



Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?

by Graham Allison.

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Political scientist Graham Allison (Harvard Kennedy School) believes that, if China and the United States continue on their present paths, “war ... in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognized.... [A]lmost certainly [they] will wind up at war” (xvii). Despite its title, his book in fact argues otherwise. The author’s simplistic hypothesis brings bad and good news: the rise of a major power (e.g., Athens or China) disrupts the politics of a previously dominant state (e.g., Sparta or the United States), and this “transitional friction” (52) leads the older power to start crises that descend into war. The author intends to help states avoid such “defensive” wars (vii)—while the more established power thinks it can win. In the sixteen case studies Allison lays out, twelve ended in war.¹

The volume’s subtitle introduces its governing (and puzzling) metaphor: the “Thucydides Trap.” A trap is a device for catching or tricking, that is, part of a planned stratagem. This fits neither Thucydides’s nor Allison’s account of the growing rift between Spartans and Athenians. The very meaning of “Thucydides Trap” remains unclear. Does Thucydides fall into a trap? If so, whose? Does he state a predictive law? Or does he describe the common situation of an older, superior power feeling threatened and so “forced” to act by a newly rising power? Allison’s notion of a “Thucydidean Syndrome” (161) better captures the sense of escalating tensions between static and expanding powers. The “use it or lose it” dynamic imperils all states with great military capabilities. (The author aptly mentions the film *Dr. Strangelove*.²) An accidental collision off the China Sea’s Mischief Reef (Hollywood could concoct no better toponym) leads to diplomatic standoffs which neither side can escape (171). One cannot, however, play “chicken” with cyber- and space-weapons (173). Even symbolic support for its many, variably loyal allies and third parties could force the United States into horribly risky positions. The sinking of a single US aircraft carrier would *double* the 2,403 fatalities sustained at Pearl Harbor (173).

The inspiration for Allison’s book is a famous passage in a faulty revision of Richard Crawley’s fine English translation of Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*: “The real cause [of the war] ... I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable” (Thuc. 1.23.6).³ The text Allison

1. Richard Ned Lebow, in *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2010), develops a better, more comprehensive dataset of ninety-four wars in which at least one great and one rising power fought each other. He finds that the currently popular “power transition” theory explains none of them (228–47). See, also, Lebow and Daniel P. Tompkins, “The Thucydides Claptrap,” *Washington Monthly* (28 June 2016) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1708.htm.

2. Subtitle: *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, dir. Stanley Kubrick (1964).

3 “The most frequently cited one-liner in the study of international relations” (xiv). Hasty readers incorrectly imagine that Thucydides did not live to the end of the twenty-seven-year war (Allison xv, cf. Thuc. 2.65.12, 5.26). Although his account breaks off in 411 BCE, seven years before the war ended, he explicitly asserts that he lived through every day up to the Athenian surrender.

cites⁴ reprints Richard Crawley's nephew's revised version of an 1874 translation. In the present instance, the Greek word rendered by "made ... inevitable" is closer in meaning to "pressured," "necessitated," or "forced." That is, the words "inevitable" and also "destined" in the book's title *have no firm basis* in Thucydides's Greek.⁵ Further, Thucydides makes clear that the Spartans, not both sides, felt pressured. He portrays Athenian diplomats telling a meeting of the Spartan assembly, at which Sparta's Peloponnesian allies were invited to present grievances, that the prime motors of Athenian aggressive foreign policies are: "above all fear, also honor/respect, and, later, self-interest" (1.75). This dynamic led to Spartan fear of diminished influence in Aegean politics.

Allison has been "assistant secretary of defense and advised the secretaries of defense under every president from Reagan to Obama" (dustjacket blurb). His, then, is an influential voice, and a dangerous one. His gimmicky book title badly misrepresents his stated goal: to help avert a catastrophic collision between Pacific-rim superpowers that would assure mutual destruction. "This master of applied history"⁶ has compiled a "Thucydides Trap Case File" (appendix 1), comprising "sixteen major cases of rise vs. rule" (244–86).⁷ China scholars, however, have complained about his ignorance of the Chinese language and the history of Sino-American relations.

The author honors Thucydides with an epigraph for each chapter, sometimes conflating separate passages. International relations "realists" forever quote Thucydides's bullying Athenians at the 416 BCE Melian Conference: "According to the law of nature, one rules whatever one can We did not make this law. We found it when we came to power..." (89). This is certainly not a "benign" Athenian self-conception (xv). But Thucydides never wrote the words "quoted" here (no phrase in the Greek denotes, e.g., "law of nature"), nor are they contained in Strassler's version of Crawley's translation, which Allison claims to follow. Moreover, Allison himself denies that his "trap" metaphor makes Thucydides a determinist. "Inevitable war" turns out to be a bit of statesman's rhetoric: "clearly meant as hyperbole," a mere "exaggeration for emphasis" (viii, 40, 286). He does not argue the point.

