years ago is evidence of this theory. Contentious economic interests, competing geographic concerns, dissimilar cultures, and differing political systems led to centuries marked by periods of both peace and conflict. The rivalry provides six lessons: war may be unavoidable but does not need to be catastrophic; domestic unity can lead to international disunity; economic interdependence does not abate economic conflict; alliances can and will shift rapidly; expect foreign interference in domestic affairs; and finally, rivalry can last for centuries.

Keywords: Thucydides’s Trap, Ottoman, Safavid, Ottoman-Safavid rivalry, great power

The Harvard University academic Graham Allison and the Thucydides’s Trap Project at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs dedicate research to the study of great power competition. The Thucydides’s Trap, named after its author in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, is illustrated as follows: “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”¹ Applying this framework to an older Middle

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Eastern rivalry provides insights into power relationship dynamics. The competition between the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the Persian Safavid Empire between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries presents lessons in how super-powers with commercial interdependence and cultural differences contend for geographic and economic supremacy.

The great powers' areas of influence directly intersected. The Islamic empires competed over border regions, such as Iraq and eastern Anatolia, and were economically interdependent. Just as China and America today rely on each other for continued economic prosperity, so too did the Ottomans and Safavids have long-lasting vital trade dependencies that suffered during times of conflict. Additionally, there were many distinctions between the two empires regarding their domestic populations' opinions, internal political beliefs, and cultural differences. The shared language, religion, and political beliefs following World War I and World War II helped the United States and United Kingdom avoid war early in the twentieth century as international power shifted west to North America. These conditions were absent for the Ottomans and Safavids.

Six major themes appear from a review of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. First, there were alternating periods of war. The outbreak and cessation of war is often beyond the hands of a single person or group of people, even if that individual is theoretically an all-powerful imperial ruler surrounded by a handful of close advisors. Second, domestic attempts at cultural homogeneity, while useful for state building and domestic consensus building, can lead to unintended foreign conflicts. Third, economic interdependence does not abate economic conflict, and economic conflict can rapidly lead to military conflict. Fourth, third-party and diplomatic alliances can shift unexpectedly and change a nation's strategic position virtually overnight. These shifts should be expected and managed. Fifth, external interference with a competitor's domestic matters has existed throughout history. The Ottoman sultan and Safavid shah launched regular subversive campaigns against the other. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, great power competitions lead to long-lasting and seemingly irreversible changes, especially for the places and persons competed over by rival powers. Decisions made today between powers may in fact remain a normal facet of world affairs two centuries hence, as was the case with the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry.

The Empires

The Ottoman and Safavid empires generally fall into a tripartite group, which includes the Mughal Empire of India, and are referred to as the "gunpowder empires." The gunpowder empire label, initially intended to attribute the empires' successful use of artillery to besiege fortresses, is not entirely accurate.² Rather, the competing dynasties should be thought of as existing in premodern

times during the gunpowder era.³ While the Persian and Turkish empires grew in the Middle East, Portugal explored the oceans of the world, the Renaissance flourished in Italy, the Protestant Reformation emerged in the Germanic states, and Queen Elizabeth I oversaw England's Golden Age.

The Ottoman and Safavid realms possessed fluid similarities in addition to firm differences. They were both imperial theocratic states in which Islam was the primary religion but minority religions flourished. While the Ottoman Empire claimed Sunni primacy and the Safavids espoused Shi'ism, both were empires in the sense that they contained diverse populations with numerous ethnicities, religions, and identities.⁴ In both cases, the non-Muslim population mostly tolerated and lived within the Islamic systems. Domestic opposition, when it occurred, often came from members of the ruling Islamic classes.

Ecologically—an important distinguishing consideration for premodern states—both faced the challenge of overcoming the arid zone limitations (which limited agricultural land and thus minimized the centralized income available for a standing army) placed upon the last major Islamic Empire, the Abbasids.⁵ The Ottomans escaped through their geographic location in Anatolia, while the Safavids overcame such hurdles through the growth of global trade.⁶ Most commonly, this trade took place through the Silk Road or the Persian Gulf.⁷ Both the Ottoman and Safavid rulers also overcame the preexisting revenue collection and distribution challenges of large empires, which “made fiscal decentralization inevitable, thus fostering political disunity,” though in different methods and at different times.⁸

Both were militaristic states almost always at war, similar to their European counterparts of the age. The Ottoman and Safavid dynasties claimed their titles from military supremacy—sultan for the Ottomans and shah for the Safavids—in addition to their religious authority as the rightful protectors and authorities of Islam.⁹ The Safavids merged their Sufi origins with the Shi'i faith, ultimately emerging into “an armed religious order whose legitimacy derived from their dual Sufi and Shi'i religious identities.”¹⁰ The Safavids specifically propagated to distinguish themselves from the Ottoman rulers.¹¹ The Safavid shah's claim to “quasi-divine status” generated internal instability in Ottoman regions such as central Anatolia and Iraq, which were countered with stronger countermessages of Sunni orthodoxy under the rule of the Ottoman sultans.¹²

In contrast, the Ottoman sultan asserted religious authority as “the most powerful sovereign in the Muslim world and the protector of Islam,” part of whose power was derived from the protection of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in the Arab Peninsula.¹³ Ottoman rulers as early as Murad I (r. 1362–89) referred to themselves as caliph, though the title was used to signify a position of political authority due to their foremost position among Muslim rulers. Only in later centuries would it take on the religious connotations of

earlier caliphates.¹⁴ Regardless, the founders of both states portrayed themselves as both Muslim rulers and warriors and depicted themselves as *ghazis*, “heroic warriors for the faith,” while fighting military campaigns in the name of orthodoxy (table 1).¹⁵

