

those of the present—well. In a classroom, I would use it with a source that examines China's domestic dynamics. Susan L. Shirk's *China: Fragile Superpower* and James Kynge's *China Shakes the World* both predate Xi's rise, but introduce domestic concerns.<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom's *China in the 21st Century* is more current, but I find it harder to use since it is written as brief responses to related questions and issues, rather than having a strong central thesis.<sup>2</sup> For a Chinese perspective, one might look to the English-language works of Wang Jisi, dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University.<sup>3</sup> ■

## NOTES

1. Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). James Kynge, *China Shakes the World: A Titan's Rise and Troubled Future—and the Challenge for America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).
2. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
3. Jisi Wang, "China's Search for Stability with America," *Foreign Affairs*, September 2005, 39–48. Joseph S. Nye Jr. and Wang Jisi, "Hard Decisions on Soft Power," *Harvard International Review* 31, no. 2 (2009): 18–22.

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**Editor's Note:** Two reviews of the following title were intentionally solicited in order to provide readers with contrasting perspectives on a potentially influential book.

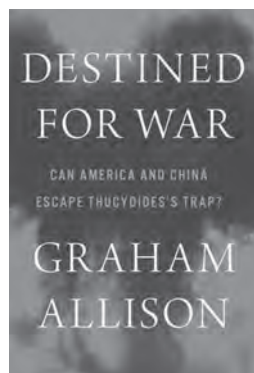
## Destined for War

### *Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*

By GRAHAM ALLISON

BOSTON: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT, 2017

384 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0544935273, HARDCOVER



Reviewed by John F. Copper

Most readers will likely find Graham Allison's newest book, *Destined for War*, interesting and fresh. Many will agree with this reviewer that it is a work that may entitle Allison to join the ranks of Francis Fukuyama (*The End of History*) and Samuel Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations*), who offer powerful templates, if not plausible theories, to help explain current international politics.

This book is therefore highly recommended to students of US–China relations, strategic studies, international politics, modern history, and more.

Allison provides an easily understandable formula to unwrap the foremost strategic issue that faces the world right now: the likelihood of a war between the United States and China, and the implications of such an event.

How so? He draws on a classic in international relations as the springboard of his analysis: Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. The ancient Greek thinker deemed it likely, if not inevitable, that due to the circumstances of a status quo power (Sparta) and a rising power (Athens) in contention, there would be a war or wars between the two. Sparta regarded Athens a threat, while Athens perceived Sparta as wanting to block its rise and keep it down; that was the basis for their conflict.

Bolstering the argument, the Belfer Center at Harvard University, where Allison serves on the faculty, carefully studied subsequent situations wherein the Thucydides “trap” applied to the relations of major world powers and reported that in twelve of sixteen such cases, war was the result. This Allison offers as proof positive the theory works.

There is more. China is not only a rising power, it is also a resentful one, given its humiliation by the West for almost 150 years after the Opium Wars in the mid-1800s. Chinese regularly recalling the sting of imperialism and China's intense desire to restore its status as a great power, which China held throughout most of its history, contribute powerfully to its urge for change.

Then, there is the reality that China is an extremely fast rising power, while the US exhibits many signs of being a declining power, not just a status quo power. Add to the fact that China is demonstrating its dominance in certain elements of power that are especially predictive of it becoming the global power. Its arguable supremacy in artificial intelligence and quantum computers, which many thinkers see as the critical assets to dominate the coming new world order, has special salience.

Last but not least, as Richard Haass in his recent book, *A World in Disarray*, observes, the international system is in a state of breakdown. This means that the contest between the world's status quo power and its rising challenger is more acute and pressing than it would be otherwise.

But there is a major flaw in Allison's analysis: His theory predicted the Cold War would turn into a hot war. Also, the bipolar system was a zero-sum system and was asymmetric or out of balance throughout its history; that should have made war even more likely. However, mutually assured destruction (MAD) served as a damper on the desire to win harbored by the United States and the Soviet Union. Another factor was they colluded to keep their superpower prerogatives, and that also kept the system stable.

