

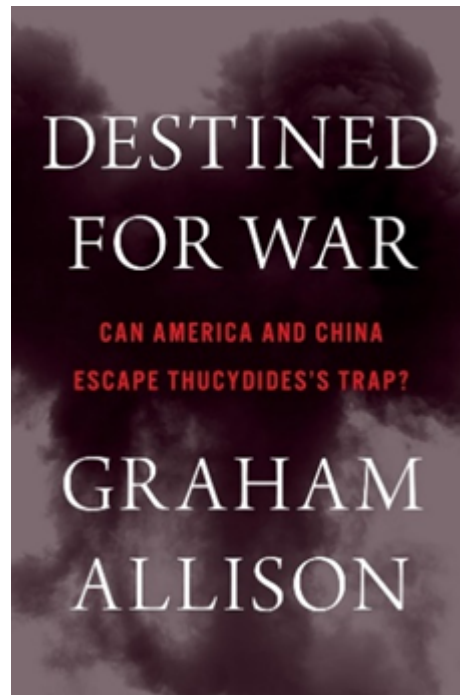


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**A Book Review of Destined for War: Can America and China Escape  
Thucydides's Trap?**

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**Introduction**

In his book "The Thucydides Trap", Graham Allison uses the works of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides on the Peloponnesian War to portray the increasing tensions between the United States and China as a typical example of a dominant power that is afraid of the advent of an emerging challenger. Allison, a prominent scholar at Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, contends that the structural tensions that exist between the Pacific countries might easily result in military war similar to the one, that ensnared Athens and Sparta if there are no intentional measures made to promote peace and collaboration.

**The "Thucydides Trap" Theory**

Allison's work builds upon foundational works like A.F.K. Organski's power transition theory, which explains how shifts in relative economic, military, and political power between nations increase the probability of war as rising, dissatisfied states attempt to change the existing international hierarchy (Organski, 1958). However, Allison's unique innovation is the psychological emphasis on the fear and perception of threats felt by the dominant state towards its emerging challenger as the key accelerant of tensions. Hence, the "Thucydides Trap" theory shares commonalities with the offensive realism paradigm

advanced by scholars like John Mearsheimer, which highlights how the security dilemma between great powers fuels worst-case planning, arms races, and cycles of action-reaction instability (Mearsheimer, 2001). Allison builds directly upon these realist premises about the self-help nature of international competition and the proclivity for rivalries to descend into hostilities (Allison, 2017: 97). Allison breaks new ground through his systematic historical case study methodology, quantifying how frequently these structural forces have resulted in violent conflict between transitioning powers over the past 500 years. Thus, Allison's work is groundbreaking in combining power transition theory, realpolitik analysis, and quantitative historical case studies into a unified framework for explaining the specific structural stresses intensifying between Washington and Beijing.

Allison derives his central theory from the ancient Greek historian Thucydides' analysis of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. As Thucydides observed, "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta" (p. xxv).

From this starting point, Allison develops the concept he calls the "Thucydides Trap" - the severe structural stress that emerges when a rising power causes fear in an established ruling power, making some form of violent conflict remarkably difficult to avoid (p. 30). He writes, "The Thucydides Trap refers to the natural, inevitable, inescapable discontent a rising power feels as a ruling power is unwilling to make the accommodating 'adjustments' the rising power wants, causing the rising power to consider a challenge" (p. 31).

Essentially, as a rising nation extends its influence and interests further outward, it inevitably comes to chafe against the constraints and status quo enforced by the dominant ruling power. The ruling power in turn sees any attempt by the rising power to change the established order as an existential threat to its supremacy (p. 49). Allison illustrates this dynamic through the concept of tipping points - lines that, once crossed by the rising power, become so unacceptable to the ruling power that violence becomes effectively inevitable: "When a rising power reached a 'tipping point,' the ruling power was overwhelmingly likely to strike first to retain its dominant position" (p. 47).

Through extensive historical cases studies, Allison found this "Thucydides Trap" had ensnared 16 rising power-ruling power dyads over the past 500 years. In a startling 12 of those cases, the rivals ended up going to war (p. 13). Allison argues this makes the "Thucydides Trap" an under-appreciated force in history repeating itself: "Time and again, the rulers of a reigning power have found themselves in positions so unappealing that they had little choice but to go to war" (p. 83).

He identifies numerous factors that contribute to the entrapping structural stress, including domestic political pressures, ideological disputes, historical grievances, geographical tensions, and the rapid shifting of economic and military balances between the powers (Pp. 124-134). Crucially, Allison highlights how even minor incidents between the rivals can spark dangerous conflicts that are difficult to control due to psychological biases, institutional inertias, and domestic constraints (Pp. 144-151). He terms this the "Punic Duel" model of escalation (p. 147).

