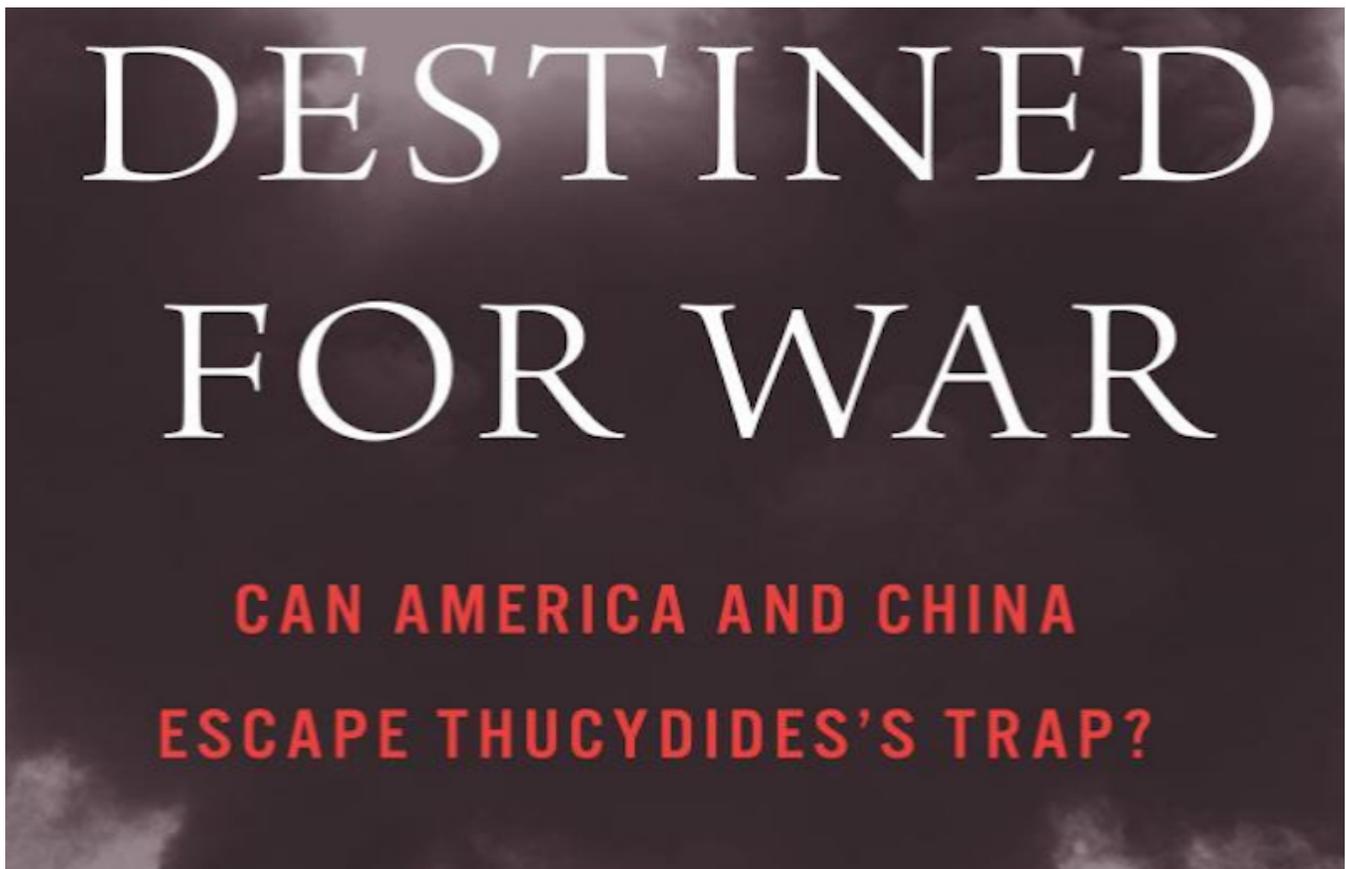




Graham Allison on "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?"

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Detail from book cover

Graham Allison, Devin T. Stewart

Podcast music: [Blindhead and Mick Lexington](#).