The Ottoman Empire—An Established Power

The original Ottoman power structure was based on armies of nomadic Turkish cavalry, the *sipahis*, who fought the sultan’s wars. When victorious, they were awarded with land holdings and urban centers to govern and tax as they saw appropriate. This system preserved a provincial power source far away from Istanbul. To counteract the sipahis and move the armies’ loyalties closer to the crown, later sultans expanded their *Janissary* soldiers—slave troops who began as the elite palace guard—into a loyal imperial army who were “superior to any European foot soldiers at the time.”¹⁶ The *devshirme* system supplied young Christian boys from villages in the Caucasus and Balkans to be converted to Islam and serve the sultan as both soldiers and bureaucrats.¹⁷ Court agents traveled regularly throughout the Ottoman provinces, “conscripting the brightest subject youths for service to the sultan.”¹⁸ The robust corps of professional administrators spread throughout the empire and kept detailed records and surveys for decades, perhaps one of the reasons the Ottomans ultimately survived much longer than their Safavid counterparts.¹⁹

The Ottoman Empire was a system built for war (map 1). The sultan moved his armies back and forth between European and Middle Eastern enemies for centuries, following a similar pattern until the empire’s fall after World War I. Istanbul maintained the capability to fight “more or less continuous war” through its elaborate financial and military structures.²⁰ As its army grew, so too did its expenses and its requirements for economic growth. In 1527, the Ottoman army had 18,000 Janissaries and artilleryman. By 1670, that number had more than tripled.²¹ The rule of Sultan Suleiman I (r. 1520–66) exemplified Ottoman military prestige with 13 major army campaigns against both the east and the west, which secured Ottoman power for decades.²² However, by this period, the ranks of the Janissary corps—perhaps numbering 200,000—were plagued by corruption and swollen with illegal members wishing to benefit from their status in the organization.²³

The Safavid Challengers

The Safavids began as a confederacy of nomadic tribes, the Qizilbash, under Isma’il I (r. 1501–24) at the turn of the sixteenth century. The balancing of power inherent in the tribal form of early Safavid government stood in contrast to the established hierarchy of the Ottoman slave-state.²⁴ Isma’il I, hailing from a prominent lineage and tracing his ancestors to the origin of Islam, harnessed the

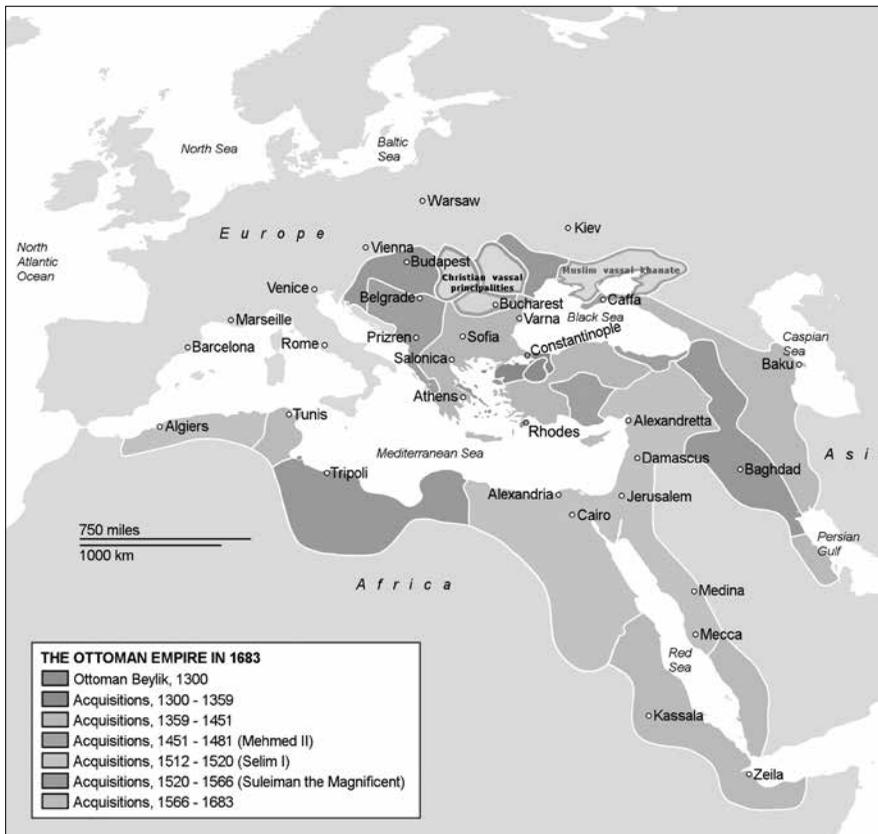
Table 1. Overview of Ottoman–Safavid rivalry from 1512 to 1639