Allison makes clear the "Thucydides Trap" is not a deterministic law, but rather identifies the powerful historical pattern of "forces that make contest terribly difficult to avoid once a new, rising power begins to threaten the established leader" (p. 44). Whether the U.S. and China can escape this trap depends on their efforts to build "extraordinary wisdom and watchfulness" into their relationship (p. 237).

In summary, Allison's "Thucydides Trap" theory asserts that when a rising power approaches parity with the dominant ruling power and begins pushing for changes to the established order, both nations enter an increasingly unstable scenario where historical forces make violent conflict extremely difficult to avoid absent conscious efforts to cooperate.

#### **Methodology: 'Historical Case Studies'**

A core strength of Allison's book is his rigorous methodology using extensive historical case studies to develop and support his "Thucydides Trap" theory. He systematically analyzes 16 cases over the past 500 years when a rising power had emerged as a significant challenger to the dominant ruling power of that era (p. 13). For each case, ranging from the 16<sup>th</sup> century rise of the Spanish Habsburgs to the 20th century U.S.-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War, Allison consults a wide range of primary and

secondary sources to assess the key factors and dynamics that either resulted in violent conflict or a relatively peaceful transition of power.

Some of the earliest examples had been cited span the 16th to 18th centuries, as new nation-state rivals arose to confront the ruling European powers. This included the "stunningly rapid" rise of the Habsburg Spanish empire, which had come to repeatedly clash with the formerly dominant Portuguese through conflicts like the War of the Mantuan Succession from 1628-1631 (Pp. 52-53). As Spain's power peaked, the emerging commercial power of the Netherlands grew to directly challenge Spanish control of the high seas, erupting into the devastating Eighty Years' War from 1568-1648 (Pp. 55-56).

As the 18th century dawned, it was newly ascendant France under the leadership of Louis XIV that "posed an existential threat to Britain and the Dutch Republic" as the reigning maritime powers (p. 57). This tension had been erupted into a series of major wars as France aimed to establish its territorial claims and check the primacy of Britain and the Netherlands (Pp. 57-59). Allison points to 19th century, Germany as "the latest iteration of a rising power bent on overturning the established order" dominated by the British empire at its zenith (p. 61). The rapidly industrializing German economy allowed for massive military buildups that enabled an attempt to "escape the confines imposed by Britain's existing order" - escalating into the powder keg of World War I after a spiral of minor crises (Pp. 64-66).

The first half of the 20th century was defined by challenges from other rising powers like Germany and Japan disrupting Western primacy, contributing to the cataclysms of World War II (Pp. 71-77). And in the Cold War era, Allison argues that it was the Soviet Union's ascension that represented the latest iteration of the "Thucydides Trap" dynamic with the U.S. as the dominant but threatened ruling power (Pp. 78-79).

Allison identifies only four cases over this centuries-long period where rising and ruling powers managed to the transition power relatively peacefully: the U.S. overtaking Britain, the Soviet rises coexisting with Britain's decline, Germany and Japan's ascent over post-WWII Russia and China, and America eclipsing Britain's empire (Pp. 80-82). However, he deems these to be rare exceptions enabled by unique circumstances largely absent today.

Allison's sweeping historical examples illustrate that, what he sees as an enduring pattern: "In case after case, when a rising power began to approach the parity with the ruling power, structural stresses developed that made conflict terribly difficult to avoid" (p. 82). He argues this precedent raises grave concerns about the current U.S.-China relationship entering a perilous "Thucydides Trap" dynamic where miscalculation or domestic political incentives could be easily lead to an escalating conflict (p. 83). By marching through over 500 years of great power struggles that predominantly ended in violent collision between ascendant rivals and the status quo defenders, Allison constructs an analytical framework that serves as a stark warning for managing the growing Sino-American tensions in the decades ahead.

Allison's methodology is a significant strength in understanding the dynamics of power transitions. He uses primary source materials such as government records, intelligence files, and first-hand accounts to reconstruct key decision-making processes in his case studies. He also validates his factual claims and statistical evidence by cross-checking across multiple respected secondary sources and academic databases. His analysis of metrics like military spending, economic output, and energy consumption levels is meticulously cited from sources like the U.S. Military Posture Statements, SIPRI military expenditure databases, conference proceedings, and datasets from institutions like the World Bank. However, his methodology may introduce biases, as he had overemphasize adversarial structural forces compared to alternative frameworks. Additionally, his "Thucydides Trap" framing may oversimplify or project other contributing factors beyond the rising/ruling power dynamic. Critics argue that this results in strained analogies that could break down under scrutiny. Despite these criticisms, Allison's methodology provides a level of historical rigor that elevates his analysis above polemic argument. His robust sourcing from primary records, validation across credible secondary sources, and granular historiographical approach make his approach a substantial scholarly strength.

