

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 47
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2017*


Article 13

Summer 6-1-2017

Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?

James C. MacDougall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

 Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [National Security Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

James C. MacDougall, "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?," *Parameters* 47, no. 2 (2017), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2937.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?

James C. MacDougall

©2017 James C. MacDougall

Book Reviewed

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

Professor Graham Allison gazes into the future of US-China relations in *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* only to find the best guide to the future is the past. Specifically based on Thucydides's well-known observation that "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable," Allison has popularized the phrase "Thucydides's Trap" to describe the dangerous historical dynamic that develops when a rising power threatens to displace an established ruling power.¹ This dynamic was summarized aptly in an earlier article: "The rise of a new power has been attended by uncertainty and anxieties. Often, though not always, violent conflict has followed. The rise in the economic and military power of China, the world's most populous country, will be a central question for Asia and for American foreign policy at the beginning of a new century."²

In researching cases of rising powers challenging ruling powers over the last 500 years, Allison and the Thucydides Trap Project at Harvard University found 12 of 16 cases resulted in war. Avoiding Thucydides's Trap thus equates to avoiding war. Based on this analysis, Allison concludes that "as far ahead as the eye can see, the defining question about global order is whether China and the United States can escape Thucydides's Trap."³

The high percentage of cases that resulted in war provide persuasive support to the overall argument that war between the United States and China may be more likely than generally considered. Yet a few cautionary notes on the data set and methodology are warranted.

First, while the principal result of the study (12 of 16 cases led to war) seems objective, decisions on what cases to include necessarily involve some subjective analysis. As such, the overall data supporting the general argument have evolved since the initial Thucydides's Trap argument was presented. In 2012–14 the argument cited 11 of 15 cases leading to war.⁴

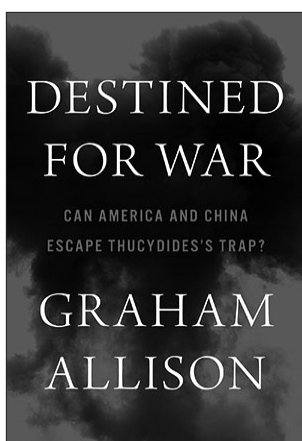
Dr. James C. MacDougall, a Professor of National Security Strategy at the National War College, has served as the chairman of the Department of National Security and Strategy at the US Army War College, the Deputy Director of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, and a faculty member at the National War College from 2007 until 2009.

1 For more on Professor Allison's paraphrase of Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1996), bk. 1, ch. 23, line 6, see *Destined for War*, n. 2, 297.

2 Joseph S. Nye Jr., "As China Rises, Must Others Bow?," *Economist*, June 25, 1999.

3 Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), xvii.

4 In a 2012 op-ed in the *Financial Times*, and subsequently in the *New York Times*, Professor Allison supported the general argument by noting that "In 11 of 15 cases since 1500 where a rising power emerged to challenge a ruling power, war occurred." Graham Allison, "Thucydides's Trap Has Been Sprung in the Pacific," *Financial Times*, August 21, 2012; and Graham T. Allison, "Obama and Xi Must Think Broadly to Avoid a Classic Trap," *New York Times*, June 6, 2013.



Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 384 pages, \$28.00

In 2015 and subsequently, the data set was revised to include 12 of 16 cases that resulted in war.⁵ Later in 2015, a detailed argument presenting the Thucydides's Trap metaphor appeared in the *Atlantic*. The 16 cases were identified in a table accompanying the article and included information on time period, ruling power, rising power, and result.⁶

In *Destined for War* the data also include 12 of 16 cases leading to war, but a comparison between the table in the book (42) and the table from the 2015 Atlantic article shows one case from the 2015 data was dropped and another was added. In the event, they both resulted in “no war” so the overall numbers remain the same; but, such changes highlight the difficulties inherent to determining which cases to include.

While 12 of 16 may have a scientific ring, the result may be less rigorous than it appears; certainly, it is subject to further analysis.⁷

Notwithstanding such questions about the aggregate data, the book's use of the Thucydides's Trap metaphor to alert the potential, indeed the seeming likelihood, that the current global shift in power could lead to war is its principal strength. The book's conclusion, based on the available evidence, “when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, the resulting structural stress makes a violent clash the rule, not the exception,” is a powerful warning that should help focus the attention of both policymakers and scholars to the perils inherent in the uneven growth of power.⁸

Although a valuable lens through which to see the current shifting relationship between the United States and China, the text is somewhat less useful in prescribing policy or strategy responses that might be taken in pursuit of US objectives given the international context described. As an aid to statecraft, Allison says, “History shows that major ruling powers can manage relations with rivals, even those that threaten to overtake them, without triggering war. The record of those successes, as well as the failures, offers many lessons for statesmen today.”⁹ The challenge for strategists and policymakers, however, is to distinguish the

5 In Professor Allison's 2015 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the data set was updated to include 12 of 16 cases which led to war. See *Hearing on China, the US, and the Asia-Pacific, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 114th Cong (April 14, 2015) (statement, Dr. Graham T. Allison, Director of Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and the Douglas Dillon Professor of Government at Harvard's Kennedy School).

6 Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?,” *Atlantic*, September 24, 2015.

