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## Book Review: Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap? by Graham Allison

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**Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2017. vi + 384 pages. Hardcover, \$28.00.**

Is a war brewing between the United States and China? In the current global climate could an ultimate military showdown between these two nations be considered anything, if not inevitable? What lessons, if any, can the study of history provide that might guide diplomats as they navigate the troubled waters of economic competition, geopolitical rivalry, and ideological divergence? These and other critical questions underlay Graham Allison's fascinating study, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Allison's answers to these inquiries are as poignant as they are chilling: "On the historical record," he writes, "war [between the United States and China] is more likely than not." (xvii). Allison does, however, note that there is a silver-lining—"war," he says, "is not inevitable. History shows that major ruling powers can manage relations with rivals" (xvii). What remains to be seen, though, is if American leaders are willing to apply the lessons of history.

Allison's premise hinges on the conclusions of the ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, and his seminal text, the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Therein, Thucydides explains that the structural cause of conflict between the two combatants of his study, Athens and Sparta, was the growing power of the burgeoning city-state of Athens, which created fear in the established Greek hegemon, Sparta. This so-called Thucydides Trap, Allison argues, is not merely ancient history; instead, Allison claims to have identified no less than sixteen historical parallels to have taken place in the last five-hundred years, wherein war has occurred, or at the very least been threatened, between an emerging challenger state and an established, dominant power. The grave implication for modern-day China and the United States is that in no less than twelve of these cases war was the eventual outcome. Grimly, Allison posits that unless American leaders learn from history, they too may very well succumb to Thucydides's Trap.

Of these historical parallels examined by Allison, he claims none is so pertinent to the contemporary struggle between the U.S. and China as that of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Germany and Britain, who spiraled into World War in the summer of 1914. In his overview of the emergent Anglo-German rivalry, Allison rehashes familiar themes of arms races, naval buildups, and Germany's bid to uproot Britain's status as the 'workshop of the world' in order to stress the ways in which the British covetously protected their preeminent place on the international stage against the perceived threat of Germany's advancing military and economic power. To this end, Allison cites the infamous Crowe memorandum in which the author, Eyre Crowe, concluded that "Germany's *intentions* were irrelevant [to the British]; its capabilities were what mattered" (59). So too, perhaps, for American strategists anxiously charting China's meteoric rise.

Allison's analysis of such episodes of history ultimately informs his conceptions of contemporary policy, along with ways in which the U.S. might avoid a future war with China. In particular, the author laments the absence of a fresh and resolute grand strategy among recent presidential administrations—both Democrat and Republican—and cites an absence of clearly

defined vital interests in American policy-making. Especially egregious to Allison was Bill Clinton's intuition that foreign policy in the modern world was akin to the improvisation of jazz. More than once, he asks how the world might be different today if George W. Bush had consulted, and taken to heart, the advice of historians in the days and months after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Furthermore, Allison appears dumbfounded by Barack Obama's assertion that he "didn't really even need George Kennan" (237). On the contrary, Allison asserts that American strategists must "do strategy," which he takes to mean establishing a "multiyear, multiminded effort...no less ambitious than the four year debate that ran from Kennan's Long Telegram to Nitze's NSC-68" (215).

Allison's erudite and well-written study offers a great deal of value to many, across multiple disciplines. To the public realm, it reads as a valiant plea for a more thoughtful and conscientious understanding of history among politicians and diplomats, as opposed to the often present fallacy that action always equals progress. Instead, Allison proposes the assembly of a Council of Historical Advisors who, building on their years of expertise, might bring context and a frame of reference to the Oval Office. Additionally, *Destined for War* has great potential for professors of history, political science, and international relations who aim to demonstrate to their students one (of many) very practical benefits of historical literacy. Allison's is a thoughtful illustration of how one might responsibly and conscientiously apply history to current international dilemmas, "not as a cookbook offering pretested recipes," but as insights and clues that bring perspective (218).

Though especially useful to diplomats, professors, and students, Allison's work offers less for the specialist. Some scholars, for instance, might take exception to his reading of the origins of the First World War as being solely (or even primarily) the result of the great-power rivalry between Great Britain and Germany. Others will perhaps find his occasional use of the counter-factual off-putting. Finally, though Allison's own background as a U.S. defense strategist makes his preoccupation with American policy understandable, his work could have benefitted from a greater emphasis on the role of other prominent members of the international community, multi-national organizations, and alliances. Nonetheless, these omissions do not detract from an otherwise lucid and sweeping display of the practicality of historical study for current and future generations.

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