



THUCYDIDES'S TRAP: WHAT LESSONS CAN WE DRAW FROM "THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR", 2500 YEARS LATER?

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Graham Allison's latest book, "Destined for War: Can America and China escape Thucydides's Trap?", argues that: American and Chinese leaders are caught up in a historic and strategic trap which is conditioning them for a probable confrontation. Mr Graham Allison is a political scientist, a professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and internationally renowned for his essay analysing the missile crisis in Cuba, through which he developed an innovative approach to understanding the foreign policy decision-making process¹.

This commentary will briefly summarize the book and its place in the international relations literature. Then it will outline the reception of the book within American and Chinese policy circles and reflect on the comparison between the Peloponnesian War and the current situation between China and the US. The last part will be dedicated to the criticisms levelled at the book, focusing on the pertinence of historical analogies in the field of international relations.

THE BOOK IN BRIEF

The historical reference chosen by the author is "The Peloponnesian War", an essay in which the Greek historian Thucydides exposed,

two and a half thousand years ago, the way the conflict between the two Greek Poleis took shape: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable". From this dynamic, opposing a ruling power whose insecurity degraded into paranoia, and an ambitious rising power tempted by hubris, Allison deduces a historical pattern the so-called "Thucydides's Trap". He considers it pertinent in order to explore the future of the US-China relationship. Beyond the aforementioned case, The Thucydides's Trap Project, led by the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center, has so far identified sixteen historical cases following the same scheme and twelve of these ended in war².

The book divided into four parts, will be briefly summarized here. In the first part, Allison describes - with an impressive use of facts and figures - the rise of China opening the door to a new dynamic in international relations and gradually setting up the Thucydides's trap between Beijing and Washington. The second part is dedicated to the examination of the sixteen historical cases which supports the author's idea of a Thucydidean dynamic transcending time and space. In the third part, the author describes a wide range of possible scenarios that could lead to war between the US and China: from North Korea's collapse to an accidental collision at sea.

The essay concludes with two reasonably optimistic chapters where the author gathers twelve lessons for peace drawn from the four historical cases during which countries were trapped in a Thucydidean dynamic but managed to prevent war. As an introduction to the last chapter, he calls for the further development of an emerging academic discipline - Applied History - that would be used to "illuminate current predicaments and choices by analysing historical precedents and analogues"³. He also gives concrete suggestions to Washington on how to address a rising China. Among others, he advises Washington to avoid business as usual in Asia and not to confuse its vital interests with those of its Asian allies. Moreover, in order to escape from the Thucydides's trap, he suggests to decision makers from both sides to avoid multiplying red lines that they can no longer see how to get out of without losing face, except through war.

Despite the fact that Allison never mentioned it, many commentators agree that the Thucydides's Trap could be compared with the power transition theory associated with A.F.K. Organski, Jacek Kugler and Robert Gilpin⁴. The power transition theory focuses on differential growth rates and their effect on shifting relative power between nations, resulting in new relationships. One potential result of differential growth is the possibility for a conflict - intended

by the parties - when a rising power and a ruling power reach the stage of relative balance of power, and specifically when the challenger is dissatisfied with the status quo⁵. In the same way, Allison dwells on economic growth differential between the US and China, listing impressive figures about China's economy. However, the author goes beyond the power transition theory by arguing that the identified historical pattern is not simply a model but an objective rule governing nation's relationship whose reliability is established by multiple historical examples⁶. The risk associated with the Thucydides's Trap is that a business-as-usual approach between a rising and a dominating power could trigger an all-out war that no side desired.

In the field of ideas, Allison also found support in Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations. In a somewhat reductive manner, the author compares US and China civilizations arguing that a civilizational incompatibility make the bilateral relationship harder to manage between the two countries. It is unfortunate that this dimension is not explored more intensively and - for the sake of argument - is never mentioned in the sixteen historical cases described in the book⁷.

THUCYDIDE'S TRAP IS THE NEW BLACK

On the American side, the reception was in line with the reputation of the author as attested by the overwhelming number of academic reviews, conferences and TV interviews that followed the publication. The interest of the Trump administration was all the greater as a number of his staff have long had affinities with Thucydides writings and The Peloponnesian War. For instance, the former National Security Advisor, Gen. H.R. McMaster, and also the Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, who was even questioned on Thucydides's Trap during his confirmation hearing in the US Senate⁸.