DEVIN STEWART: I'm Devin Stewart here at Carnegie Council in New York City, and today I'm speaking with Graham Allison. He is a professor at Harvard University, and he's also author of [Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?](#)

Professor Allison, thanks so much for speaking with us today.

GRAHAM ALLISON: Thanks so much for having me.

DEVIN STEWART: First, I know you get this question a lot, but a lot of people are talking about what Thucydides's Trap is. Can you just give our listeners a sense of what that means?

GRAHAM ALLISON: [Thucydides](#) was the founder of history and had a big idea, and the big idea was that when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power alarm bells should sound "extreme danger ahead"—generally bad things happen. So, Thucydides's Trap is the dangerous dynamic that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power.

That is actually, I think, the best lens for understanding what's happening in relations between a rising China and a ruling United States today.

DEVIN STEWART: You've talked about the two variables that are key to understanding whether there is a Thucydides's Trap or not. I believe it was the rise of one power and fear from another power.

GRAHAM ALLISON: Exactly. This is again Thucydides's famous line. He says, "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made the [war](#) inevitable." So there are two variables here: One is a kind of objective condition of rise, the relative power of the two parties or the correlation of forces as they change; and the second is the subjective—the perceptions—of the parties, in particular of the ruling party, which becomes insecure and fearful, and then behaves in ways that are quite predictable, Thucydides says, and that leave both parties vulnerable to external events that would otherwise be inconsequential, but they can nonetheless set off a set of actions and reactions between the two primary parties that end them in a war that they never wanted.

DEVIN STEWART: Are those two variables—fear and changes in power—applicable to the causes of other wars as well?

GRAHAM ALLISON: In the book I look at the last 500 years of history and find 16 cases in which a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power. In 12 of these cases the outcome is war; in four of the cases the outcome is not war. So Thucydides's line about "inevitable" is, I think, an exaggeration. He means it as an exaggeration—he just means likely or that the odds are not good.

I think the dynamic as you see it play out over the course of history, but in particular in the 16 cases in the last 500 years, is a recurring pattern, and quite understandable actually because the rising power—China—rightly thinks: I'm bigger, I'm stronger, my interests deserve more weight, I deserve more say and more sway. The current arrangements that were created before I even was at the table are constraining me, trying to keep me down. And the ruling power thinks: The status quo is fantastic. It has actually provided the environment that let the rising power grow and become bigger and stronger, and so it should be shored up and should be secured.

Under those conditions, the rising power often seems and feels threatening to the ruling power. The ruling power gets more entangled with allies which it hopes will help its side of the balance and as a consequence becomes more entangled with these allies.

If we go back to [World War I](#) as one of the most dramatic cases of rise versus rule that leads to war: You have a rising Germany; you have the fear that this instills in Britain. Britain then becomes entangled with both France and Russia to try to deal with the problem of a rising Germany, and Germany becomes more entangled with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, even though it knows it's a very weak reed.

So you get constructed a set of interactions that when an [archduke](#) is [assassinated](#) by a [Serbian terrorist](#) in Sarajevo in June of 1914, one thing triggers the next thing, and lo and behold, pretty soon you've got a conflagration that burns down everybody's house.

DEVIN STEWART: Is there a characteristic of the times when the countries went to war compared to when they did

not go to war?

GRAHAM ALLISON: That's a good question.

Every one of the 16 cases is fascinating and has many nuances itself. I think there is not a single pattern other than the Thucydidean dynamic. All of the cases are in fact up on the Harvard [Thucydides's Trap website](#), which is an open site that is also looking for additional cases.

If I look at the four cases of success, the two most instructive are the rise of the United States to rival and then eclipse Britain at the beginning of the 20th century—[Teddy Roosevelt](#) emerges as the leader of what is going to become the "American century"—and the surge of the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and 1960s that became the [Cold War](#) and the invention of a Cold War strategy. In both of those cases you see extremely imaginative diplomacy on the part of the ruling power.

Britain, facing both a rising United States and a rising Germany closer to home, finds ways of accommodating the United States that don't actually sacrifice any vital British interests, but make for an alignment between American and British interests that become so tight that when World War I comes, the United States naturally becomes the lifeline of both supplies and loans for Britain, keeping it in the war until ultimately the United States enters the war on the British side. That's a very imaginative case.