### **U.S. and China Outlined by Allison**

Allison highlights the increasing economic tensions between the U.S. and China as a major source of conflict and escalating rivalry. He cites issues like "America's massive trade deficits with China, lack of access for American companies to Chinese markets,

theft of intellectual property, and currency manipulation" as the major points of friction (p. 120). Disagreements over Chinese investment in critical U.S. infrastructure and key technology sectors have been also raised national security fears about overreliance (p. 121). At a deeper level, Allison argues the two nations' fundamentally different economic models - state capitalism in China versus free market capitalism in the U.S. - represent "a source of massive structural stress between them" (p. 122).

Another crucial flashpoint had been identified by Allison is the series of escalating territorial disputes between the U.S. and China, particularly in the South China Sea and East China Sea regions. He points to China's "breathtakingly comprehensive programme of artificial island construction" and militarization of these islands with advanced radar, missile systems, and aircraft as direct challenges to American primacy (p. 123). The risks of confrontation over vital trade shipments transiting these waters have been significantly raised tensions. Allison also highlights Chinese claims over Taiwan and its rejection of a "One China" policy as "the most volatile issue between the U.S. and China today" (p. 126).

Allison depicts the two nations as entering a new arms race driven by competing military buildups, cyber warfare capabilities, space-based assets, AI development efforts, and next-generation technologies like hypersonic missiles (Pp. 126-127). Fears about shifting military balances that could be tilted dominance have fueled debates over economic "decoupling," export controls, investment screenings, and the securitization of a wide range of dual-use technologies (p. 128). Allison warns the "ubiquitous opportunities for inadvertent or intentional provocations by military and paramilitary forces on both sides" increases risks of escalation spirals (p. 127).

Finally, Allison emphasizes the fundamental tensions arose from the conflicting ideologies and forms of governance between the two rival powers. He frames it as a clash between "a rising authoritarian capitalist regime fundamentally challenging a ruling democratic capitalist one" (p. 128). The mutual fears and distrusts caused by these differing value systems and models of political organization exacerbate domestic nationalist voices in both nations portraying the other as an existential threat (Pp. 129-132). Allison argues this dimension of intensifying ideological rivalry leaves less "space for compromise and co-existence" between the U.S. and China (p. 132).

Across all these critical flashpoint areas, Allison contends the structural forces at play are increasingly resembling the "Thucydides Trap" scenario that has been repeatedly led rising and ruling powers down a path toward devastating conflict throughout the history. Whether the U.S.-China relationship can buck these patterns depends on both nations' wisdom and ability to manage these intensifying tensions.

### **Criticisms on Allison**

One of the primary critiques is that Allison overstates the deterministic nature of the "Thucydides Trap" playing out between the U.S. and China despite key differences from previous historical cases. Ramo (2017) argues Allison's theoretical models caused him to "overly discount the ability of American and Chinese societies to shape their own destiny" beyond the structural forces he identifies.

Similarly, Beckley (2018) writes that Allison "loses sight of the profound differences between the U.S.-Chinese relationship today and great-power rivalries in the historical past" (p. 92). Beckley highlights how the economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, and the presence of international institutions altered the current geopolitical landscape. Related to this, several critics contend Allison overlooks crucial factors that separate the contemporary U.S.-China dynamic from previous conflicts between rising and ruling powers. Rosecrance (2018) argues "globalization has raised the costs of war so high that neither Beijing nor Washington could win such a conflict" (p. 604).

Ferguson (2017) similarly suggested today's economic interdependence between the U.S. and Chinese economies means "the two countries have been too intertwined to slide into open conflict." Beckley (2018) added that nuclear weapons have "reduced the expected benefits of military conquest" compared to earlier eras (p. 108).

Kupchan (2017) argues Allison "gives short shrift" to how international institutions like the UN, World Bank, and global trade regimes could help mitigate to U.S.-China tensions in ways not available to previous rising and ruling powers. Another criticism is that Allison's structural theory overlooks the critical role individual leaders could play through diplomacy and prudent decision-making to avoid conflict. Ramo (2017) argues Allison "fails to sufficiently credit the agency of leaders" in being able to steer their nations toward more peaceful paths.