Currently, the leaders of the US and China seem to realize the critical importance of their relationship as they are recreating the bipolar system. MAD is still around. President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping have established working, if not cordial, understandings and may be willing to collude. The term Chinamerica, coined by historian Niall Ferguson, describes this vividly.

Alas, both leaders also seem very cognizant of the reality that the global financial system, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, environmental issues, and more cannot be managed satisfactorily without US–China cooperation. Thus, their relationship is “too big to fail” for everyone.

There are other variables. Fortuitously, the wannabe powers, Europe and Japan, have pretty much resigned themselves to second-class status (though Russia has perhaps not), and India is rising but is too distant in economic and military power to be a contender. Thus, a multipolar system is not in the cards. In addition, Trump and Xi harbor no illusions that international institutions are not capable of serving as the driver of a universal system.

That the US–China-based bipolarity is asymmetric, with China dominating in economic power and the US dominating in military power, seems to be a condition that both their leaders accept. Trump has “signed on” to China's One Belt, One Road initiative to connect the world and run global commerce, quite in contrast to President Barack Obama, who opposed US

involvement. Xi has recognized, and has apparently accepted, at least for now, America's global military supremacy by not seeking military bases around the world (a big asset for Washington) while he has not bettered the size of Trump's increased military budget, as he no doubt could.

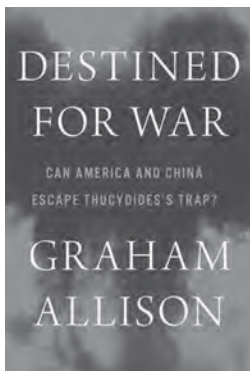
Meanwhile, Trump's grandchildren entertained (in Chinese singing and reciting poetry) Xi and his first lady twice when the two leaders met—signaling that Trump respects Chinese culture as no other American leader has while showing that he accepts China's dream to rise in global stature. Not only that, but the grandchildren's performances went viral in China and won for Trump the admiration of the Chinese people.

Thus, US–China relations, which during the last years of the Obama administration were at a low point, worse than at any time since before Richard Nixon's rapprochement with China, are now (tentatively, at least) cordial. In fact, one might say that while the challenges America and China present to the other will be frequent and may often appear dangerous, they are being well-managed, and that will likely continue to be so in the future.

Hence, the subtitle to Allison's book, *Can American and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, may be answered in the affirmative. That is no doubt a good thing. ■

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Reviewed by Chandar Sundaram

China. It's an economic powerhouse and the world's second-largest economy. And, if current projections are correct, it will become the world's largest and most powerful country economically by the middle of the next decade. With this economic power will come military power, which will destabilize the present geopolitical order in Asia and possibly the world. This deeply worries Harvard political scientist and foreign policy expert Graham Allison. In this book, Allison

warns that China's rapid rise may well lead to war between China and the US. Like his colleagues specializing in international relations (IR) theory, he believes that relations between nation-states are simplistic "zero-sum games," and like foreign policy advisers to US governments, which Allison has been, he argues that China is a threat that has to be "managed." To quote Allison himself, the "book . . . is about the *impact* of a rising China on the US and on the global order . . . led by Washington . . ." (viii).

To buttress his argument, and to appeal to the current administration, Allison has come up with a zippy and alliterative theory: Thucydides's Trap.<sup>1</sup> Thucydides was the ancient Athenian who wrote what is generally regarded in the West as the first true history that is factual, empirical, and unbiased. He is also the darling of the realist school of IR theory. The subject of Thucydides history was the second Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), a ruinous conflict fought between rival alliances led by Athens and Sparta, which eventually engulfed all the *poleis* (city-states) of the ancient Greek world. Allison bases his theory—and it is *his* theory, because Thucydides never wrote of a trap—on but one line of Thucydides's work, namely, "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the

fear which this caused in Sparta." Allison removes this observation from its context and elaborates it into a full-blown axiom. He postulates that large-scale armed conflict can be triggered by Thucydides's Trap: "the severe structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to upend a ruling one" (29). Allison argues that these triggers could include "not just extraordinary, unexpected events, but even ordinary flashpoints of foreign affairs" (29). Allison further states that "[in] particular, ruling powers' fears often fuel misperceptions and exaggerate dangers, as rising powers' self-confidence stimulates unrealistic expectations about what is possible and encourages risk-taking" (39).