Major Ottoman events	Ottoman ruler	Periods	Safavid ruler	Major Safavid events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conquest of Egypt, Levant • Control of Mecca and Medina • First official Sunni caliph • Embargo on Safavid trade 	Selim I (1512–20)	1512 to 1514 Conflict	Ismail I (1501–24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safavid dynasty established • Shi'ism adopted • United Iranian plateau • Hermit after 1514
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ottoman Golden Age • Major wars against Europe • Annexed North Africa • Major legislative reforms 	Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–66)	1515 to 1531 Peace 1532 to 1555 Conflict	Tahmasp I (1524–76)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil war after Ismail's death • Tribal rivalries in court • Recruited Caucasians to counter Qizilbash influence • Wars on both borders • Harbored rebel Ottoman prince
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anointed after palace disputes • Wars against Europe, Yemen 	Selim II (1566–74)	1556 to 1577 Peace	Ismail II (1576–77)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imprisoned by father • Qizilbash domestic conflict • Pro-Sunni policies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Killed brothers to secure rule • Costly wars in Europe, Middle East • Financial difficulties • Attempted military reforms • Rebellion in Anatolia • Government corruption 	Murad III (1574–95)	1578 to 1590 Conflict	Khudabanda (1578–87)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blind but only heir • Weak authority, state factionalism • Overthrown by son, Abbas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Killed brothers to secure rule • Court rivalries • Domestic revolts 	Mehmed III (1595–1603)	1591 to 1603 Peace	Abbas the Great (1588–1629)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongest Safavid ruler • Assumed throne while empire was in chaos • Qizilbash civil war • Ottoman and Uzbek invasions • Formalized Caucasian government service • Reconquered lands from Ottomans • Moved capital to Isfahan, Iran • Support for art, architecture • Killed sons as competitors, grandson became heir
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wars against Europe • Wars with House of Hapsburg, Austria • Revolts in Anatolia 	Ahmed I (1603–17)	1604 to 1618 Conflict		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competing palace factions • Weak ruler, possibly mentally ill 	Mustafa I (1617–18)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gained throne through coup • Imprisoned by Janissaries 	Osman II (1618–22)	1619 to 1622 Peace		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executed rebels and opposition • Remained weak ruler, no authority • Political instability • Janissary and Sipahis conflict 	Mustafa I (1622–23)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early period of anarchy • Revolts in Anatolia • Revolts by Janissaries • Strict religious, imperial policies 	Murad IV (1623–40)	1623 to 1639 Conflict	Safi (1629–42)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executed rivals • Little interest in government • Weakness enticed war

Source: courtesy of the author.

Map 1. The Ottoman Empire



Source: courtesy of Atilim Gunes Baydin, adapted by MCUP.

growth of Sufism, a rising branch of individualized Sunni Islam, to convert the Persian tribes to Shi'ism and unite them around his personal charisma. Isma'il I led the Qizilbash to conquer Tabriz in 1501, where he founded the Safavid dynasty.²⁵ The Safavid imperial structure fused the various cultural histories of the region into a unified dynastic story containing pieces of Assyrian, Babylonian, and Achaemenid influence.²⁶ Upon this heritage was placed Shi'a Islam to unify the various ethnicities of the empire, promote the shah's authority, and provide a lineage that was distinctive from the Sunni caliph in Istanbul.

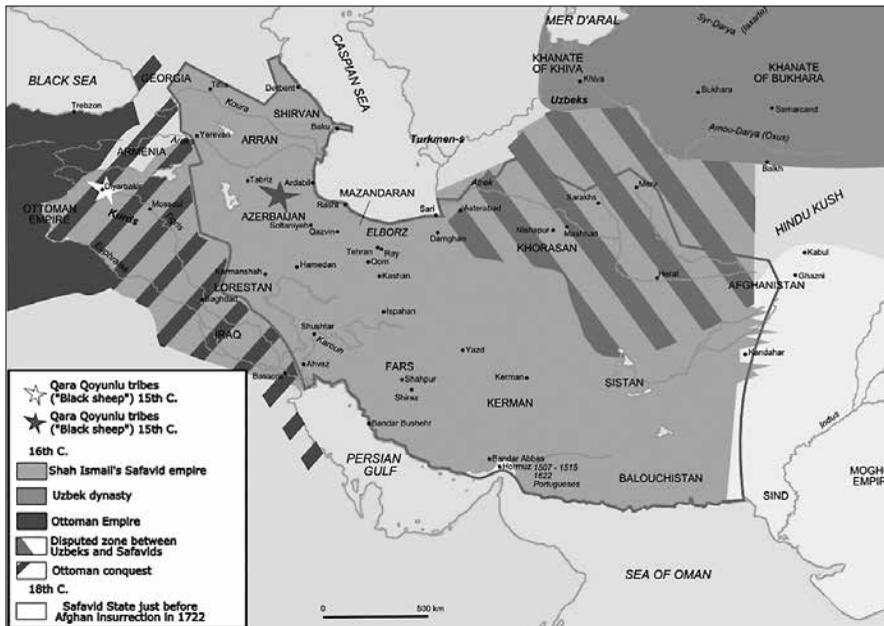
Much of Safavid history, similar to other premodern empires, is a continuous domestic balance of power between the urban cities supported by agriculture and trade against the nomadic tribal communities of the domain's corners, which based their livelihoods on the plunders of war.²⁷ The leaders of the Qizilbash provided the empire's early leaders a system around which to structure the empire. Leaders competed for favored positions around the shah and for control of the best cities and lands captured via war. As the empire grew into a more developed form, internal struggles shifted power away from the tribes, with their version of kinship-driven loyalty, to a system of semiprofessional bureaucrats and military officials driven by personal loyalty to the shah.²⁸

Perhaps the second most prominent difference after religion between the Ottoman and Safavid states was the Iranian plateau's lack of waterways and port cities to spur trade.²⁹ Safavid Persia had "no Paris or London, no Istanbul or Bombay."³⁰ Its commercial income relied on dispersed urban areas connected via "precarious" land-based trade routes, many of which went through or terminated in Ottoman territories (map 2).³¹ Modern historians believe the weak economic base of the most distant Safavid regions actually helped the empire survive. With little trade, industry, or agricultural income, local leaders in these areas could never garner sufficient autonomy to break away from the shah's authority.³²

