

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

By Graham Allison
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REVIEWED BY LAWRENCE FREEDMAN

It is conceivable that one day the United States and the People's Republic of China will go to war. There are a number of possible scenarios involving a disturbing range of countries—Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, India, Japan, and the Koreas—that could draw the two countries into a fight. None of this is news, as tension has been evident for some time. Whether or not there is a conflict will depend on how far China pushes to assert its interests, for example in the South China Sea. In other cases, the risks revolve more around actions that might be taken by others, for example a formal secession by the Republic of China (Taiwan) from China.

Graham Allison, former Director of the Belfer Center at Harvard University, describes these concerns in a lively, readable, and in some respects alarming, book. "On the current trajectory," he warns, "war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognized." Fortunately

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it is not "inevitable." To explain the extent of the danger he gives the niggling set of potential conflicts a wider context. Behind the particularities of the various scenarios there are three larger and related issues shaping Chinese behavior and American responses. The first is that China knows what it is like to be powerless and humiliated. Its treatment at the hands of the great powers from the late 19th century left its mark. Now that it has economic weight, military strength, and consequential political power Beijing sees this as a time to demonstrate that the country can no longer be pushed around and that past grievances must be addressed. The second is that China has a distinctive civilization, with a culture and outlook very different from that of the Western world, which risks producing a clash of the sort described by Samuel Huntington in the early 1990s. Third, not only does China now have an opportunity to act upon its sense of grievance and entitlement but it also is coming to the point where it can push to take the leading position in the international system. Even if this is not its aim, the fact that it is no longer unrealistic raises the stakes for the United States. China has to be viewed as its most significant rival, challenging American predominance, threatening the role it has been playing since the 1940s.

Allison concentrates on this feature of the developing relationship between the two great powers. It provides his big idea—the "Thucydides Trap." The idea of the trap comes from the famous explanation by the Greek historian of the Peloponnesian War in the 5th century BC: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that it instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable." These words are repeated many times throughout the book.

So important is this big idea to Allison that much of *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* is taken up with providing a quasi-theoretical foundation for the existence of the trap as an historical phenomenon as well as consideration of how it might apply in this case. He identifies 16 cases where a rising power came to challenge the position of a dominant state, and notes, disconcertingly, that 12 of these ended in war. Thus the danger in the current situation comes not from the very real possibility of a crisis developing over one of the known flash points but because of the historic moment as the United States confronts a fundamental challenge to its position in the international hierarchy. Allison's idea caused something of a stir since it was first mooted in an Atlantic Monthly article in 2015, and was even discussed at a summit between U.S. President Obama and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, when they vowed not to be trapped.

It is always a good test of any theoretical proposition, whether in a Ph.D. thesis or a book by an eminent scholar, to ask whether much elsewhere would need to be altered if this proposition were excluded. Had the Thucydides Trap never been mentioned, most of the arguments and concerns in this book would still be relevant and deserve careful consideration (although I would go a bit easier on the Clash of Civilizations). The trouble with the big idea is that it elevates this clash of the titans to the exclusion of many of the other key strategic relationships in the Asia-Pacific region involving China.

The case studies deployed by Allison tell us very little of value. There are debates about whether Thucydides was accurately translated

in the first place, because he was certainly not precluding other factors in conjunction with a shifting power balance. His main objective may have been to protect the reputation of his hero Pericles for some poor strategic calls in the runup to the war. The power of Athens had not actually been increasing significantly. A better way of viewing the origins of the war may be mismanagement by Athens of its alliances. A similar point might be made about Allison's other major case study, the origins of the First World War. It was true that this had been preceded by an Anglo-German naval arms race, but that was over before July 1914, and at any rate the origins of the war lay in the dispute between Austria and Serbia, and its mismanagement by their allies, Germany and Russia. One factor might have been Germany's fear of Russia's rising power. A failure to act in 1914 would have made war even riskier when the next crisis came along.

If lessons are to be drawn from past power struggles, perhaps the most relevant would come from the Cold War is that the avoidance of a hot war in this case had something to do with nuclear weapons. The nuclear issue might also encourage caution between China and the United States. The other instances come from times when issues of war and power were viewed differently than they are today, and their implications are not compelling. To try to find lessons from 15th century Portugal and Spain, or 17th century England and the Dutch Republic is unlikely to be fruitful.