Second, I think the Cold War—which now most people have forgotten about—involved the most amazing, creative period of diplomacy ever in American history. When [George Kennan's "long telegram"](#) from Moscow in April 1946—hardly a year after the [war](#)—announced that the Soviet Union was going to pose a threat graver than the threat of Nazism, this awakened a conversation in Washington that by [National Security Council Report 68 \(NSC-68\)](#) in 1950, four years later, had created an amazing strategy for war in every dimension and by every means except bombs and bullets, which is why it was called the "cold" war. It was not a hot war. That's why it figures in my column as a no-war case because in this case, it's Cold War just as a metaphor; it was not really thousands of people killing each other.

DEVIN STEWART: In the case of the United States and China, there are two other factors that might be worth considering: One is the deep economic integration and interdependence between the two countries and also the fact that both of them have nuclear weapons, as did the Soviets and the United States during the Cold War. What do you make of the factors of having nuclear weapons and being economically interdependent?

GRAHAM ALLISON: That's a very good question. In the next-to-last chapter I have 12 clues for peace drawn from the cases, and then try to see how these are helpful as we think about the special case of China and the United States.

I would say there are at least three big factors that encourage constructive U.S.-Chinese activity to escape Thucydides's Trap: First, nuclear weapons as you said. What mutually assured destruction (MAD) does is that once that level of capability is acquired by two parties, it in effect converts them into Siamese twins, in which however evil, devious, destructive, or dangerous my twin is, whenever I'm tempted to strangle him, I notice that if I do, I'll commit suicide. So that has a huge cautioning effect and even forces a degree of compromise that you wouldn't see otherwise. That's first.

Second, in the U.S.-Chinese case, our economies have become so entangled and interdependent that if there should be a war between the United States and China, there wouldn't be anything for Americans to buy in Wal-marts, and Chinese factories would be producing stuff that nobody is purchasing. Actually, we would find it impossible to get a loan to make up the money for our deficit. This is a thick economic interdependence, much thicker indeed than what had occurred between Britain and Germany before World War I, which was also thick economic interdependence.

Third, we have climate. While this is not a unanimous view, at least in the U.S. government, it's a unanimous view among people who have looked seriously at the issue, that basically on the current trajectory of China and the United States just continuing to emit greenhouse gases on the current trend line, we may create an uninhabitable environment for our great-great-great-grandchildren. Unless the two parties were to find a way to work together to deal with the issue—since greenhouse gasses go into the atmosphere that we all are part of—there are no potential solutions.

So there is more than enough good stuff for parties to work with if they were trying to work to avoid Thucydides's Trap.

On the other hand, there are lots of areas of competition. If you're looking out from Beijing and you say: "Well, tell me again, why should the American Navy be the arbiter of events in a body of water adjacent to us that's called the [South China Sea](#)? Why is that? Why should the United States actually be on the Korean Peninsula? If there were no United States there, there would be no Korean crisis."

And we say, "Wait a minute. Let's go back through the history. What happened in World War II, and who defeated the Japanese, and who created an Asian international order after that, and hasn't this economic and security order made possible greater and more sustained growth than Asian countries ever saw in their whole history?" In which the answer is, "Of course it has."

But the Chinese say: "Yes, and we appreciate that. Thank you very much. But now that's that, and now's now, and our time has come, so we'll take care of this order in the next chapter."

And we say, "I don't think so."

I think trying to deal with issues like the South China Sea, North Korea testing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), the impulse toward greater independence in Taiwan, and even in Hong Kong as the Beijing government becomes more authoritarian and constrains people's freedoms more, as well as the array of other areas where there are differences of views, means that managing a central competition while avoiding being pulled into Thucydides's Trap by the North Koreans or by some accident or by some impulse is going to be the challenge.

DEVIN STEWART: It sounds like you're fairly optimistic that we might be able to avoid war. I'm sure a lot of listeners are thinking, So are we destined for war or not? What would you say to that?

GRAHAM ALLISON: I hate to be too professorial, but I would say the answer is yes and no.

I would say, yes, we're destined for war if we insist on business as usual. I argue in the book that business as usual will in this case most likely produce history as usual, and that would be a war, and it would be catastrophic for both parties. So, yes, we're destined for war.

