

## BOOK REVIEW

**Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?** By Graham Allison, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York, 2017, vi+384 pages, ISBN 978-0-544-93527-3.

The history of international relations incorporates a vast range of events that are independently unique as per the contexts, causes and outcomes. However, if the cases are properly decoded through meticulous observation, they can also shed light on particular patterns to signify the probability of a future outbreak of conflict. In this regard, Graham Allison looks forward to evaluating the renowned model of Thucydides's trap addressing the rise of China vis-à-vis the response of America and the political contemplation associated with their actions. During the course of his journey into this beautiful discourse, the author has illustrated diversified geostrategic and geopolitical scenarios in order to identify all of the key avenues. In the introductory chapter, the author has clearly defined his motivation behind and objective of writing the book, which can be noted as an academic venture to identify the unintended transgression of the balance of power and to stop the history from repeating itself. Hence, he uses some scholarly quotes and empirical experiences to manifest a proper breakdown of historical events. In this monograph of four chapters and 384 pages, the author has moved back and forth from theoretical analogies to practical events, from the battleground of the Peloponnesian war (431 BC–404 BC) to the European combat zone of the World War I and from literary artistry to statistical empiricism in order to furnish a memorable grindstone.

In addition to a brief preface, an introductory and a concluding section, this book contains four major parts. Each of the parts comprises a number of chapters and there are ten chapters altogether located under these parts. The introductory chapter begins with the explanation of Thucydides's trap and throws the question: whether China and America are going to fall under a sequel of this political destiny. The 'trap', hence, refers to a situation or a structural stress<sup>1</sup> where a rising power challenges the status quo and it inevitably leads to a confrontation between the ruling power and the revisionist one.<sup>2</sup> The follow-up parts focus more on different dimensions of this topic juxtaposing various examples to provide an answer to the question which has

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<sup>1</sup> Jyotishman Bhagawati, "Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?", *Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2017, pp. 95-97.

<sup>2</sup> Hugo Bras Martins da Costa, "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?", *Brazilian Political Science Review*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2018.

been raised. The first part elucidates how China has been maintaining a strong legacy in the competitive arena of international relations for a long period of time. The second chapter presents a historical overview and correlates the China question with intriguing anecdotes. The third part tries to investigate both the Chinese and the American intentions as well as the similarities and the dissimilarities in their patterns of 'aggression'. The fourth part illuminates a ray of hope by explaining the means of pacific solutions and the factors which might prevent the outbreak of war.

In the first chapter, China's gradual development in different areas, particularly, the sheer triumph in the economic sector has been discussed. The second chapter presents a detailed picture of the clash between the two Greek city-states, viz. Athens and Sparta in the fifth century BC. The third chapter points out sixteen cases during the past five hundred years identified by the Harvard Thucydides's Trap Project based on the examples of an ascending power challenging an established power. It further elaborates the issue through a few instances like the mid-twentieth century Japan vs United States clash, the confrontations of China and Russia with Japan during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the mid-nineteenth century Germany vs France scenario, etc. The fourth chapter focuses particularly on the rise of Germany as a naval power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and its confrontation with the erstwhile British power in the contemporary geostrategic latitude. The fifth chapter makes a critique of America's rise as a global hegemon and the way this supremacy has been safeguarded. The sixth chapter emphasizes on China's ambition under the rule of Xi Jinping. The following chapter validates the Clash of Civilization thesis vis-à-vis the US-China confrontation. The eighth chapter considers the probabilities and outcomes of a nuclear confrontation between the two. The last two chapters respectively focus on twelve different examples and suggest a number of options for America which could be useful to tackle the situation. He concluded the book asserting on the American policymakers' role and suggested that they should foster more proactive or 'do strategy'.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that Allison has taken a long timeframe and a broad geographical amplitude in order to identify the elements for his analytical purview. To define the Chinese ambition and probable consequences, he has clearly taken a realist route. Hence, he addresses the concept of national interest as 'plain enough' which signifies the survival of the state and the right to claim sovereignty within its own domain. The author picks up fear, honour

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<sup>3</sup> Blake Dufeld, "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?", *International Social Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 2, 2018, p. 1.