The Rivalry

The competition between the empires began early in the sixteenth century and continued for roughly 200 years until the fall of the Safavids. The major struggle for power lasted until 1639 when the Treaty of Zuhab permanently divided Iraq and the greater Mesopotamian region between the Ottomans and Safavids. In 1512, when the Ottomans launched their first invasion of Persian lands, Istanbul was a recognized power with a functioning bureaucratic and military apparatus. The Ottoman Empire had established "institutional maturity" decades prior under Mehmed I (r. 1413–21) and Murad II (r. 1421–44), shortly after the capture of Constantinople in 1453.³³ The Safavids emerged later but rapidly achieved early success between 1500 and 1514 under Isma'il I. They would not reach their peak until 1588 with the rise of Abbas I (r. 1588–1629).³⁴

Map 2. Map of Savafid Empire



Source: *Streudand, Islamic Gunpowder Empires, adapted by MCUP.*

The initial success of the Safavids after 1501 stagnated for roughly seven decades throughout the sixteenth century as competing Qizilbash factions vied for imperial favor. While the Safavid leadership stagnated, the Ottoman Empire reached its peak under Sultan Suleiman I (r. 1520–66), now recognized as Suleiman the Magnificent (or the “Lawgiver,” as he is known in the Middle East).³⁵ Persian power could only reach its full potential later once subsequent leaders had virtually replicated the Ottoman bureaucratic and military systems of importing foreign outsiders to serve only the shah and his state. Even then, the power and unity of Istanbul at the Ottoman Empire’s height was never matched by any of the Safavid rulers.³⁶ Safavid Persia was always smaller, weaker, and poorer than its Sunni rivals to the west. Some historians even question whether the Safavid dynasty can be called an empire, but Istanbul viewed them as peers.³⁷

The rise of the Safavids posed a direct challenge to established Ottoman dominance in Anatolia.³⁸ During the late 1400s and early 1500s, Ottoman leadership recognized the threat posed to its rule from the east and took action. Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512) attempted to mitigate it by banishing Safavid sympathizers to Europe and moved his armies to the eastern frontier on two occasions—1501 and 1507—to deter Persian aggression.³⁹ Five years later, in 1512, the empires found themselves at war for the first time.

The Recurrence of War and Peace

Beginning in the early sixteenth century, the Ottomans and Safavids warred for control over the same border areas driven primarily by religious motivations or strategic concerns for almost two centuries.⁴⁰ The periods of war between Ottoman sultans and the Safavid shahs resembled a regular rhythm for both sides. For Istanbul, always focused more on its campaigns against Budapest or Vienna, war with the Safavids usually followed the establishment of new peace deals with Istanbul's European neighbors. To the east, the Safavid state often found itself in civil war and domestic strife following the deaths of the shah while the Qizilbash factions vied for influence. It was at these moments when the Ottoman armies attacked. The Safavid state then sued for peace to allow time for internal pacification before launching counterattacks against their Sunni neighbor.

The cycle began in 1501 with Isma'il I's capture of Tabriz near Azerbaijan and adoption of Shi'ism. Competition with the Ottomans commenced immediately due to territorial disputes, urban economic control, and the "nascent nationalism" that developed along dynastic religious differences.⁴¹ The Ottoman victory in 1514 at Chaldiran and subsequent successes against Egypt and Syria ruined Isma'il's confidence as a ruler, and he was forced to sue for peace. He went into seclusion for the next decade until his death in 1524.⁴² Political chaos within the Safavid regions followed, and Istanbul, secure in the west from a new treaty with Hungary, exploited the situation to march its army against Persia. The Janissaries captured Baghdad in 1534 "with no resistance," and within two years added the main holdings of eastern Anatolia back to the Sultan's domain.⁴³

War continued for 20 years until 1555 as the Ottoman armies gained further territory throughout Mesopotamia until the new shah sued for peace to stabilize Persia from internal civil war and Uzbek incursions in the east.⁴⁴ Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524–76) used the peace to reduce the power of rival tribal leaders and consolidate his hold over the empire. Due to the personal nature of his rule, though, the existing constituencies and centers of authority were "voided" with his death.⁴⁵ Unfortunately for Persia, the Ottomans were again free to attack east due to stalemates in the Mediterranean and truces with the Hapsburgs.⁴⁶ In 1585, Ottoman armies captured the old Safavid capital of Tabriz and secured control over most of the Caucasus and Azerbaijan, both of which were economically important provinces.⁴⁷

Shah Abbas I rose to the Safavid throne in 1588 following a decade of instability and Ottoman victories. He sued for peace with Istanbul to gain time, strengthen Persia internally, and combat the Uzbek incursions still plaguing his eastern border. Abbas modernized and reorganized the Safavid military to provide an effective counter to the Ottoman forces and ultimately pushed them

out of Azerbaijan and the Caucasus between 1603 and 1605. The recapture of Tabriz in 1605 unofficially ended this series of wars until peace treaties could be solidified in 1618.⁴⁸

During this period, the Safavids posed their greatest challenge to Istanbul, and the Ottoman sultan Osman II (r. 1618–22) tried to institute major transformations in the military and bureaucracy, such as eliminating the Janissaries. The endeavor failed remarkably. The Janissaries deposed Osman and placed his brother Mustafa on the throne (now referred to as “Mustafa the Mad” due to reports of mental instability), a rebellion broke out in Anatolia, and Istanbul “fell into anarchy.”⁴⁹ Shah Abbas took advantage of the domestic Ottoman instability, just as his own empire’s internal weaknesses were previously exploited. He achieved additional successes a few years later in 1623 with the capture of most of Kurdistan and Iraq, including a successful defense of Baghdad against the Ottoman army.⁵⁰ By the end of his reign, Abbas’s successes included a restructured state, a loyal army, an expanded economy, and a magnified imperial power, which he extended from his capital in Isfahan.⁵¹ Many historians agree that the pinnacle of Safavid Persia—the closest it came to a golden age—ended after the death of Abbas.⁵²