To support his theory, Allison resorts to the "Thucydides's Trap Case File," a cherry-picked selection of sixteen Eurocentric historical instances of emergent versus hegemonic power, from the sixteenth century CE to the present. For information on this "data set," Allison relies on a remarkably narrow range of sources, designed more for the undergraduate than for senior foreign policy officials. Allison is apparently unaware of works such as John Darwin's *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405*; Robert L. Tignor, et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World: From the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present*, fourth ed.; and Jeremy Black's *War and the World: Military Power and the Fate of Continents*.<sup>2</sup> The key point that all these works share is that, as nuanced world histories, they collectively challenge their readers to not impose Western cultural ideas onto non-Western historic events. Allison's does not, and then accuses historians of only looking at "proximate causes." A look at Richard Evans's *In Defense of History* would have set Allison right on this score.<sup>3</sup> I am surprised that the historian Niall Ferguson, whom Allison cites as a collaborator in the "applied history" project, did not warn him of the methodological deficiencies of *Destined for War*.

Allison's theory uses the Peloponnesian War as an exemplar for China's rise. The closest parallel to that, however, is the alliance system dividing Europe in the lead-up to the First World War. China's recent rise most resembles the rise of the US relative to Britain in the nineteenth century in the economic sphere and, for its no-one-saw-it-coming rapidity, the Mongol eruption in thirteenth-century CE Eurasia, which saw the overthrow of, among others, Song dynasty China, the Khwarezmid dynasty of Iran, and the Kievan Rus. The Mongol Empire also promoted trans-Eurasian trade and was, for a time, *the* economic powerhouse of the world, just as Allison predicts China will be soon. Of course, the Mongols employed warfare with a vengeance.

Because Allison apparently wishes to inform the current president, the book reads like an executive summary, a form of précis-writing that gained popularity during another president, Ronald Reagan. For example, after asserting in chapter 6 that Chinese leader Xi Jinping's fixation is to make China great again—an obvious adaptation of Donald Trump's tagline—Allison enumerates Xi's aims in a bullet-pointed list:

- Restoring China to the powerful position that it held in Asia before Western colonialism. This means recovering its historic influence along its seas and borders so that peoples and state entities in these areas treat it with due deference.
- Reestablishing Chinese control over its "natural borders," including Sinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan. Allison includes Hong Kong here, but, as the failure of the pro-democracy movement there a few years ago in the face of Beijing's hard-line demonstrated, China already controls Hong Kong.
- Being taken seriously and being respectfully treated by other great powers in political/economic/strategic world councils. Allison also outlines Xi's strategy for effecting these goals:
- Revitalizing the Chinese Communist Party and reinvigorating

the Chinese people's trust in it by eradicating ills like corruption.

- Reviving Chinese nationalism and patriotism, pride in being Chinese.
- Overseeing an economic revolution designed to build a moderately prosperous Chinese society with a per capita GDP by 2021 of US \$10,000 and a fully modernized, developed, rich, powerful, and respected China by 2049—the 100th anniversary of the Communist regime.

For information on Xi and contemporary China, Allison relies a bit too much on China watchers like former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the late authoritarian ruler of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, about whom he cowrote a rather laudatory book. Allison's research would have also benefited from the following: Robert S. Ross, and Øystein Tunsjø, eds., *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia*; and Julian Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China*.<sup>4</sup> These nuanced works examine China's international geostrategic policy in and of itself, and do not seek to suggest strategies to “control” China.

Allison's book is designed to bolster American self-importance and displays little of the outside-the-box thinking that the present complex international situation requires. Before theorizing the Thucydides's Trap, Allison should have looked at Laurie M. Johnson Bagby's article in the journal *International Organization*, “The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations.”<sup>5</sup> The book should have been rigorously fact-checked. For instance, America was not the “birthplace” of the automobile (9). Gottfried Daimler, a German, manufactured the first, complete with an internal combustion engine, in 1886. By saying the Greeks “essentially invented philosophy, drama, architecture, sculpture, history, naval warfare, and more” (28), Allison ignores the great Asian traditions of India and China, which is decidedly odd for a book that seeks to shed light on China.

