

ESCAPING THUCYDIDES'S TRAP: THE FATE OF US-CHINA RELATIONS ACCORDING TO GRAHAM ALLISON

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Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

Destined for War by Graham Allison, former dean of Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and advisor to various US administrations, has aroused a lively debate in the International Relations theory community, for the purpose of explaining the current global strategic environment and US-China economic, diplomatic, cultural and military competition through a framework drawn from Thucydides's observation of the fifth century BCE Peloponnesian War.

Throughout the book, a Thucydides's sentence forms the cornerstone of Allison's analysis and, thus, is repeated like a warning: «It was the rise of Athens and the fear that it instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable». According to the author, this *trap*, namely «the severe structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to upend a ruling one»,¹ led Athens and Sparta into a major war and may help IR scholars and American and Chinese policymakers to reflect on the consequences of Beijing's ascent and Washington's approach towards it. In fact, the Harvard professor warns that «on the current trajectory, war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognized».²

The book is divided into four parts. In the first, the author lists China's several economic, industrial, diplomatic, and military improvements to prove Beijing is actually a rising power. The second is an historical overview where Allison draws the concept of *Thucydides's Trap* from the Peloponnesian War's case and, subsequently, applies it to five hundred years (16 cases) and to the early twentieth century Britain-Germany competition that led to WWI. The third part, «A Gathering Storm», firstly compares the late nineteenth century-rising US and today's China and then highlights the risks of conflict, elaborating four scenarios of escalation between the two powers. Finally, based on the historical survey, part four provides 12 recommendations to avoid war.

The *Thucydides's Trap* gained massive popularity after Allison first mentioned it in an article for *The Atlantic*,³ enough to break into high dip-

1. Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017, p. 29.

2. *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

3. Graham Allison, 'The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?', *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015.

lomatic parleys as when President Obama and President Xi both pledged to avoid it. Because of its simplicity, the concept has moved easily into the public debate and jargon.

The book has been largely criticised for being insubstantial and simplistic and the criticism can be summarised into two main categories: the first deals with Allison's alleged historiographical misreading of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, while the second deals with the utility of Allison's model for International Relations' scholars. Leaving the former to ancient Greece historians,⁴ here the focus will be on the latter.

In reviewing Allison's study, the analysis will move on two levels, national – both for China and the US – and systemic, and, lastly, will assess the usefulness of the 12 clues suggested.

It's with regard to Beijing that Allison shows the most negligence. The vague concept of *Thucydides's Trap* ignores the many peculiarities of Chinese policymaking, strategic culture and self-perception. China is seen as an increasingly assertive power willing to gain its «place in the sun» in Asia and the world, but this is at odds with the findings of many sinologists and Chinese strategy, foreign and defence policy scholars.⁵ For example, David Shambaugh⁶ describes China as a *partial power* that lacks a deep global presence, showing much hesitancy in taking a leading role in world affairs in spite of the 40 years tumultuous economic growth, while Schweller and Pu argue that China aims to an international «negotiated order»⁷ with the United States. Likewise, Buzan depicts Beijing as a «reformist revisionist»⁸ and Feigenbaum, similarly, put forward the idea that China «does not seek to overturn the current international order wholesale»⁹, both meaning that it pursues a calculative, selective, cautious and short-of-war approach towards unipolarity and US hegemony. Furthermore, the book lacks an in-depth assessment of Beijing's economic shortcomings and vulnerabilities, misleadingly portraying a picture of stable, inexorable growth. China's economy is

4. For a historiographical review of *Destined for War*, see Jonathan Kirshner, 'Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right', *Security Studies*, September 2018.

5. For a review of the literature about China's rise see Lorenzo Termine, 'La Cina nell'ordine unipolare. Obiettivi e strategie di una potenza revisionista', *Rivista Trimestrale di Scienza dell'Amministrazione*, Issue 3, 2018.

6. David L. Shambaugh, *China goes global: the partial power*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

7. Randall L. Schweller & Xiaoyu Pu, 'After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline', *International Security*, Vol. 36, Issue 1, Summer 2011.

8. Barry Buzan, 'China in International Society: Is «Peaceful Rise» Possible?', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, Spring 2010, p. 18.