Another problem is that China is involved in a complex set of power relationships. If the Thucydides Trap referred to a persistent phenomenon then it would also be necessary to address Sino-Soviet tension (where nuclear deterrence again might have

been relevant) or, looking forward, Sino–Indian tension. In 2014, when thoughts were turning to parallels with the First World War, it was Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who wondered aloud about the disturbing similarities with the situation in Europe then and Japan’s dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands, (claimed by China as the Diaoyu Islands). The issue for China is not just a struggle for power with the United States, which comes into the frame largely as an ally of countries threatened by China, but also possible conflicts with all the other big players in the region.

In addition, China has form when it comes to conflicts. It has been to war with India (1962) and Vietnam (1979), and had skirmishes with the Soviet Union (1969). In 1950 Chinese and American troops fought during the course of the Korean War. The point about these fights is that they took place when China was relatively weak. The fact that it is now well on its way to becoming the world’s largest economy and is building up its armed forces means that it is in a far stronger position to take on the United States, and others, but also that it has a lot more to lose.

China’s main interest has always been its regional position, and if that is the case, then there are strong arguments for it to show patience, as its economic pull becomes progressively stronger, while the American position becomes questioned because of the effort required to back a complicated set of allies with interests with which Washington may not always be in sympathy. The various missteps of the Trump Administration—first appearing to favor Taiwan and then backing away, complaining about trade deals with South Korea as a crisis was building up with

the North, preparing to denounce China as a currency manipulator and then suddenly being able to forge a warm and constructive relationship at the U.S. President’s Florida retreat—may steadily subvert confidence in American’s guarantees and encourage a gradual willingness to put Beijing’s wishes to the fore rather than Washington’s. That is as likely a future as a U.S.–China war, accepting the caveats about the risks of an otherwise minor crisis being poorly handled. China, like the Soviet Union at the start of the 1970s, may also conclude that it is better to have the United States closely involved in the region as a stabilizing force, given what individual states, such as Japan, might get up to if they no longer felt that they could rely on Washington.

All this leads to the conclusion that the Thucydides Trap is an unhelpful construct. It only takes a smidgeon of realism to recognize the importance of power balances and to acknowledge that their calculation by states influences behavior. That is not at issue. The question is whether the U.S.–China relationship can be understood as one of a rare set of occasions—of which there have been only 16 up to now in all of international history—when an upstart power challenges the established power for top position. The key point is that the United States with its local allies remains far superior to China so long as it takes care of its relationships. Managing its regional alliances is not straightforward, but so long as this is done the United States will still remain the stronger. China’s security dilemma lies in the number of potential rivals who might combine together against it in a number of ways. This adds to its incentives to play a long game.

Allison's technique is to draw a very bleak picture, not out of fatalism but to demonstrate that it is possible to avoid the worst outcomes. If the various and generally sensible policy prescriptions he offers are followed then all should be well, and we can relax. He has used the same technique before. In 2004, Allison explored the possible ways in which terrorist groups might be able to get hold of a nuclear device or build their own and then use them to cause carnage. He reported his "considered judgment, on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not." Without determined action, largely to make sure that weapons and fissionable material were kept secure, a disaster was almost certain. With the right action the catastrophe could be prevented. This formula has an evident attraction as a way to dramatize dangers and influence policy, for no one wishes to be accused of complacency on such grave matters as these. But it also risks playing down the numerous factors that already make any great power war incredibly risky and exaggerating the differences that sensible policy initiatives can make when something happens that neither side wanted but soon escalates out of control. **PRISM**

A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order?

By Richard Haass
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Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, is an innovative thinker in the field of American foreign policy and international relations. In his recent work, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order*, Haass proposes updating the current world order—that has been with us seemingly since time immemorial, having originated with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648—to help alleviate world disorder.

In this new world order, respect for sovereignty and the inviolability of borders would be supplemented by "sovereign obligation," whereby states would be responsible for developments within their borders that affect other states, such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and cyberhacking. Haass views sovereign obligation as a form of realism, the emphasis of which is "less on what another country is (or does within its borders) as it is on what it chooses to do beyond its borders,

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