and interest as the key features leading the Peloponnesian war as portrayed by Thucydides. He also points out that it is not these elements per se, rather the shift in the balance of power which inevitably led to the war. However, Allison's explanation of the concept of balance of power remains abstract and somewhat parsimonious in the sense that it sees both the concept from a very archaic point of view. He does not elucidate a revisited definition or new features of the trap in this new era and also ignores how the political realities of China and the US are different than those of Athens and Sparta.<sup>4</sup> Although he has added the concept of a 'new balance of power', according to his interpretation, the revisited idea only adds up geo-economics to its dimension. The author has referred to the great Chinese leader Sun Tzu's aphorism which announces the true victory of a battle as 'defeating the enemy without fighting'. Nonetheless, he singles out the geo-economic dimension and skills as representatives of this statement which are destined to wield economic instruments. Therefore, ignoring other prevalent areas associated with the balancing mechanism has limited the room for a vigorous standpoint. It should be mentioned that Thucydides's own writing has been critiqued because of the absence of different relevant political junctures and overtly glorifying his personal hero Pericles.<sup>5</sup> Thus, considering this thesis as an analytical departure point is also not free of questions.

The author makes a praiseworthy effort in preparing and presenting the wide range of data he has collected to assemble the arguments. For example, the book has shown how Japan crafted a steady move against the American interference in the Asian pivot and eventually ended up confronting them in the Pearl Harbour. Japan's advancements did shake up the powers ruling over the world as it avenged war against Russia in 1904, sent troops to Korea in 1894 to manifest its response to a rebellion and eventually defeated the Chinese troops in the battleground. It also occupied Korea, Taiwan and the southeastern part of Manchuria. Similarly, the rise of Germany in the mid-nineteenth century worked as an impetus for the escalation of the Franco-Prussian tension. Allison has given a number of other examples as well, but has significantly focused on the strife between the British and the German powers at the outset of the World War I. Through these eloquent memoirs from the pages of the history, Allison presents how the intense presence of the Germans in the sea had generated the fear of compensating national security at the cost of a *détente*. He also refers to the Crowe Memorandum, the statement of the leading Germany expert during

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<sup>4</sup> Biao Zhang, "Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*", *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 2019, pp. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Freedman, "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?-Authored by Graham Allison", *Journal of Complex Operations*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2017, pp. 175-178.

the British King Edward VII's regime who opined that it was not the intentions of the Germans, rather the capabilities which was posing a threat. Based on these examples, Allison has successfully inferred the outstanding issues which worked as nibbling factors behind the tension among these contravening powers in the course of history. However, Allison's point of view ignores the fact how the confrontation between Austria and Serbia was indeed the gripping factor that pushed the war.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is unclear from his demonstrations why some of these 'tensions' were limited to a manageable degree of dispute and some resulted in all-out wars. Putting all these different degrees of battles under the same rubric of 'war' also disregards the contextual elements.

Addressing the global expanse does also have its limitations. It is comprehensible that the author has taken a number of events into account to present an encyclopedic view; however, the author could have justified how all these different events might have carried some fundamental commonalities which transcend the notion of balance of power beyond a particular case or time or geopolitical radius. On the other hand, Allison has not stratified the examples under the sub sections based on any unique feature or analytical rationale. Hence, the reading experience may turn out to be sluggish and monotonous, particularly, to someone who is not affiliated with the discipline of International Relations or Political Science. Moreover, this huge array of data fails to appropriate Thucydides's analogy in an absolute form. None of the examples refers to a case where a particularly 'small' power is challenging the bigger power.<sup>7</sup> Given the historical endowment that China bears, it can also never be justified as a 'small' power vis-à-vis the US.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the first chapter which signifies the rise of China, the focal area of analysis only begins at chapter 5, around halfway towards the end of the book. However, the author gives a balanced and diligent example of how the hegemony of the US amalgamates different layers of positive and negative connotations. The rise of America as the supreme power in the global pantheon did not happen overnight or without any predicament. Allison has pointed out the discomfort that persisted among the American policymakers over the probable risk of a Spanish control over Cuba resulting in the Spanish-American War in 1898. The US was not content with only dislodging the Spanish from the Western Hemisphere, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines;

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Arjun Banerjee, "Book Review of 'Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?'" by Graham Allison", *International Journal of Nuclear Security*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2018, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Shapiro, "America's Collision Course with China-Review, Non-Fiction", *The New York Times*, 15 June 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/15/books/review/everything-under-the-heavens-howard-french-destined-for-war-graham-allison.html>, accessed on 05 March 2020.

it also looked forward to waging confrontations with Germany and Britain given they might not agree to settle the disputes as per America's resolution. Allison has also added the case of America's passionate interference in the creation of the Suez Canal in Panama. Obviously, it was not out of benevolent endeavours, rather from an urge to protect its national security and safeguard a convenient channel for the American warships to operate around the Atlantic coast. America's indirect support towards the insurrection movement against the Colombian rule also proved how it would not mind gazing at a war in the precinct if the war served the interest of its own. This analytical viewpoint was quite refreshing from an American scholar who himself was a part of the bureaucratic assembly in the 1960s. The chapter not only adds up a critical or balanced tone but also enriches the interest and trust of the reader vis-à-vis the alternative perspectives in the following chapters.