War between the two powers continued until the nineteenth century, though without any major realignments like the 1639 peace treaty. This regularity of battle was not inevitable. For example, the Ottomans were consistently reluctant to launch military campaigns to the eastern side of its empire. Logistical concerns and the harsh environment of Mesopotamia and the greater Iranian plateau meant that Ottoman generals preferred to operate in the empire’s western frontier “where they would find abundant food and water.”⁵³ The Ottomans excelled at siege warfare, but such knowledge was near worthless on the Persian Steppe with few fortresses and an enemy composed of Turkic cavalrymen.⁵⁴ Peace was welcomed at times, even by the victorious side. While the Safavids viewed the Treaty of Amasya in 1555 as an embarrassing loss, these difficult campaigning conditions in conjunction with “war-weariness” in Anatolia meant the Ottomans were willing to sign the treaty instead of pursuing further gains.⁵⁵

Despite efforts to the contrary, wars were launched for any number of varied reasons, including religious conquest, economic gains, national glory, or court personalities. Peace treaties failed to stem the cycle as each new government brought new desires to increase national pride and overcome previous wrongs. These same themes and cycles of war appear in other cases of great power rivalry. England and France fought recurring wars for centuries and conflict between the Soviet Union and United States, while never directly expressed, broke out in the form of proxy wars and near-war experiences on multiple occasions. Additionally, while the Safavids and Ottomans fought repeatedly over

the same regions (Azerbaijan, Iraq, the Caucasus), so too could multiple periods of conflict break out between the United States and China over the variety of conflicting interests in the Asia-Pacific region, such as North Korea, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.

Domestic Unity and International Competition

Competition between cultures has existed since the first communal organizing of mankind and has perhaps led to more conflict than any other matter. Culture is inherently unique to an ethnicity, country, religion, or people that can spread and be exported but tends to remain tied to one place of origin. The competition between Ottoman Sunnism and Safavid Shi'ism was more than a religious or cultural difference. For the Ottomans, Sunni Islam—the only Islam—was a source of authority and worldly order.⁵⁶ The rise of Shi'ism to the east constituted not only a heretical religion and rival culture but a direct and contradictory threat to the legitimacy of the sultan's rule, much the same as the political threat Protestantism posed to Roman Catholicism in Europe.⁵⁷ At the founding of both empires, religious sentiments tended to be superficial and rulers were more tolerant of heterodoxy within their lands. Later administrations on both sides resorted to stronger religious claims to unify their ethnically diverse lands, which continued to fracture and surely contributed to the downturn of relations between the two powers.⁵⁸ These “religious undertones” seeped into the fighting as decades passed.⁵⁹ Both rulers continued raising new armies and fighting new wars to gain glory for the state and to overcome previous religious or political humiliations.

The increased antagonism between different cultural identities highlights the often-unintended circumstance of increased internal unity leading to external competition. Both the shah and sultan's portrayal of themselves as defenders of the faith and the Muslim people increased the loyalty of their populations while simultaneously moving their empires closer to conflict. Especially in Persia where the deaths of most shahs brought domestic strife and civil war, religious homogeneity was the best means to unify the various competing groups. Each round of renewed Shi'a assertions, however, brought more trouble with the Ottomans because cultural competition often contributed to military competition. For instance, the Safavids looked toward Iraq for its religious importance as “the object of pilgrimage” for the Shi'a saints.⁶⁰ Baghdad and Mesopotamia thus became a prize to be won through war. The shahs viewed Iraq as “part of their rightful heritage.”⁶¹ The cultural importance of areas like an-Najaf compounded the economic incentive for conquest and helped motivate the shahs to launch multiple campaigns into the area.

Nationalistic and cultural differences between great powers today often appear minimized due to globalism, social media, and international trade. But

even during this premodern period, cultural overlaps between the Ottoman and Safavid courts, such as the fact that Persian was the diplomatic language of the Ottomans even during times of war, showcase that differences often outweigh similarities when interests clash and rivalries ensue.⁶² Leaders emphasizing the economic dependence between China and the United States may find it difficult to restrict growing passions of nationalism and patriotic pride if, or when, the two compete.

Economic Cooperation, Economic Competition

Imperial finances were a regular focus of domestic concerns and wartime competition. It comes as no surprise that the ability to collect, manage, and disperse funds challenged both the sultan and shah in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, just as it does for the twenty-first century nation-state. Both empires found their economic interests overlapping at times, such as with the silk trade. Regardless of mutual benefits, control of valuable economic regions like the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia pushed both sides to multiple wars. Without accurate accounting records, it remains difficult to discern whether these endeavors—when successful—were worth the cost relative to the logistical expenses of campaigning with premodern armies for multiple years. It is doubtful, though, as the cost of military expeditions occurred frequently in the discussions among imperial advisors and campaigns, such as the 1590s fighting in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan, which drained the Ottoman treasury.⁶³ Plunder from the war was scarce and provincial tax yields from the conquered territories was inadequate to sustain the required military garrisons.⁶⁴ On another occasion, the recapture of Baghdad by the Ottomans forced the Safavids to impose serious reductions in expenses and heavy taxation.⁶⁵ It appears more likely that the preconceived notion of financial gains from these regions led to war rather than the actual revenue recovered.