But on the other hand, no, as [Santayana](#) taught us, "Only those who refuse to study history are condemned to repeat it." So there's no obligation to make the mistakes that our predecessors made. My purpose in the book is certainly not to be fatalistic or pessimistic—I'm a congenital optimist—I would say it is to try to help us see: "Wait a minute. This is extremely risky, even though it seems inconceivable that China and the United States would go war." Actually, it seemed inconceivable to [MacArthur](#) in 1950, but we did, and it seemed inconceivable to [Grey](#), the foreign minister in Britain, but they did.

Basically wars don't have to be conceivable; wars don't have to be desired to happen. So recognize the risk in order to motivate us to do the things that we could do, because if, god forbid, a war were to happen, [Xi Jinping](#) or [Trump](#) are not going to be able to blame some iron law of history. It'll be because of some mistakes that they made that they could have chosen otherwise or some actions they could have taken that they failed to take. I think this is

about trying to motivate us all to be more imaginative than we've been about how we can escape Thucydides's Trap.

DEVIN STEWART: Those actions that you recommend that we take, it sounds like you're talking about things that would mean more to the Chinese than to the United States, things that would not harm our security by giving up. Can you give a couple of examples of things that we could do immediately to reduce tensions?

GRAHAM ALLISON: I think both parties will have to make painful adaptations and adjustments. The Chinese have actually, because they have a much longer historical horizon, been more inclined to do this than the Americans have. One of the amazing things [Deng Xiaoping](#) did in dealing with the case of the islands in the East China Sea that are [disputed](#) between China and Japan, he said, "Well, why don't we just put this on the shelf for 50 years, and then we'll resolve it later?" What a fantastic idea. I would say that would be a great idea in many parts of the Chinese-American competition, to find a way to freeze things and shelve them for a while. That's not very American; we like to solve problems yesterday or today or immediately.

The other thing is that Americans, as we wake up to the fact that China has now become a power approximately equal to us—and superior to us in many realms—I have in the book a quiz that I give to students in my class at Harvard, where I basically say, "When could China become number one?" I give them 26 indicators. They guess 2030, 2040; some say "not in my lifetime." Then I give them the second chart, which says "already." So China has already overtaken us in every one of these domains.

For Americans to wake up to a power that is as big and strong as we are will mean that we have to take account of that. And taking account of that will mean that many of the things that we thought were desirable but not vital can be adapted or adjusted.

I don't, for example, think that we have a vital interest in who owns which island in the South China Sea. It is certainly not something I would be interested in fighting about. Could we imagine adapting and adjusting there? I think we could.

Could we imagine even on the Korean Peninsula some constraints on our joint military exercises with South Korea if we could buy for that some constraints on North Korea's testing of ICBMs? I could become interested in that.

People go, "Oh, my goodness, well, you're giving up this, or you're giving up that." I would say: "Start by asking 'what's vital for us?' and then 'what's only vivid?' and then 'what are some things that may be vested but were vested under different objective conditions, but now conditions have changed, and so we can adapt?'" I think there is a lot of adapting that I could imagine both we and the Chinese could do, and that would best be done in the context of negotiations where basically we give up something for something, and they give up something for something else.

DEVIN STEWART: Let's talk about whether that's happening or not. I've seen that your book has been blurb-ed by [Joe Biden](#), General [Petraeus](#), and [Henry Kissinger](#). Do you get the sense that the [Trump administration](#) is listening?

GRAHAM ALLISON: They invited me to come and do a briefing to [Matt Pottinger](#) and his China-Asia team maybe three or four weeks ago, and I spent a couple of hours in very serious conversation. I know that [H. R. McMaster](#) is very familiar with this book and with the argument and is interested in that set of ideas. He used to teach Thucydides when he was teaching at one of the army staff colleges. [Mattis](#) is very familiar with Thucydides.

So I think there is certainly some percolation of these arguments within the administration. Whether and how this is going to lead to where, we'll see.

DEVIN STEWART: I'll bet you're very busy, Professor Allison. Thank you so much for speaking with us today.

GRAHAM ALLISON: Happy to speak with you, and talk to you again soon. Thanks.

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