The book also manages to make a polished breakdown of the Chinese idiosyncrasy in governance and strategic management. Allison portrays the extravagant precept in the Chinese governance structure which has systematically restrained any foreign influence over the Chinese government. He also addresses how China is ambitious of achieving four major objectives at once—revitalizing the party, upliftment of the Chinese nationalism, fostering an economic revolution and rebuilding the Chinese military. The ingeniousness in China's design is manifested through its actions and agenda. Allison refers to the 'credential goals' of Xi Jinping—building a 'moderately prosperous society' by doubling the GDP to around US\$10,000 by 2021 and establishing a 'modernized, fully developed, rich and powerful' nation by 2049. As Allison elucidates, if China becomes successful in achieving these goals, it will also own an economy 40 per cent larger than that of the US. Nevertheless, the author predicts a possible Chinese attempt to restore its full control over the adjacent territories including the contested South China Sea including reinforcement of law and naval presence. However, despite bringing in these issues, the author has missed a critical debate on whether China wants to be a global or a regional hegemon. A significant number of the statements and references penned by Allison veritably fits more to be China's perceived prominence over the Asian region. The author has translated China's beyond-the-border or regional expedients as eventual global manoeuvres. There is no concrete answer to the debate as well; however, adding this debate to the list would have made the dissertation more intriguing. On the other hand, so far as geo-economics is concerned, China also has corporate Giants like Jack Ma, the co-founder and former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Ali Baba. Although Allison mentioned the issue of geo-economics, he completely missed the actors

who are no less than a king or a president in the global platform.<sup>9</sup>

One of the commendable features of the book is that it has elaborately discussed the views of relevant policymakers and the rulers. It mentions the French king Napoleon III's fear over Germany's rise as well as the German statesman Otto von Bismarck's bold perambulations in the mid-nineteenth century; it addresses King Charles I of Spain's strains over the French eminence in the sixteenth century Europe; it captures the epitomes of the Chinese president Xi Jinping's rule vis-à-vis those of the Trump and the Obama administrations. Having said that, it should also be pointed out that the author has not made any direct acknowledgment regarding how individual decisions may indeed lead to a shift in the balance of power or to the war itself. While explaining these chronicles of the American hegemony, the author has reiterated the examples of Theodore Roosevelt's overtly arbitrary decisions a number of times; yet, the overall presentation lacks an unequivocal voice beyond the neorealist paradigm. It is not sure whether the omission was intentional or not; however, throughout the book, Allison sticks to the fairly realist explanation of terminologies like 'nation', 'state' and 'national interest'. It has to be mentioned that Thucydides himself was a classical realist and much of his discussions in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* was based on human nature. However, a concise focus on Allison's previous work would show that he is an admirer of Kenneth Waltz (1924-2013), known as the father of neorealism. Allison (along with Morton Halperin) has suggested a bureaucratic-executive variant of the Waltzian model.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, this methodological circumspection might have derived from Allison's own inclination towards the neorealist reasoning.

Another noteworthy area which has been picked up by the author is the probability of a nuclear warfare. In one hand, the author has aptly illustrated the conceptual areas like the background of a nuclear war, the concept of escalation ladder or nuclear threshold; on the other hand, he has also attached these key issues to the erstwhile relevant examples of probable nuclear confrontation among China and other nuclear powers. He has also identified some areas which may provoke a war between China and the US in the future, i. e. an accidental clash in the South China Sea, the independence of Taiwan or the involvement of a third party. However, albeit the author has embraced all these different dimensions of warfare, his analysis has been confined within

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<sup>9</sup> James R. Cricks, "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap? by Graham Allison", *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 84, No. 4, 2017, pp. 102-103.

<sup>10</sup> Graham T. Allison and Morton H. Halperin, "Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications", *World Politics*, Vol. 24, No. S1 (1972), pp. 40-47.

the traditional idea of strategic confrontation.<sup>11</sup> Overtly focusing on warfare induced by national interest, Allison has completely omitted the ‘low-political’ factors like environmental issues, terrorism and global pandemics. A very recent example is the worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which led to a tension between the two powers.

