Graham Allison. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* **Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. ISBN: 978-05-44-9352-7. Pp. xx, 364. Hardcover, £22.99; $28.00.**

In the beginning there were two nations. One was a proud, well-developed and educated nation, culturally unified and brilliantly organised. It was the focal point of international politics. The other was a corrupt hinterland, culturally fragmented and suffering from a political system inappropriate as a role model for the world. The first nation was China. The second was the United States of America.

What may have been discredited as an inconvenient truth before, proves to be an undeniable fact in the year 2019. There is little reason to deny that China has, much like Napoleon Bonaparte stipulated it would, woken up from hibernation. In past decades, China has accumulated a noteworthy quantity of power resources including a territory equivalent of that of the U.S., a population of over 1.3 billion, an annual GDP of $11,200 billion, and a military that exceeds that of the U.S. in sise and capabilities.[1] Simultaneously, we are witnessing a strategically restraining U.S. attempting to dampen the impact of the global power shift from 'West' to 'East'. While China's ascent is stirring a combination admiration, concern and disbelief among Western publics, political scientists like renowned Harvard scholar Graham Allison try to assess the extent to which the awakened giant will actually 'shake the world'.

Allison has served on the Advisory Board to several American Presidents. Besides his long-lasting experiences as a 'defence intellectual' in American national security policy, he was also actng as the director of the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs until 2017. His work at hand *Destined for War* is the result of the Centre's Thucydides's Trap Project which has classified all occasions since 1500 in which a rising power threatened to supplant the current hegemon.

The vast scope of history presented in a comprehensible way – even to a novice in the study of great power rivalry- echoes the author's depth of knowledge on international security and power shifts.

Allison has set himself the difficult task of elaborating on what

---

[1] J. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Foreign Affairs, 2011), p. 178.

he calls the preeminent strategic question for this generation: whether the rise of China can unfold without major war. In the current Sino-American tensions, Allison recognises the repetition of a certain conflict pattern, the name of which he designates to the antique historian Thucydides. Thucydides postulated that when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the most likely outcome is war. This thesis has been proven in 12 out of 16 documented great power shifts throughout history. Employing Thucydides's Trap, Allison presents historical examples of states that have succumbed to –or averted– Thucydides's Trap, with the objective of drawing lessons about the future of Sino-American relations. He argues that great-power war between America and China is looming but not inevitable, provided both actors make painful adjustments in their attitudes towards one another.

Believing that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it, Allison thus makes an attempt at applied history by blending historical analysis with current events. However, while Allison promises much, he fulfils fairly little in terms of linking historical study and modern policymaking. In that respect the reader is lured into reading *Destined for War* based on a strong introduction,

but ultimately feels disappointed.

The seminal book encompasses ca. 360 light pages and is separated into ten individual chapters which can be categorised into four broader segments. Having postulated Thucydides's trap as the most appropriate analytical grid to illuminate Sino-American relations in the preface, Chapter one begins by tracing the economic rise of China which feeds into an expansion of the military and the formulation of a globally-oriented foreign policy. This rather empirical but sharp examination is followed by chapters two to four which provide seven historically well-researched thumbnail sketches of cases in which a rising power has challenged the pre-eminence of an established power. Using these cases, Allison illustrates how tension between rising and ruling powers has often led to war, while also showing when and how war has been avoided.

Overall, these chapters are clear-cut, comprehensible and succeed in capturing not only the long-term structural factors but also domestic dynamics that have caused outbreaks of war. In this respect Allison acknowledges what structural realists would stipulate as several levels of analysis. However, the lessons that had been promised to transform historical narrative into the discipline of applied history are missing at this point, leaving the analysis ultimately superficial and the reader disappointed.

The presentation of historical cases feeds into chapters five to eight which assess whether recent developments under Trump and Xi Jinping seem alarming. By elucidating the distinct civilisations, elaborating on China's 'never again' mentality and expounding China's institutional power to shape international dynamics, Allison provides a broader context to the forces that shape Chinese foreign-policy towards potential aggression. Despite the fact that his rhetoric frames China as the ultimate aggressor, an assertion highly toxic in foreign policy discourse, these are the chapters where the author comes across strongest.

Given this context and the possibility that nuclear deterrence may fail, Allison persuasively describes five different ways in which tensions on the Korean peninsula, in the South China Sea or in the Taiwan Strait could escalate into a conventional war between China and the U.S. While these pathways to war may seem rather speculative at first glance, Allison effectively demonstrates the ability to 'think the unthinkable', and provides important strategic foresight.

Having previously dramatised the dangers of lingering war,

Allison offers policy options designed to escape catastrophe in chapters nine and ten. In doing so he deduces clues for peace from the four identified cases in which great powers have managed to avert war. Divorcing these policy suggestions from the analysis in the previous chapters (two-four) signifies an inefficient organisation of material as it causes unnecessary repetitions. Apart from that, it remains debatable whether it still proves fruitful to draw lessons from fifteenth and/or seventeenth century cases. This is reflected in the fact that Allison clearly struggles to apply the deducted 'clues for peace' to the case at hand. Accordingly, policy suggestions remain shallow.

Despite the fact that each chapter provides valuable knowledge, historical narrative and policy discourse seem utterly divorced from one another which essentially makes *Destined for War* a synoptic reflection rather than an analytical prediction. And yet, Allison acknowledges that the relationship between China and the U.S., irrespective of who is in power, is far too intricate for either side to rely on nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence or international institutions to keep peace. Providing American and Chinese leaders with a stark warning about the consequences of stepping into Thucydides's Trap, Allison even seems to have infused the current political climate. At least both former U.S. President Barack Obama and Xi Jinping have recognised the term 'Thucydides's Trap', first employed in 2015, and even pledged to break the pattern. Allison has thus already been appreciated as a *dramatis personae* of this century, even though this seminal book does not provide sophisticated advice for policy makers. Yet the book may be a recommended starting point so that, in the end, there will be two nations coexisting in peace.

Julia Huentemann
King's College London

———————————————