

BOOK REVIEW

Graham Allison, **Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?**, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017, 364 pp., US \$21.78, ISBN 978-0-544-93527-3

The unprecedented rise of China in the last three decades has transformed the geopolitical landscape of the world. It has led to a tectonic shift in the global power equilibrium. The unipolar moment that the US enjoyed after the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union, is facing an extraordinary challenge from China across the economic, military and geopolitical domains. The sheer scale of China's rise as a revisionist power has pitted it increasingly at odds with the US, the established power. How will the two greatest powers on earth manage their relations in the ongoing transitory phase? Are they headed towards a collision course with each other? Or will statesmen from the two countries be able to redefine their relationship in order to create a "new form of great power relations" (p. 227)? The book under review attempts to tackle this dilemma.

In *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Graham Allison, the Director of Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, warns of a serious possibility of war erupting between China and the US. Allison takes the concept of Thucydides's Trap – the inherent structural stress that occurs when a rising power challenges an established hegemon – to play with the larger question of whether the US and China can manage what he calls "transitional frictions". Analysing 16 historical cases involving similar power shifts over the last 500 years, Allison brings to light the difficulties involved in escaping Thucydides's Trap. He cites the Sparta–Athens conflict to illustrate how, despite the sincere efforts of leaders from both sides to avoid war, they were forced into conflict due to the "security dilemma" they faced. Similarly, Allison highlights the adjustments that Britain had to make both externally and domestically, in order to avoid war with a rising US threatening its dominance in the Western Hemisphere. Likewise, in the ongoing power play between the US and China, he finds the two countries seem to be headed more towards conflict, with neither side showing any willingness to compromise on their positions. Against this background, Allison attempts to provide a very in-depth analysis of the difficulties involved in escaping Thucydides's Trap and the hard choices that leaders in the US and China will have to make in order to peacefully coexist.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part is devoted to analysing the impact of the rise of China, which has not only altered the relative position of the US in the world, but has also shifted the global balance of power. According to Lee Kuan Yew, whom the author describes as an astute China watcher, the shift is so significant that "the world must find a new balance" (p. 6). Lee argues that China is not just another big player, but is in fact, "the biggest player in the history of the world" (p. 6). Allison claims that unlike previous balance-of-power tussles, where military power held prominence, in the 21st century, geo-economics will play a major role in defining the power shifts. He further contends that as far as geo-economic strategies were concerned, China not only exerts tremendous influence by virtue of its economic heft, but has also demonstrated a "unique mastery" (p. 21) in leveraging this advantage to influence the policies of other states, especially those which are heavily dependent on it.

According to Allison, out of the 16 instances when a rising power has challenged a hegemon in the last five centuries, 12 have resulted in wars. In the second part of this book, the author analyses seven of these wars, focussing especially on the Peloponnesian War between Athens

and Sparta. Based on facts and arguments, the author convincingly explains how inherent and natural tectonic stress in these circumstances often results in war. While he concedes that war is not inevitable despite the structural stress involved, he emphasises that in order to avoid war, leaders might need to compromise or dilute their stand on issues of vital national interest. This is extremely difficult for any state, especially under conditions of strategic uncertainty. However, the presence of other pressing challenges that demand greater attention can enable the adoption of such hard choices. This was reflected in Britain's "Great Rapprochement" with the US in the early 20th century, when it favoured addressing the more proximate threats from Russia and Germany in its backyard rather than getting involved in a confrontation in the Western Hemisphere.

In the third part, Allison claims that although the trajectory of China's rise is different from that of the US of the 20th century (when it rose to primacy), there have also been significant similarities. For instance, both Xi Jinping and Donald Trump, seek to make their respective countries great "again". The author portends that China presents itself as the most potent adversary the US has ever faced. This is not only due to their different ethnic and linguistic heritages, or models of government, but also because of differences in their strategic cultures and their uncompromising perception of themselves. Allison argues that there are several reasons which make conflict between the two nuclear armed states very likely. Drawing an analogy from Thucydides's account of the conflict between Athens and Sparta, Allison maintains that the present geopolitical situation of the US and China is no different. The author also resuscitates Samuel Huntington's thesis on civilisational differences between the US and China, which might become more pronounced and lead to conflict down the road. He argues that the two countries' conflicting worldviews and lack of compatibility, whether in terms of culture, values political systems, etc., make them more prone to conflict in future.

Through the use of statistics and applied history, the author makes a fairly conclusive case about the US and China falling into Thucydides's Trap. However, in the last segment of the book, he also contends that war is not inevitable, as Thucydides's Trap is not a problem to be fixed but a "chronic condition that must be managed over a generation" (p. 215). He therefore offers 12 clues for leaders to redefine the US–China relationship, on the basis of the four historical cases that did not lead to war. Allison argues that issues like climate change, global terrorism, nuclear Armageddon and nuclear anarchy pose far greater challenges for the two countries, dealing with which requires these countries to cooperate. He also includes nuclear deterrence and an interdependent trade relationship between the two states as positive factors favouring peace.

Allison offers a staunch critique of the current US policy towards China, as lacking any discernible strategy. While making a case for the White House to establish a "Council of Historical Advisers" along the lines of the Council of Economic Advisers, Allison highlights the need for the US to study applied history and formulate strategies accordingly.

In short, *Destined For War* paints a grave picture of the evolving dynamics of US–China relations, and sketches out a scenario for escalation. However, despite explaining the structural stresses associated with the US–China relationship very conclusively, Allison does not take into account the positions and roles of other powers like Russia, India and Japan. These countries are also wary of the rise of China, but have differing perspectives on the US's sphere of influence. Another weakness in Allison's analysis is with regard to the deterrence value that he associates with nuclear weapons. As Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri argue, the hidden dangers associated with nuclear weapons are equally significant and also inherently risky.¹

The book makes an outstanding contribution to understanding contemporary US-China relations and the associated power dynamics. While the book appears to target policymakers

in both US and China, it would make essential reading for anyone interested in international relations, the Indo-Pacific region in general, and the intricacies of great power competition in particular.

Note

1. Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri, "The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969", *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 150–83.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2017.1412578>



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