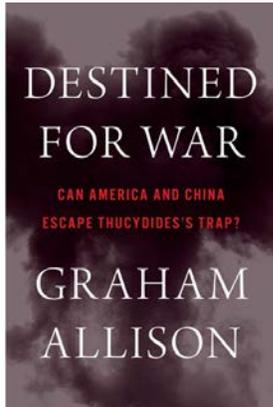


Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?



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By Graham T. Allison

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Graham Allison, an American political scientist and professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and a Washington D.C. insider, has written a compelling book on China and the United States as they vie for political, economic, and military power in the early years of the 21st century. Allison has been in and out of government, serving five Republican and Democratic administrations in Washington and at Harvard. He's an excellent academic with the instincts of a good politician. He has an impressive range of historical, geopolitical, and military knowledge.

The book examines the question of whether an established power and a rising power are bound for conflict. The book's subtitle, "Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?" refers to the fact that Sparta, the established power in ancient Greece, was gradually drawn into conflict with Athens, the rising power, in a chain of events recounted by the historian Thucydides. Thucydides' assessment is that the rise of Athens instilled fear in the dominant Spartans, which pushed them to war.

While at Harvard, Allison and a group at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs examined sixteen historic examples over the past 500 years in which powerful nations with rivals who were challenging their supremacy. A dozen of these cases ended up in war. He also considers four cases in which rivalries between established and rising powers did not result in shooting wars. He focuses on the examples that he considers to be the most instructive: the Peloponnesian War, the rise of the United States of America, World War I, and the Cold War. The sixteens cases are shown in a table at Appendix 1 of the book.

In making his case that Beijing's goal is the restoration of China as a regional hegemon, Allison shares observations from the late Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. He effectively demolishes the idea that China will become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system in which the US remains the arbiter. China clearly seeks the ejection of the US from Asia, and is rapidly accumulating capabilities to achieve this goal. This and China's ambitions have been reinforced recently in the popular press such as *The Economist*¹, and more specialist publications such as *The Diplomat*², and *Survival*³.

¹ *The Economist* "How the West Got China Wrong" March 3rd 2018

² *The Diplomat* August 2017 Issue 33

³ *Survival* Vol 60 No. 3 Aaron L. Friedberg "Competing with China"

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Allison does not argue that war is inevitable between China and the United States. But, he says that merely the existence of an established power and a fast-rising one creates built-in structural conflicts that can lead to military conflict. “China and the United States are currently on a collision course for war — unless both parties take difficult and painful actions to avert it.”

The book is structured in four parts: The Rise of China, Lessons from History, A Gathering Storm, and Why War is Not Inevitable. The parts are supported by subordinate chapters.

The rise of China offers a classic Thucydides trap. In the past thirty-five years China's economy has grown from less than a tenth the size of the US economy to currently being larger based on PPP. The details of the economic rise of China are shown comprehensively in statistics and historical anecdote in the book. China believes it is the most important power in Asia, notwithstanding US commitments and alliances in the region.

In Part III, Chapter 5 “Imagine China Were Just Like Us,” Allison describes America's expansion in the Western Hemisphere under President Teddy Roosevelt; it is examined in some detail as it provides an interesting analogy to China's current rapid rise in the Asia-Pacific. In comparing the two powers he notes that each have narratives of their own “exceptionalism”, China's sense of earlier humiliation and current rejuvenation, incompatible cultures and political systems, and a series of ensnaring flashpoints and alliances. Allison argues that the two nations are “currently on a collision course for war”, which he says can be averted only if both demonstrate skill and “take difficult and painful actions to avert it.”

In Part III Allison also gives a comprehensive review of China and its current ruler, Xi Jinping. Xi has clearly expressed his desire to “make China great again” as expressed in his vision of a “China Dream.” The review of the situation in South China Sea and the East China Sea is very useful and clearly makes the point that there are issues about which China feels particularly strongly. The growth and modernisation of the PLA and its significant capabilities are highlighted. The driving force behind this change was the realisation that the effectiveness of the US military in the first Gulf war with Iraq related directly to the US doctrine and its formidable command and control structure. In addition, other salient lessons came from the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis.

The book describes conceivable scenarios of how conflicts between these two superpowers could start. He suggests that disputes over Taiwan or the South China Sea, or an accidental provocation by a third party or a quarrel related to economic competition. He also reminds the reader that the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand by a Serbian terrorist triggered the First World War – so the law of unintended consequences is always at play.

Allison isn't a pessimist. He argues that with skillful statecraft and political sensitivity these two superpowers can avoid war. In the Conclusion he makes the case for peace “If leaders in both societies will study the successes and failures of the past, they will find a rich source of clues from which to fashion a strategy that can meet each nation's essential interests without a war.”

The book is a well written and timely exploration of a very important International Relations and Security Policy question. It is highly recommended to be read by all who think seriously about these issues.