The Chinese know about the Thucydides's Trap mostly because US

policy makers keep talking about it. Many scholars in China dismissed the theory and consider it as the last version of the longstanding "China threat theory" developed in the United States⁹. Interestingly, Thucydides's Trap is not only subject to debate in academic and military circles but is also integrated into the official discourse. In their comments, Chinese policy makers are insisting that there is nothing inevitable, whereas the clear risk is that it may lead, within the US establishment, to the acceptance of the inevitability of the war instead of a concern to reduce the risks of conflict. The Thucydides's Trap would then turn into a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

For instance, during an official visit in the US in 2015, the Chinese President Xi himself rejected the existence of a Thucydidean dynamic between the two countries¹⁰. In the same vein, Foreign Minister Wang Yi confirmed, during a speech at the 2017 China Development Forum, that China and the US will not step into the Thucydides's Trap. The authorities' eagerness to invoke the Thucydides's Trap, and at once dismiss it, shows the prestige which - they believe - the country can derive from a theory conferring on China a status of equality with the United States and which is fully in line with the Chinese proposal of the "new type of great power relations"¹¹.

IS 2018 A REPEAT OF 461?

Graham Allison is of course not the first observer to be struck by the similarities between its own times and the Thucydides's account of the Peloponnesian War. It has been evoked in situations such as Brexit, Ukraine, Indo-Chinese relationship, and so on. More generally, historical analogies are a common feature in international relations studies and Thucydides is one of the recurring themes. In 1922, a French critic, Albert Thibaudet, wrote that "1914 repeats 431" noting the similar rivalry between a maritime power (Athens or England) and a continental power (Sparta or Germany). Other

similarities are mentioned: they both sought for large alliances, neutral countries were the first to suffer¹².

Concerning the US-China case, there are indeed many resemblances with the Peloponnesian War, with the United States playing the role of Sparta and China playing the role of Athens. Thucydides' contrast between Spartan conservatism and Athenian dynamism mirrors the current US-China relationship. Since 2009 and financial crisis, China has been more assertive in its foreign policy, combining the nine-dash line on the South China Sea, a global development strategy called 'One Belt and One Road Initiative' and the modernisation of the People's Liberation Army. On the other side, the United States - which failed to win four of the five wars it launched since World War II - is feeling deeply anxious about no longer being the top global power in the future and is showing it is not willing to share the power so easily¹³. As an illustration, the pivot to Asia - initiated by President Obama - was conceived in this context as an answer to China's assertiveness. With Trump, there is a great deal of continuity but also divergences about the strategic objectives of the Pivot to Asia. Obama was trying to overshadow the American disengagement from the Middle East and was looking for new opportunities in Asia. Trump is now seeking to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and is preparing the US for a long-term economic competition with a rising China (e.g. recent US trade barriers)¹⁴.

There is no lack of possible flashpoints: the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan and the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Moreover, US alliance commitments with Japan and South-Korea might further exacerbate the rivalry with China. Most structural conflicts are indeed intensified by third parties because any failure to support their allies or any concessions to Beijing would weaken the US position in the region. This series of scenarios makes the Asia Pacific region look like a powder keg where everyone wonders what would happen should an archduke be shot?¹⁵

To support his thesis, the author provides striking statistics of China's economic and military power. For the sake of completeness, it is regrettable that he only explores the positive aspects of China's impressive development when a great number of severe challenges awaits the rising power. There is indeed no mention of its economic vulnerabilities, such as huge Chinese energy imports, water endowment and pollution¹⁶.

In the penultimate chapter, Allison gives the reader "Twelve clues for Peace", lessons drawn from the four historical cases where countries were entangled in the Thucydides's Trap but managed to prevent war. Reading the lessons, the first thing that comes to mind is that there are obvious differences between the two considered periods. The first one is the economic interdependence binding the US and China together. With such interdependence, the economic consequences of a war for the US and China (and the rest of the world) would be catastrophic and thus lowers its likelihood¹⁷.

Economic interdependence is not the only feature that has emerged since the days of the Peloponnesian War. The nuclear weapons would undoubtedly impede the dynamic of the Thucydides's Trap. Both countries being advanced nuclear powers, neither of them is going to seek a full-scale conflict. According to Allison, these evolutions will influence the course of events but does not invalidate the pertinence of the Thucydides's Trap and the historical analogy between the Peloponnesian War and the current US-China relationship.

HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ARE NOT A PERFECT BLEND

To summarize the book to its very essence, Allison's thesis is two-fold. First, Thucydides proposes a correct interpretation of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War where the rise of Athens provoked fear in Sparta. Second, still according to the author, Thucydides' Peloponnesian War

is more than the mere interpretation of a specific event but can be conceived as a wider principle of international relations, as shown by the sixteen analogous historical cases.