7 For example, a list on the Thucydides's Trap Project website of potential additional cases that may be included in a second phase of the analysis includes 14 cases of which 7 led to war and 7 did not. While none have yet been included in the overall data, the variance in the result highlights the importance of decisions of which cases to include and which not to include. See “Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?,” Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School, accessed July 18, 2017, <http://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/methodology/thucydides-trap-potential-additional-cases>.

8 Allison, *Destined for War*, xv.

9 *Ibid.*, xvii.

historical lessons to avoid war, which vary widely and are in some cases mixed if not contradictory. Here former Presidential Historian Arthur Schlesinger's lament "that the past is an enormous grab bag with a prize for everybody" would seem applicable.¹⁰

To illustrate how differing conclusions might be drawn, we might compare two cases from the Thucydides's Trap analysis which had the same result of "no war." In case number 11 regarding the British response to rising American power in the early twentieth century, Allison observes that Great Britain chose a strategy of ad hoc accommodation, deciding "to make a virtue of necessity and to yield to the Americans in every dispute with as much good grace as was permitted."¹¹ In case number 15, a rising Soviet Union challenged the United States for several decades, but the end result was "no war."¹² In what Allison describes as the "greatest leap of strategic imagination in the history of America diplomacy," a "comprehensive strategy for a form of combat never previously seen" was developed to conduct a cold war "by every means short of bombs and bullets."¹³ The result, though not war, was that "the US and Soviet Union made systemic, sustained assaults against each other along every azimuth except one: direct military attacks."¹⁴

For the statesman or strategist intent to avoid Thucydides's Trap the above two examples offer starkly different historically-derived approaches: accommodation or cold war. The advice to "apply history" found in chapter 10, "Where Do We Go from Here?," while sensible, still begs questions on which history and how it is to be applied.

A fundamental challenge arises for efforts to apply the Thucydides's Trap methodology and data to strategy and policymaking. The study designates war as the dependent variable. Could dependent variables other than war be understood in the context of Thucydides's Trap? In other words, could strategic objectives beyond avoiding war be addressed by the information and evidence presented in the study? Allison cites Clausewitz's famous line: "War is an extension of international politics by other means."¹⁵

In case 9, the rise of Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, the "war" result suggests France and Germany fell into Thucydides's Trap. Yet, the Franco-Prussian War assisted in the attainment of Bismarck's main strategic objective of unifying the German states around a strong Prussia. Is it possible that war could be a rational choice in pursuit of national objectives? The answer, according to the analysis in *Destined for War*, is no. Of the "Twelve Clues for Peace" offered in chapter 9, several point out, given the unprecedented nature of nuclear weapons, war between modern great powers is "madness" and "no longer a

10 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "Lessons' of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy. By Ernest R. May," *Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (September 1974): 443–44; doi:10.2307/1903961, cited in Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 8.

11 Allison, *Destined for War*, 42; and Ernest R. May and Zhou Hong, "A Power Transition and Its Effects," in *Power and Restraint: A Shared Vision for the U.S.-China Relationship*, ed. Richard Rosecrance and Gu Guoliang (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 13, cited in Allison, *Destined for War*, 197.

12 Allison, *Destined for War*, 42.

13 Allison, *Destined for War*, 202–203.

14 *Ibid.*, 203.

15 *Ibid.*

justifiable option.”¹⁶ Without doubt, this is an exceedingly sensible position. Yet, must we then discount historical analogies drawn from events in the prenuclear age?

To resolve the conundrums of the Thucydides’s Trap metaphor posed in the preceding two paragraphs, a couple of suggestions are offered. First, using a variety of different dependent variables to review the historical cases of a rising power challenging a ruling power could yield important knowledge. By identifying a nation’s strategic priority as the dependent variable, for example, insight could be collected into whether either power achieved its objectives. A possible observation would be that in x of y cases the rising power achieved its objectives, or alternatively, the ruling power achieved its objectives. How they did so would be the subject for further inquiry. Several variations on this approach might be useful.

A second approach might be to disaggregate the data and conduct detailed analyses of each case compared to the present using the structured methodology articulated by Richard Neustadt and Ernest May in their book, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* and cited favorably in *Destined for War*.¹⁷ By shifting the focus from the aggregate to the specific; identifying known, unknown, and presumed facts; and detailing both similarities and differences between the cases, the historical record would reveal a more comprehensive and nuanced picture that could provide important insights. Indeed, Allison previously used this approach to good effect, and it would complement the more general description of the cases included in *Destined for War*.¹⁸

Yaacov Vertzberger reflected “history does not contain an inherent truth which necessarily reveals itself to the scholar or practitioner. It maintains many faces when studied with great care and through the application of scientific methodology.”¹⁹ Seen in that light, *Destined for War* presents not inherent truth, but one face, an important face, revealing a dangerous historical dynamic reflected more prominently in description rather than prescription.

16 Ibid., 206–209.

17 Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 232–46, cited in Allison, *Destined for War*, n. 5, 337.

18 Graham Allison, “Just How Likely Is Another War? Assessing the Similarities and Differences between 1914 and 2014,” *Atlantic*, July 30, 2014.

19 Yaacov Y. I. Vertzberger, “Foreign Policy Decisionmakers as Practical-Intuitive Historians: Applied History and Its Shortcomings,” *International Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (June 1986), 244.