

# China, US and manifest destinies



## BOOK REVIEW

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Historical analogy is an effective tool for analysing contemporary international relations and Graham Allison, the well-known Harvard professor, is certainly adept in its use. He coined the phrase "Thucydides Trap" to highlight the tensions that are generated when an emerging power challenges an established one; more often than not, these tensions seem to lead inexorably to war, even when neither side wants war. The historical analogy goes back to the 5th century BC when ancient Sparta, the established power, went to war with the rising power, Athens, and the results were tragic for both. The war, known as

the Peloponnesian War, was chronicled by the great Greek historian, Thucydides. Why did the war take place? Thucydides' answer: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable."

In order to avoid the charge of historical determinism Graham Allison claims that in using the word "inevitable" Thucydides was indulging in hyperbole, that war is not always predestined in such situations. He presents 16 historical case studies, from the 15th century onwards, to demonstrate that while in 12 instances war was, in fact, the outcome of a contestation between an established and an aspiring hegemon, there were four cases in which a clash of arms had been avoided either through a mutual respect of respective spheres of influence or through self-restraint by the established power. Thus in the 19th century, Britain conceded to the US dominance over the

western hemisphere while retaining its command over the European theatre and its colonial empire, in particular India. In contrast, the First and Second World Wars resulted from Germany's search for unchallenged dominance in Europe and its aspiration to rival British naval power.

Graham Allison looks at the Cold War relationship between the US and Russia as a success in preventing the outbreak of war between the two superpowers even if there were near misses like the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Although he tries to sound an optimistic note on the trajectory of US-China relations going forward, the analysis he presents offers more reasons to expect the worst rather than hope for the best. For example, China is already, in Purchasing Power Parity terms, the largest economy in the world, having surpassed the US. It is on track to overtake the US in nominal currency terms by 2022, if not earlier.



The book also presents considerable data to show that in most other key metrics of power — economic, scientific and technological (such as robotics) — China is the world leader or will soon be. A significant failure of American policy is its inability to grasp the enormity of the shift that is taking place in the global balance of power and assuming, somehow, that China will be prepared to acquiesce in a US-centric global order. As he points out, American policy makers are unable to “distinguish the valid from the vivid”.

Having made his case persuasively, Mr Allison disappoints in the policy prescriptions that he offers to enable America to deal with this historically unprecedented power shift. He begins by making an important, if somewhat self-evident, point that the US must decide its priorities and then bargain with the Chinese to safeguard its core interests. The examples he gives hint at precisely what the Chinese may want, that is, conceding Chinese dominance in the Asia-Pacific, abandoning Taiwan and even reducing forward deployments near China's coast in return for

restraining North Korea, respecting American core interests which may lie closer to the US mainland, the Atlantic and a less expansive Pacific theatre. While lauding the “wise men”, like George Kennan, who conceived of the containment policy to deal with the post-war Soviet challenge, Mr Allison shies away from suggesting something similar to confront a rising China, in particular a China that, like Theodore Roosevelt's belief in America's manifest destiny in the 19th century, believes in national rejuvenation in the 21st.

Mr Allison's analysis over-simplifies in order to amplify his thesis. For example, do nuclear weapons and the deterrence embedded in their possession lessen the chances of an all-out war between major powers? Did this factor not prevent the Cold War from becoming a hot war? There may be rising tensions between China and the US but will they not be restrained from escalating such tensions given the risks of a nuclear war?

The analysis is limited to the dynamics between the US and China. But there are a host of other substantial powers,

including Russia, Japan, Australia and India, whose choices will affect the balance of power even in Asia, where China seeks dominance. There is no account taken of the inevitable slowdown of the Chinese economy and the imbalances that grow and add to its vulnerability. Chinese politics remains brittle and opaque and factional squabbles are endemic. The imperatives of one-party rule often contradict the logic of economic reform. Therefore, while profiting from Mr Allison's outstanding insights, we must remain open to other scenarios. I do not believe that Chinese hegemony is inevitable or indeed sustainable even in Asia.

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## **DESTINED FOR WAR: CAN AMERICA AND CHINA ESCAPE THE THUCYDIDES TRAP?**

Graham Allison  
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