The Ottoman and Safavid rulers understood the importance of and relied on the results of successful economic endeavors. The Ottomans depended on levies from wealthy regions and the taxes from shipments of oriental goods like silk and cotton to Europe.⁶⁶ They benefited from the occupation of Tabriz by controlling all the overland silk trade routes between Persia and the Mediterranean.⁶⁷ In both empires, religious and civic centers were doubly used as markets and commercial hubs to link the leaders' religious authority to economic prosperity, thus helping to restrict opposition. The use of the *waqf*, a religious charity often supported from nearby stores, was the "conscious result of imperial commitment to stimulating the commercial exchange."⁶⁸ Both empires emphasized the connection between trade, economic prosperity, and the ruler's authority to govern, especially due to the shortage of farming areas in the greater Middle East. For instance, after capturing Istanbul in 1453, the Ottoman

ruler Mehmed II guaranteed the safety of the non-Muslim commercial leaders due to their importance in Mediterranean trade.

In the Safavid regions, Abbas I founded an empire-wide market system to meet the needs of “an impoverished economy, a fragile state, and an unreliable military system.”⁶⁹ Abbas, like the Ottoman rulers, relied on minority communities such as the Armenians to empower his economy. The “pragmatic tolerance of non-Muslim commercial communities” was not only endured but promoted by both empires alike due to economic realities.⁷⁰ In Persia, the reshaping of a widespread economy on minority-driven trade helped lead to the peak of Safavid power under Abbas.

Four premises stand out from the Ottoman-Safavid economic relationship with possible contemporary relevance. The first is that competitive great powers will likely enter into conflict—violent or not—over perceived economic gain rather than actual economic gain. Second is the significance and tolerance of minority communities due to their importance to the state’s economic functioning. The third is recurring competition over prosperous and strategically important regions, specifically eastern Anatolia and modern-day Iraq.⁷¹ Iraq’s southernmost Basra Province could be used for commercial expansion into the Persian Gulf and maritime trade to the Indian Ocean, while the routes through northern Iraq, such as Mosul, facilitated trade between the Middle East and the Mediterranean.⁷²

Finally, despite wars and competition between the two sides, both the Ottomans and Safavids were economically linked through international trade routes. The silk trade “represented Iran’s [Persia’s] principal and most valuable export” and was primarily shipped through Ottoman routes to Europe.⁷³ The silk industry was “critical” to both empires and mentioned explicitly in treaty arrangements.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, despite economic interdependence and the high costs of war, both rulers were willing to go to war for financial gains. The contemporary analogies are significant. Many experts argue that the economic interweaving of global markets, especially between such powers as China and the United States, will serve as a strong inhibitor toward violent conflict. Western-driven organizations, such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization may soon find their status fragile against Chinese-led competitors like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the One Belt, One Road initiative. Geographic chokepoints like the Straits of Malacca carry international power for those who control them. Hopes for peace spurred on by economic prosperity may not pan out.

Third-Party Alliances and Diplomacy

Diplomacy played a major role in the abilities of both capitals to manage their empires. Wars were expensive, logistically challenging, and far from a guar-

anteed outcome. Diplomats and political arrangements helped control the most-distant areas where imperial military power was weakest. The geographic distance between Istanbul and its governors in Iraq led to minimal involvement or support for the defense of the Mesopotamian frontier.⁷⁵ Local leaders resorted to “whatever arrangements they could to hold the borderlands in the face of Iranian [Persian] hostility.”⁷⁶ Naturally, such precarious conditions in the corners of the empires meant that local strongmen were open to negotiation over their loyalties. The allegiances of third-party tribes and communities in the frontier zones were often available to the highest bidder or the most immediate threat.

The wealth of areas such as Baghdad and Basra meant that the sultan frequently found himself negotiating with subordinates for their allegiance.⁷⁷ After their 1514 victory at Chaldiran, the Ottoman sultan preferred diplomacy to secure his alliances with the Kurdish chieftains in eastern Anatolia.⁷⁸ Many subsequent Ottoman diplomatic missions worked to secure the loyalty of Kurdish chieftains and were improved by sending loyal Kurdish nobles to parlay with the provinces.⁷⁹ This tactic was unique to the Kurds. While Istanbul used military force to control most of its frontier holdings, it preferred diplomacy and familial relations to secure Kurdistan.⁸⁰

The loose hold on power by central authorities meant that inconsistent commitment from the frontier zones could lead to war and required constant supervision. The initial Ottoman incursion against Persia in 1512 was launched partially in support of a local leader who preferred Istanbul to Tabriz.⁸¹ One of the greatest crises for Safavid rule came during the Ottoman invasion of 1533–34 when the threat was compounded by the emergence of rebels in Iraq and attempts to poison the shah and replace him.⁸² On another occasion, a main cause of the 1578 conflict was how the Kurdish factions played both empires against each other.⁸³

Diplomacy and communication was the norm between the two empires during times of peace. Most often, such overtures took the form of Safavid rulers sending delegations to Istanbul to preserve fragile treaties and reduce the risk of renewed conflict. In 1567, Persia sent a massive delegation of diplomats and gifts to the newly crowned sultan to foster good relations.⁸⁴ An ensemble of 320 men and 400 merchants made the journey to Istanbul to congratulate Selim on his ascension and a similar retinue traveled a decade later for Murad III’s coronation.⁸⁵

Relations with Europe played a part during the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry regarding international trade and outlying regions. The Portuguese traded silk through the Straits of Hormuz beginning in 1543, and the English and Dutch merchant trading companies sought out trading routes along the maritime fringes of the empires to gain monopolies on goods from the east.⁸⁶ Iranian silk

producers attempted in the late sixteenth century to redirect trade away from the Ottoman-controlled ports on the Mediterranean and instead trade through European partners. Increased economic ties with Europe then led to overtures for military alliances during times of war. For example, the Ottomans sought European partners via British diplomats and even took part in a joint maritime operation in 1622 with the Portuguese in Hormuz to garner favor.⁸⁷ Diplomatic missions to Paris also created an alliance between the Ottoman Empire and France for nearly the entire sixteenth century.⁸⁸

Modern great powers should appreciate the need for continuous diplomatic efforts, even if their success is erratic. Competition for the Asia-Pacific region will only continue and both China and the United States require allies to meet their national goals. It is likely that some third-party nations will appeal to both sides and become areas of competition as they did during the Cold War. Such a situation should be expected and managed to reduce the possibility of war.