9. Evan A. Feigenbaum, 'China and the World. Dealing with a Reluctant Power', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, Issue 1, 2017, p. 33.

slowing down due to structural factors,¹⁰ and this inevitably will compel Chinese policymakers to choose wisely among future public expenditures and to not easily embark on brinkmanship with the US. In the military dimension, little knowledge of China's strategic culture and its historical patterns in warfighting is shown, so that Beijing is juxtaposed to any past military actor. In a show of West-centrism, Allison represents China as any other European power of the past depriving it of its political, cultural and social uniqueness and argues that Beijing's main goal is restoring its great power status in Asia and the world, but he doesn't articulate how China actually plans to achieve that. Lastly, the «rising Chinese nationalism» argument, on which Allison bases most of the rationale of China's growing international assertiveness, should be carefully handled, as Johnston plainly illustrated,¹¹ and requires further evidence and follow-ups.

With respect to the United States, the case of Athens' rise appears to give more clues about today's America than China. For instance, Alcibiades' speech endorsing the Athenian expedition to Sicily shows several analogies to what Paul Kennedy called Washington's «imperial overstretch», namely the fact that «the sum total of [its] global interests and obligations is nowadays far larger than the country's power to defend them all simultaneously»,¹² as when the Athenian statesman claims that «we cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop»,¹³ and to the hub-and-spoke military alliances system built by the US, especially in East-Asia, as when he wonders: «what reason can we give to ourselves for holding back, or what excuse can we offer to our allies in Sicily for not helping them?».¹⁴

Finally, in the international systemic dimension Allison draws the same general lesson from diverse historical international systems without acknowledging that a different international polarity implies different challenges and strategies. The author, for instance, dwells on Wilhelm II's psyche and hostility towards Great Britain, believing that it could bring some advice for getting China's rise right, but he doesn't appear to be equally interested in the different international distributions of power where his 16 cases occur. Indeed, different polarities in the international system are supposed to shape different strategies and outcomes that are worth considering – e.g. balancing a competitor in multipolarity is nothing like balancing one in bipolarity or unipolarity. Moreover, lacking a thorough analysis of China's objectives and strategies, the author frequently enumerates Bei-

10. Dwight H. Perkins, 'Understanding the Slowing Growth Rate of the People's Republic of China', *Asian Development Review*, Vol. 32, Issue 1, 2015, pp. 1-30.

11. Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing', *International Security*, Vol. 41, Issue 3, Winter 2016/17, pp. 7-43.

12. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, New York: Random House, 1987, p. 515.

13. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.18.3.

14. *Ibid.*

jing's accomplishments instead of putting them in the right perspective. By contrast, Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth accurately selected among China's military, economic and technological capabilities those ones «tailored for superpower status»¹⁵ and found that «the one-superpower system [with the US atop] is not on the cusp of structural change» and that «there has been no such transformation in its fundamental operating dynamics»,¹⁶ notwithstanding China's several improvements.

In the final chapter, the author picks 12 «clues for peace»¹⁷ the US and China should heed in order to avoid the «Trap» and conducts a clear-headed appraisal of the possibilities Washington faces ahead. Indeed, the United States will be compelled to take a «serious pause for reflection» and not just continue «doing what it has been doing»¹⁸ vis-à-vis the monumental shift currently taking form in the international system, i.e. the massive distribution and diffusion of power. The author deserves credit for promoting a fresh debate about America's stance towards the Chinese rise, frankly considering «even the ugly» possible strategic options in tackling it, namely «accommodate», «undermine» – i.e. sponsoring opposition and regime-changers, «negotiate a long peace» and «redefine the relationship» with China.

In conclusion, the *Thucydides's Trap* appears to be merely a general name for the knotted, difficult and perilous relationship occurring between a rising power and a ruling one and it doesn't furnish any further hints on how to disentangle the specific relationship between the US and China. Nevertheless, the book stimulates the debate on America's approach towards China's rise and represents a noteworthy endeavour to deliver a wider spectrum of options to US policymakers than the usual primacy-oriented strategies. Even though Allison is motivated by the noblest purpose – to help enduring peace, Washington and Beijing will require more insights to escape war.

15. Stephen G. Brooks & William C. Wohlforth, 'The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position', *International Security*, Vol. 40, Issue 3, Winter 2015/16, p. 9.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 53

17. Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, p. 187

18. *Ibid.*, p. 204.