In short, this book tells us more about the insecurities of American foreign policy “experts” than it does about China's ambitions. Taking the long view, Chinese civilization has been around for 3,500 years, while the US has existed for less than one-seventh of that time. Who, then, is the real emerging power of Thucydides's Trap? ■

#### NOTES

1. I have modified Allison's English here for the sake of correct grammar.
2. John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (London: Allen Lane 2007); Robert L. Tignor, et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World: From the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013); and Jeremy Black, *War and the World: Military Power and the Fate of Continents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
3. Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (London: Granta, 1997).
4. Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø, eds., *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017); Julian Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).
5. Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, “The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations,” *International Organization* 48, no.1 (1994): 131–153.

**CHANDAR SUNDARAM** earned a PhD from McGill University and is a historian of war and society in the modern world. He has diverse interests, among them Asian history, the history of Western imperialism, Thucydides, and contemporary international politics. He has taught and held fellowships in Canada, the US, China, Hong Kong, and India. His latest book, *The Forgotten Debate: The Indianization Issue in Anglo-Indian Military Policy, 1817–1917*, will be published by Lexington Books later this year. He currently lives in Victoria, Canada.

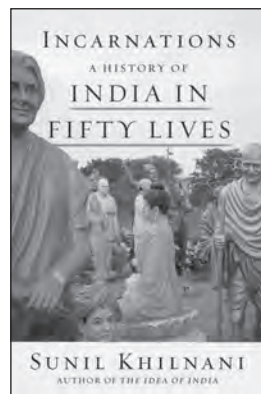
## Incarnations, a History of India in Fifty Lives

BY SUNIL KHILNANI

NEW YORK: FARRAR, STRAUS, AND GIROUX, 2017

464 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0374537210, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Tommy Lamont



In his latest book, *Incarnations*, Sunil Khilnani, director of the Kings College London India Institute, helps broaden and deepen our understanding of and appreciation for the rich history of South Asia, particularly India. With the same smooth, bold, and engaging style that characterized his excellent 1997 award-winning book *The Idea of India*, Khilnani once again weaves an original narrative of the complex story of the Indian subcontinent. In *Incarnations*, the author deftly and concisely explains the lives and contributions of

fifty remarkable individuals, some of whom are well-known, such as Gandhi, Akbar, and the Buddha; and others who are less familiar, at least in the West, such as Malik Ambar and Chidambaram Pillai.

The portraits of each figure in *Incarnations* are surprisingly comprehensive, informative, and compelling, despite each one being only a few pages long. Indeed, Khilnani succinctly provides the essential details of each individual and then offers an astute analysis of their significance, while nicely combining primary and secondary sources. After reading each selection, I felt far more knowledgeable about these fascinating men and women, even those who I thought I already understood. And I came away from each selection wanting to learn more about these people, a reaction that I hope, and suspect, our students will have.

Indeed, even if students of world or South Asian history do not read the book in its entirety, *Incarnations* will prove useful to students as a terrific resource that can be consulted time and again. It is readily accessible to both eleventh- and twelfth-grade high school students and college and university students of all levels, and some of them may even enjoy the material more than instructors (such as me) who might be less interested in the many contemporary references that pop up frequently in this book, including ones to popular culture (e.g., Netflix), recent events (e.g., legalization of same-sex marriage in the US), and current figures (e.g., Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State). While *Incarnations* might not be ideal as a textbook for a course on Indian history, it would be an excellent companion text, especially at the college level. This is the type of book that I would recommend to a young person who is already familiar with the general outlines of the history of South Asia and is preparing to study more about the region or spend significant time there.

As current at one level as Khilnani's approach and narrative are, he demonstrates an appropriate respect for the deep and varied cultural and intellectual traditions of the subcontinent during the past two millennia. He has chosen an amazingly diverse group of fifty individuals to discuss, and he makes clear that these individuals are anything but lightweights. Represented in *Incarnations* is an array of original thinkers and doers of all sorts—intellectuals, political leaders, entrepreneurs, scientists, artists, and insiders and outsiders. Some historians will surely quibble with