Part I summarizes the rise of China. Though the (unidentified) "elite press" thinks the Chinese economy is slowing down, Allison pointedly observes that "between 2011 and 2013 China ... used more cement than the US did in the entire twentieth century" (13).⁸ Part II surveys five hundred years of European⁹ standoffs, comparing them to recent relations between the United States and China. The author finds that "none of the conflicts were inevitable" (43). The rising powers thought they were only establishing their "rightful place in the pecking order" (49). Part III asks whether current policies are trending toward war. Allison compares American views of present-day Chinese "aggressive behaviors" to the 1914 European crisis and to Theodore Roosevelt's "virile conception of international altruism" (93). China is pushing its weight around now as the United States did a century ago in Cuba, the Philippines, among future Panamanians, and in seizing Alaska's panhandle and diminishing Canada's territory.

4. Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (NY: Free Press, 1996).

5. See Arthur Eckstein's insightful study of 1.23.5–6, "Thucydides: The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War and the Foundation of International Systems Theory," *Internat'l Hist Rev* 25 (2003) 757–74.

6. So Niall Ferguson in his dustjacket blurb. Allison calls Thucydides the first master of applied history (28).

7. Reproduced online: www.miwsr.com/rd/1709.htm.

8. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, in *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2016), attack Allison's "Unstoppable China" position using more criteria than he does. See, too, Ian Buruma's omnibus review of books on China's growing power, including Allison's ("the worst of the bunch"): "Dance with the Dragon," *New Yorker* (19 June 2017) 61–66.

9. The Pacific War (1941–45) is the sole exception to the Europe-only rule, but the Japanese Empire never approached economic or military parity with its enemy. The Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) was fought in Asia.

“What Xi’s China Wants” (chap. 6) is “Making China Great Again,” a wry jab at Xi’s Washington counterpart. The (restored) “Middle Kingdom” (that is, the *only* earthly power) wants to be rich and respected. It wants the United States to “butt out” (126) of Pacific and Asian security concerns, while it develops the technology and strategy to enforce its will. If possible, China will reach its goals without fighting, but it will arm and train its forces to win. Thucydides and Allison’s former colleague Samuel Huntington are credited with identifying “the clash of civilizations.” Allison distorts this other trendy, inflammatory phrase out of all recognition when he contrasts Athenians with nearby Corinthians and Spartans. Just as the United States pushed Britain’s imperial navy out of the Western Hemisphere, relying on geography, population, economics, and weaponry, so the Chinese may be able to capitalize on their strategic advantages to force an overextended United States back from East Asia. The wily British discovered they could get what they needed (“vital interests”) from their “special relationship” with their young American cousins. In one chapter, Allison provides scenarios of accidental encounters that could escalate beyond points of no return. Masters of policy become slaves of uncontrollable events. He reviews examples of China’s shrewd initiation of limited wars (159) and identifies plausible paths to future wars with the United States.

Part IV jauntily rejects fatalism, determinism, irresistible and immovable objects. In “Rise Meets Rule” (30), the author astutely summarizes China’s startling economic, political, and geostrategic progress in the past twenty years. America has lost or withdrawn from its post-Cold War military engagements (329n21), save for Grenada! Even transactional diplomacy—the usual kind—should forgo “sleeping giant” and “America First” rhetorical fireworks. Allison thinks it unwise to vilify China, as President Donald Trump has done. Better to thicken “economic entanglements” with the Chinese rather than humiliate them and be humiliated (cf. Thucydides’s notion of “honor”). If answered, Allison’s call for better strategic thinking would benefit everyone.

Pundits should not be, cannot be, historians. But there are no gatekeepers. Analogies, thought-bites, and provocative titles obscure yawning differences and exaggerated similarities and promote weapon-rattling. Allison clearly worships Thucydides, at least in aphoristic sound-bites taken out of context. But his discovery of the Athenian’s “trap” concept is nullified by its dependence on the word “inevitable,” which does not appear in Thucydides. He decries “Seven Straw Men”—unaware that his “trap” formulation produced several of them (287–88). He name-drops recent heroes of his acquaintance, including his “co-conspirator” Niall Ferguson (242), Henry Kissinger, the pardoned Caspar Weinberger, and Singapore’s dictatorial Lee Kuan Yew.

Despite his doomsday rhetoric, Allison actually believes war between the United States and China is not inevitable. Chapter 9, “Twelve Clues for Peace,” analyzes four instances of “rising and ruling powers successfully steer[ing] their ships of state through treacherous shoals without war” (187). But some of these cases do not parallel our current predicament: fifteenth-century rulers of Portugal and Spain faced papal excommunication; a shared language and cultural values kept Britain out of conflicts with the United States around 1900.

Allison wishes to help policymakers forestall wars, but hypernationalists and militant “exceptionalists” playing war games in the Trump White House may derive a different lesson from *Destined for War*: better fight a war now than later. Ancient historians fear that Allison’s language and argument will be twisted and misused just as he has (unawares) twisted those of Thucydides. The Athenian historian (and elected general) observed that war and its justifications and prologues encourage men to distort a polity’s and a civilization’s guiding concepts and slogans to gain dominance at home and abroad.