Domestic Competition

There is no shortage of historical examples of outside interference in the domestic matters of a state, and the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry is no exception. Both competitors often intruded in the others' domestic affairs. For seven years prior to the 1555 peace treaty, the Ottoman ruler Suleiman twice supported rival claimants to the Safavid throne.⁸⁹ Suleiman's own son Bayezid attempted to mount a rebellion and overthrow his father from Persia until the Safavids deemed his protection too risky and returned him to authorities in Istanbul.⁹⁰ Domestic interference contributed to war just as cultural differences and economic interference did. Safavid protection of Anatolian tribal authorities wanted by the Ottoman sultan sparked the rivals' first war in 1512.⁹¹ The Ottoman sultan's orders for local frontier leaders to conduct border raids into Safavid territories led to the breakout of war in 1578.⁹²

A second domestic matter contributing to war was the competition among those around the throne for power and favor. In Istanbul, while the sultan's authority was supreme, the grand vizier oversaw most of the state functions with assistance from other advisors.⁹³ For most of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry, two competing factions of ministers served the sultan as advisors. Istanbul's "enduring strategic rivalries" led to some advisors arguing that Europe and Hungary should be the empire's primary focus, while others demanded wars against the Safavids in the east.⁹⁴ For example, the Ottoman attacks in 1576 after the shah's death were not a "foregone conclusion but the outcome of a set of specific political circumstances at the court in Istanbul."⁹⁵ As reports from local Turkish rulers in eastern Anatolia documented the internal disorder within Safavid lands, a faction of ministers argued that attacking Persia would bring more wealth and glory to the empire than fighting in Europe.⁹⁶

Domestic opposition groups could take the form of military leadership, and internal military opposition could force a leader's hand. After victory in 1514, Selim I had the opportunity to press his offensive and secure additional gains over the Safavids. However, his army, after nearly four years in the field, refused to continue. The political desires of the dynasty met their end at the overstretched capabilities of its army.⁹⁷

Domestic instability in either capital enticed action by the other, and the Ottoman armies took frequent advantage of Safavid internal weaknesses to secure military victories. Ismail I's reign after 1514 was fragile and depended on the internal balancing of Qizilbash tribes.⁹⁸ Subsequent shahs also had to delicately balance the competing tribal factions to maintain domestic harmony. Multiple Persian leaders attempted to reform the domestic power balance to overcome such discrepancies. In 1532, Tahmasp removed tribal leaders and appointed scholars to bring steadiness and coherence to a bureaucracy plagued with rivalry.⁹⁹ The continued growth of competing domestic groups during the 1560s resulted in division and civil war after his death in 1576.¹⁰⁰ One faction of Qizilbash placed Tahmasp's son, Isma'il II, on the throne to exert their influence over the state. Strife ensued and Isma'il II died only a year later from opium abuse, leading to further disunity.¹⁰¹

Persian insecurity again led to subsequent Ottoman invasions and Abbas's desperate peace treaty in 1590.¹⁰² The cost of peace was high: the Safavids gave up the valuable provinces of Azerbaijan and Iraq to focus on their internal stability.¹⁰³ Abbas then put his full attention into formalizing the system of placing Georgian and Caucasian Muslim converts into the military and bureaucratic structure to counteract the tribes. With a capable army and bureaucracy, he recaptured lost territory and reunified the empire. However, the decision to strip power from the Qizilbash led to further domestic fracturing when tribal elites reasserted their dominance after his death.¹⁰⁴

The Safavid power structure remained less hierarchical and more impermanent than the Ottomans. Tribal factions always played a major role in Persian political arrangements. For example, Abbas only rose to power in 1587 due to the resurgence of a specific tribe called the Ustajlu who other tribes rallied around.¹⁰⁵ The throne's tenuous hold on power meant that drastic steps were taken to secure authority. During 1631 and 1632, while Ottoman armies and Uzbek invasions ravaged the Safavid frontier, rumors about coups and schemes to depose the shah flowed abundantly. The shah and his advisors took drastic actions to secure his rule through the elimination of any potential claimants to the crown.¹⁰⁶

Such conditions were not unique to Persia. Ottoman sultans frequently killed or banished competitors to their rule. Selim I killed as many as 40,000 Persian sympathizers upon his assumption to the throne in 1512.¹⁰⁷ The death

of Ahmed I in 1617 initiated the “times of troubles” as rival Turkish groups competed to put their preferred heir on the Ottoman throne. Years of reform efforts failed and destabilized the empire. In 1623, to “prevent the disintegration of the Empire,” enough power brokers agreed to dethrone the sultan, anoint the 12-year old Murad IV, and buy the loyalty of rebelling Janissary groups.¹⁰⁸ Another telling example comes from the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 when a combined European fleet destroyed the Ottoman navy in the Mediterranean. The Turkish leaders brought their entire personal fortunes on the expedition to avoid confiscation from the sultan.¹⁰⁹ It was all lost with the destruction of their vessels during the battle.

Competition between domestic groups may push a leader toward war when it is against a nation’s best interest. In both the structured Ottoman government and the looser Safavid arrangements, the throne’s rule was far from absolute, and disagreements by advisors contributed to the outbreak of conflict. Finally, domestic instability can entice a rival to act.