To substantiate the theoretical point of view, along with the theory of balance of power, the author has brought in Samuel P. Huntington’s Clash of Civilization thesis. Allison refers to Huntington’s views on ‘the Western myth of universal values’ where non-Western civilizations, i.e. the Confucian civilization, might not be willing to incorporate themselves under the Western umbrella. Particularly, so far as the Communist Party of China’s (CCP) ideologies are concerned, they do differ from the Western liberal views in many respects. He has also added the points of two American statesmen who illustrated the Chinese views regarding the American objectives as: to isolate, to contain, to diminish, to internally divide China as well as to sabotage China’s leadership. Nonetheless, Allison has reckoned a ‘strategic culture clash’ which seems to be more logical if the out and out discussion of the book is concerned. The author’s own words “China will be ‘strategic’ with Chinese characteristics” gives a great insight into why the US-China rivalry should not be examined under the same criteria upon which other relative power distributions might have compelled the states to engage in all-out wars. Hence, with respect to the theoretical requisiteness, the discussion could have reflected upon other subcategories of balancing mechanisms while appropriating them with subsequent examples. For instance, the author has mentioned the issue of ‘stem revolution’ and the increasing Chinese prominence in science, technology and education. Yet, he has ignored the fact that these areas are significant on their own rather than working as instrumental factors behind economic development and strategic robustness. He also ignores the idea of ‘smart power’ which is a more practical explanation of China’s ventures compared to the strictly stratified divisions of either soft or hard power. Inclusion of other neorealist variants like the balance of threat theory by Stephen M. Walt,<sup>12</sup> the hegemonic stability theory by Stephen Krasner<sup>13</sup> and most importantly, the diversification of offensive and defensive types of realism would have been useful to make the deliberation structurally stronger. His selection of cases along with the Harvard study remains very West-biased and Eurocentric as out of the 39 countries in the 16,

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<sup>11</sup> Arjun Banerjee, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power”, *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1985, pp. 3-43.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, “State Power and the Structure of International Trade”, *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1976, pp. 317-347.

only three were non-Western states.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, the scholarly monograph by Graham Allison is a compelling piece of literature that never falls short of literary dexterity or analytical crafts. Every chapter of the book opens up a new door that offers an insight into the twilight zone of the author's mind and his effectively sewed allegories from history. Each paragraph gives a different taste and the author's deft experience in assembling and presenting this enormous number of issues has to be acknowledged. With catchy titles, subtitles and analogies, the book creates a particular genre of its own transcending the generic division between the academic and the non-academic lines. Any interested learner can go through the book and get enlightened by the immense amount of information while enjoying the reading experience. The monograph contains multifarious issues like balance of power, strategic culture, nuclear warfare, geopolitical doctrines, proxy war and so on which reinvigorates the necessity of discussion on geostrategic dimensions and their political significance. Thus, this book definitely adds value to the existing literature in the fields of Strategic and Security Studies, International Relations, Peace and Conflict Studies and Political Science due to its multidisciplinary nature.

Besides the affirmative sides, the book also has some limitations. It fails to cultivate a thorough and proportionate division between the theoretical and empirical demonstrations. Thus, the references and examples may seem outdated and incoherent at times. The script also misses a few punctuation marks (i.e. a quotation mark on page xi and a quotation mark on page 239).<sup>15</sup> The extensive amount of focus on trivial areas also makes the arguments weary and tedious. Nevertheless, it does not address the change in global structure which now includes a multipolar form of power-distribution, post-Greek city-state or the Westphalian state order, globalized reality and the prominence of non-state actors like the multinational corporations (MNCs) or even different terrorist groups. Therefore, while capturing the overall scenario, Allison's dissertation limits itself under the state-centric focus of realism and its variants.

Finally, due to the apt focus, logically manifested arguments and comprehensively predictive patterns, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* should be recognized as a noteworthy contribution to the field of International Relations. It investigates the question addressed and brings in a plethora of strategic innuendos with an objective to

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony Vivian, "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?", *UCLA Historical Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2017, pp. 77-78.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Vivian, op. cit., p. 78.



prevent a future confrontation between China and the US. The book stands as a bridge between the past, present and future; a curious journey to decipher the lessons of history; or as Thucydides has mentioned in his book - “a possession for all time”.

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