The first volley of criticism against the book was mainly focused on the inevitable character of the war and the applicability of the Thucydides's Trap on the current situation between China and the US¹⁸. Regarding this point, the historian is very clear early on in his essay: to be caught in the Thucydides's Trap does not mean that war is fated. Despite the eye-catching title, *Destined for war* doesn't support the idea that the war between China and the US is inevitable but rather that the shifting balance of power will strain the US-China relationship and might generate dangerous visions of national interests. According to the author, the use of the word inevitable by Thucydides was only meant as hyperbole¹⁹.

The issue with the Peloponnesian War is that we just have Thucydides' account and not much else to prove it. Historians are still doubtful about Thucydides motives and whether this was a correct interpretation of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. For instance, the American Professor Donald Kagan contradicted the idea of the Thucydides's Trap, explaining that Sparta wanted no pre-emptive war and had already accommodated the rise of Athens²⁰. In his description of the Peloponnesian War, Allison relies exclusively on Thucydides' account without mentioning existing controversies around it²¹.

The second wave of criticisms – championed by the Professor Neville Morley and far more interesting from an academic point of view – questioned the pertinence of using historical analogy to explain current international affairs²². In an article in *The Atlantic* released in September 2016, Graham Allison argued for the creation of a Council of Historians accredited to the White House²³. He also made the case for the development of a discipline called "Applied History" in which historians would study historical precedents to illuminate current issues. The academic objective would

be to find historical pattern based on which applied historians can identify likely outcomes and appropriate policy actions for decision makers.

There can be undoubtedly a common ground between the political theorist – dealing with concepts and generalisation – and the historian who is more concerned with context and facts²⁴. The issue here is to see how far one can privilege his normative model over history in all its complexity. Indeed, the historian's fate is to disappoint the policymaker, because his job when analysing a historical fact is to raise the specificities of it. Unlike the political theorist, he knows well that the events of the past never reproduce themselves identically. He is therefore inclined, by the very nature of his discipline, to be reluctant to accept normative model.

When we look at the original case study, the Peloponnesian War, the existence of the Thucydides's Trap as an explanation to the outbreak of the war is rather difficult to contest, as we must almost exclusively rely on Thucydides's account. But the reluctance of the historian becomes more acute when we move to later history because we have more historical sources at our disposal which entails various interpretations of an event. There have been of course multiple cases in history where a rising power confronted a ruling power but the same event can be explained in different manners. The World War I case is particularly illustrative. In this essay, the author reduces the cause of the war to the naval rivalry between the rising Germany and the ruling Britain. If this interpretation has been considered valid by many historians, other plausible and non-exclusive interpretations exist²⁵. Allison reads historical cases through the prism of the Thucydides Trap and represents them in almost exactly the same terms, to finally claim that they demonstrate the theory's validity²⁶.

By attributing his power transition theory about US-China to Thucydides, Graham Allison makes the dynamic (Thucydides Trap) a general characteristic of international relations, whose veracity can be proved

via numerous historical examples as opposed to an original theory developed to interpret a particular situation which is therefore open to more debate. Thucydides is therefore used here as some sort of authority figure supporting Allison's own theory²⁷.

CONCLUSION

This comes not as a surprise to see that "Destined for War" has been compared with controversial books such as Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" or Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man". But, unlike these two authors, Graham Allison has been relatively spared of criticism from his peers. Indeed, the majority of academic reviews doesn't contest the existence of the Thucydides's Trap, but rather raises questions about the details of the dynamic and its application on the US-China relationship. This situation could be explained by the notoriety Thucydides enjoys among international relations scholars. Thus, despite a few reluctances expressed by historians, the "Applied History" discipline seems to make its way in academic and policymaker's minds.

All in all, Allison proposes a convincing model of power transition and it is right to argue that history can give us a better understanding of our situation but one can regret that the author somewhat betrays history in order to support the credibility of his normative model.

Let there be no mistake, the book is less an analysis of the current US-China relationship than a strong advocacy for the development of the "Applied History" discipline. In the end, the degree to which the Thucydides's Trap matters depends just on how much Chinese and American policymakers think it matters. Let's just hope that this will not become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

ENDNOTES

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22 Morley, N., "History can't always help to make sense of the future", in *Texas National Security Review*, November 1, 2017, pp. 6-10. Neville Morley is Professor of Classics & Ancient History at the University of Exeter. His research interests are in the contemporary reinterpretation of antiquity, especially within the social sciences. In this context, he is directing a project on the influence of Thucydides in historiography and political theory.

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