The Futility and Finality of Superpower Conflict

The wars between the Ottomans and Safavids should be viewed as a regular cycle of violence to pursue domestic desires rather than a prolonged existential conflict. Wars broke out for one or multiple reasons: imperial glory, economic pursuits, religious crusades, geographic control, or political competition. On multiple occasions, war was initiated due to perceived disgraces of previous peace treaties. One motivation for Abbas to strengthen the military and go to war in the early seventeenth century was the “humiliating” arrangement of 1590.¹¹⁰ Each treaty—1514, 1555, 1590, 1618, and even 1639—failed to stem the cycle of war between the two empires, despite their mutually beneficial economies, individual domestic concerns, and other external rivals (the Hapsburgs and the Uzbeks).

Perhaps the greatest lesson from the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry is the lasting impact it had on the regions and persons where the competition took place. The rulers never imposed substantial or lasting impact on the other. Beginning in 1514 with the initial Ottoman victory, both rivals “accustomed themselves to centuries of intermittent, wasteful, and unwinnable frontier wars,” which focused on territories such as Iraq.¹¹¹ Neither empire fell due to fighting with the other. Instead, the effects from the rivalry are still witnessed today in the divisions of people and geography.

The final division between Sunni and Shia lands solidified the Middle Eastern boundary between Ottoman and Persian rulers. The impact upon Persia from the Safavid rulers stands tallest. Despite a lack of military success against its Ottoman neighbors, the Safavid Empire brought two lasting impacts to the Iranian plateau. The first was unity. The Arab conquests and Mongol invasions

shattered the political cohesion of the region; but under the Safavid reign, weak and disparate provinces were replaced by a “united realm of Iran, more or less within its present frontiers.”¹¹² The second lasting contribution of the Safavids was the Shia identity, strengthened during each series of wars and domestic unrest.¹¹³ Modern-day Persia, and later Iran, with its characteristic Shia prominence and discrete Persian heritage, emerged under the Safavid rulers as a “separate, different and distinctive element within Islam.”¹¹⁴ The same effects occurred in Ottoman lands where Sunni Islam persists as the predominant religion today.

Major hostilities between the two sides concluded in 1638 with the Ottoman recapture of Baghdad. In repetitive fashion, domestic concerns within Safavid lands spurred on by weak monarchs and competitive ministers forced the shah to relinquish his claims to Iraq permanently.¹¹⁵ The Safavids paid a great price to secure their dynastic existence, but the impact from the 1639 Treaty of Zuhab was immediate. The Persian economy recovered from the opening of Levantine ports and the export of silk regained its former vitality. Both sides reemphasized their religious credentials in the form of shrines, mosques, and proclamations.¹¹⁶ The religious and political geography of the greater Middle East remains unchanged since the Ottoman-Safavid period. Eastern Anatolia, often fought over but never controlled by the Safavids, is still controlled by Istanbul. Premodern capitals like Mosul, Damascus, and Baghdad emerged firmly into the Arab-Ottoman heritage they embrace today, despite their substantial Shia communities.

The two empires survived for centuries after the treaty. The decline of the Ottoman Empire was long and drawn out. Continuous reform efforts kept Istanbul as an international power up until its final dissolution in 1922. Its longevity relative to its Shia neighbor can be at least partially attributed to the well-organized provincial structure and capable administrative functions that made its control more permanent.¹¹⁷ The caliph’s religious authority certainly played a role in regime survival as well.

The Ottoman decline is partially attributable to the decline in quality of sultans to guide it. While early sultans rose to power by proving themselves adept military and political leaders in the Ottoman provinces, the later practice of palace-protected sons ascending to the throne lessened the quality of royal leaders.¹¹⁸ The *devshirme* class of converted non-Turkish bureaucrats who ran the empire eventually “broke up into conflicting political factions,” after which “the Ruling Class fell into a maze of petty struggles.”¹¹⁹ Additional economic and population changes, such as the lack of financial and industrial development that occurred in Europe, accelerated the end of the Ottomans.

Part of the Safavid survival until the mid-nineteenth century can be attributed to factors beyond the state’s control. The heart of Safavid Persia was

geographically isolated, especially after the relocation of the capital from Tabriz near the Ottoman border. Potential capturing forces, such as the Ottoman armies, lacked the funding, willpower, or capabilities to mount such difficult missions. The relative poverty of the Safavid territory increased the difficulty of rival domestic leaders to establish centers of power to compete with the shah, and a lack of established communication lines meant coordination between groups to oppose him faced immense hurdles.¹²⁰ Luck played a secondary role: due to the Safavid's internal weaknesses and constant foreign threats, it remains "remarkable that the Safavid polity survived at all."¹²¹

Conclusions

The Thucydides's Trap model is used to compare examples of rising powers and established powers to examine the conditions that can lead to war and those that can help avoid it. The purpose of such a study is not to provide prescriptive solutions to policy makers for implementation or to diagnose the exact conditions that lead to war. Rather, it is to provide recommendations for managing a relationship, identify potential sources of conflict, and avoid a catastrophic aftermath.

The Ottoman-Safavid conflict presents these six ideas for the possibilities of great-power conflict. Alternating periods of conflict may break out between the two states. When they occur, they need not become existential crises but can remain as limited actions to better protect the stability of the international political and economic systems. International attempts to limit war may not be able to overcome the will of domestic populations or interest groups in either nation, especially during times of increased nationalism. A changing political scenery regarding alliances and third-party nations should be expected and mitigated through extensive and continuous diplomacy. As Allison states, "To escape Thucydides's Trap, we must be willing to think the unthinkable—and imagine the unimaginable. Avoiding Thucydides's Trap in this case will require nothing less than bending the arc of history."¹²² Fortunately, the arc of history, like the Ottoman and Safavid dynasties, is enduring, protracted, and adaptable.

Notes

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