Economy (2017) adds that Allison spends too little time exploring "potential off-ramps from his tragic cycle of tensions" and how proactive efforts by leaders could be defused the "Thucydides Trap" risks he described. Some critics take issues with Allison's narrative style and structure of the book itself. Kupchan (2017) argued the book "bogs down the narrative" by overextending into too many background historical examples. While praising Allison's "masterful use of examples," Economy (2017) contends "the theoretical analysis overwhelms the examination of current U.S.-China tensions."

Hence, while many reviewers praised the book's comprehensive research and raising awareness of the U.S.-China rivalry's dangers, a common critique is that Allison overstates the determinism of great powers repeatedly falling into conflict. Critics argue he overlooked key differences separating the modern geopolitical context, as well as the agency of individual leaders to cooperate and find pathways to coexistence absent in previous eras.

### **The Impact and Implications for Policymakers**

Allison does not offer explicit policy suggestions concerning the bilateral relationship between the two nations. Allison's cautions regarding the "Thucydides Trap" are disquieting. The potential escalation of tensions among Pacific countries into instability and warfare may result in significant ramifications. It is imperative for national leaders who are been prioritized worldwide peace and economic well-being to not overlook this matter. Policymakers bear the duty of effecting substantial changes in these dynamics through the use of long-term strategic planning and the adept management of escalating tensions within the system. Reading "Destined for War" is crucial for policymakers and foreign policy practitioners who are been involved in U.S.-China relations, particularly those dealing with economic, security, or technology matters. Allison is urging for leaders that possess extensive knowledge and information, in order to prevent the costly errors of the past from being repeated. She had achieved this by doing a comprehensive analysis of the specific structural hazards of current era, taking into account historical occurrences of significant power rivalry.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

While Allison presents a stark warning about the potential for conflict between the U.S. and China, he is upfront that his book does not offer any simple policy prescriptions or solutions to avoid the "Thucydides Trap" (p. 237). Instead, he argues that by this systematically illuminating the powerful structural forces at play based on extensive historical precedents, leaders of both nations have a better chance to take prudent steps to maintain peace and vitiating these escalating tensions.

Allison makes clear that in his view, a violent clash between China and the U.S. is not a deterministic certainty, but rather a "daunting risk" that must be acted upon proactively (p. 237). He writes, "Nothing captures the reality of the Thucydides Trap better than recognizing the coin as still being in the air" (p. 237). The two Pacific powers still have agency to be controlled their own destinies if they are prioritizing open communication, negotiation of guardrails against conflict, and the construction of a larger framework for peaceful economic cooperation and coexistence.

However, Allison expresses deep concern about both nations' current trajectories pushing them towards an increasingly adversarial posture with rising suspicions, military buildups, and hardline nationalism. He argues this "steady re-creation of the dynamics that have been predictably led to tragedy" stems from accumulated "grievances, judgments, and actions [that are] almost calculated to make an eventual clash inevitable" (p. 238). Miscalculation, third-party provocations, or domestic political forces incentivizing confrontation could easily spark uncontrolled escalation from seemingly minor incidents, reflecting the escalatory models like "Punic Duels" seen throughout history (p. 147).

Allison's sobering conclusion is that avoiding a direct hegemonic challenge between the rising Chinese power and the reigning American order will be required both nations to take "heroic steps" and demonstrate "extraordinary wisdom and watchfulness" to defy the historical patterns he illuminates (p. 237). While intended as an urgent wake-up call, Allison sees immense constructive potential if the two nations could proactively address their structural stresses:

"If America and China could be able to escape the Thucydides Trap...their efforts could lay the foundations of an international order capable of allowing China and the U.S. to lead the world toward an extended period of peace and prosperity more fabulous than anything yet achieved in human history" (p. 242).

Ultimately, Allison hopes that by thoroughly diagnosing the uniquely acute dangers of the "Thucydides Trap" dynamic emerging between the U.S. and China, his book could be catalyzed the foresight and commitment required from leaders of both nations to steer their relationship towards the peaceful coexistence that had been eluded most rising and ruling powers throughout the past half millennium. Allison's extensively researched book serves as a profound call for farsighted statecraft by U.S. and Chinese leaders to escape the historical cycles of hostility between ruling and rising powers - cycles that had been repeatedly led to devastating consequences when left unattended. Thus, while Allison's theoretical arguments have some valid criticisms, he delivers a vital wake-up call about the uniquely perilous structural stresses intensifying between the Pacific powers. His book's insights and urgency make it an essential read for anyone seeking to uphold global stability amid the intensifying superpower rivalry reshaping the 21st century world order.

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