

## **There is no Thucydides Trap**

Arthur Waldron , PUBLISHED  
JUN 18, 2017, 5:00 AM SGT

### **A Chinese history and military affairs scholar argues against a concept that has become a pillar of establishment thinking on China, in this essay responding to Harvard professor Graham Allison's book, *Destined For War: America, China, And Thucydides's Trap*.**

Let us start by observing that perhaps the two greatest classicists of the past century, Professor Donald Kagan of Yale and the late Professor Ernst Badian of Harvard, long ago proved that no such thing as the Thucydides Trap exists, certainly not in the actual Greek text of the History Of The Peloponnesian War, perhaps the greatest single work of history ever.

Astonishingly, even the names of these academic giants are absent from the index of this baffling academic farrago. It was penned by Professor Graham Allison, associated with Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, to whom questions along the lines of "How did you write about The Iliad without mentioning Homer?" should be addressed.

Prof Allison's argument draws on one sentence of Thucydides' text: "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian Power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." This lapidary summing up of an entire argument is justly celebrated. It introduced to historiography the idea that wars might have "deep causes", that resident powers are tragically fated to attack rising powers. It is brilliant and important, no question about that, but is it correct?

Clearly not for the Peloponnesian War. Generations of scholars have chewed on Thucydides' text. Every battlefield has been measured. The quantity of academic literature on the topic is overwhelming, dating as far back as 1629 when philosopher Thomas Hobbes produced the first English translation.

In the present day, Prof Kagan wrote four volumes in which he modestly but decisively overturned the idea of the Thucydides Trap. Prof Badian did the same.

The problem is that, although Thucydides presents the war as having been started by the resident power, Sparta, out of fear of a rising Athens, he makes it clear first that Athens had an empire, from which it wished to eliminate any Spartan threat by stirring up a war and teaching the Spartans that they could never win.

The Spartans, Prof Kagan tells us, wanted no war, pre-emptive or otherwise. Dwelling in the deep south, they lived a simple country life that agreed with them. They used iron bars for money and lived on bean soup when not practising fighting, their main activity. Athens' rival, Corinth, which also wanted a war for its own reasons, taunted the young Spartans into unwonted bellicosity - they would not listen even to their king, Archidamus, who spoke eloquently against war.

Once started, the war was slow to catch fire. Archidamus urged the Athenians to make a small concession - withdraw the Megarian Decree, which embargoed a small, important state - and call it a day. They rejected his entreaties. Then plague struck Athens, killing, among others, the leading citizen Pericles.

Both Prof Kagan and Prof Badian note that the reason the independent states of Hellas, including Athens and Sparta, had lived in peace became clear. Although their peoples were not acquainted, their leaders formed a web of friendship that managed things. The plague eliminated Pericles, the key man in this peacekeeping mechanism. Uncontrolled popular passions took over, and the war was revived, invigorated. It would end up destroying Athens, which had started it.

Pre-emption would have been an incomprehensible concept to the Spartans, but war was not, and when the Athenians forced them into one, they ended up victors. The Thucydides Trap - it is not clear who coined this false phrase - does not exist, even in its prime example. So now, we can turn to the hash Prof Allison makes of the unfamiliar material he has chosen.

## **A CASE OF CHINA FEVER**

Ignoring all this, Prof Allison takes Thucydides literally: Wars (sometimes) begin when rising powers like Athens threaten established powers like Sparta. But do they really? The case is difficult to make.

Japan was the rising power in 1904 while Russia was long established. Did Russia thus seek to pre-empt Japan? No. The Japanese launched a surprise attack on Russia, scuttling the Czar's fleet. In 1941, the Japanese were again the rising power. Did ever-vigilant America strike out to eliminate the Japanese threat? Wrong. Then-President Franklin Roosevelt considered it "infamy" when Japan surprised him by attacking Pearl Harbour at a time when the world was already in flames.

Switch to Europe - in the 1930s, Germany was obviously the rising, menacing power. Did France, Russia, England and the other threatened powers move against it? They could not even form an alliance, so the Soviet Union eventually joined Hitler rather than fight him. Exceptions there are, and Prof Allison makes a half-baked effort to find them, but these are not the mainstream. Is this some kind of immense academic lapse?

No. What has really happened is that Prof Allison has caught China fever, not hard around Harvard, although he knows no Chinese language and little Chinese history.

As a result, he seems to have been impressed above all by Chinese numbers: population, army size, growth rate, steel production, et cetera. So if that sentence from Thucydides is correct, then China is clearly a rising power that will want its "place in the sun" - which will lead ineluctably to a collision between rising China (Athens) instigated by the presumably setting United States (Sparta), which will see military pre-emption as the only recourse to avert a loss of power and a Chinese-dominated world.

To escape this trap, Prof Allison demands that we find a way to give China what it wants and forget the lessons of so many previous wars. Many of his colleagues at Harvard also believe this to be true.

The reality, however, is that his recipe is actually a recipe for war. Appeasement of aggressors is far more dangerous than measured confrontation. Did China become more aggressive in the South China Sea in the 2000s because the Obama administration got tougher or because it went AWOL on the issue? I'd say the latter is more likely.

With China, we might want to be more mindful of the Chamberlain Trap (named after the peace-loving prime minister of England, one of the authors of the disastrous 1938 Munich Agreement that sought to avoid war through concessions), which taught Hitler that the British were easily fooled. That is the trap we are in urgent need of avoiding.

As an intellectual exercise, let us try making the modest substitution in Prof Allison's argument of Europe for China. Europe - excluding Russia and some other smaller countries - has a land area of 10.1 million sq km (larger than the US at 9.8 million sq km). The European Union's gross domestic product (nominal) is roughly US\$20 trillion (S\$27.6 trillion) while that of the US is perhaps US\$1 trillion less. Europe had 1,823,000 forces in uniform in 2014, compared with 1,031,000 for the US today.

Where am I going? If we add educational and technical levels as well as living standards, one might be forgiven for thinking that, by the numbers, Europe - not China - was the leading potential challenger to the US. That is what the late journalist Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber argued in his popular and influential bit of futurology, *Le Defi American* (The American Challenge), in 1967. It might well be that the great, almost unspoken question of this century is the future of Europe. So far, however, Europe and America have not proved "destined to war".

Nor are America and China. The late diplomat James Lilley, who was ambassador to China and my colleague and mentor, liked to recall a lecture about Taiwan given by an American professor. The speaker became increasingly heated, declaring that unless Washington yielded immediately to Beijing's demands about Taiwan, a nuclear war was unavoidable. A People's Liberation Army general in attendance was at first puzzled, and then agitated. He turned to the ambassador to whisper a question: "Who is this guy? Does he think we are crazy?" In other words, come whatever, "we Chinese" are intelligent enough to realise that war - not to mention nuclear war - with the US is an insane action that would destroy all that China has achieved in the years since Mao Zedong's death in 1976.

As I see it, it's far more likely, but certainly not as sexy, to believe that there will be no "destined" war between China and the US because the Chinese might actually have a clearer reading of history than the scholars at Harvard.

---

## THE CHINESE ARE NOT IDIOTS

Prof Allison's book is chock-a-block with facts. And the impressive statistics of China's growth in military power that he cites are real. So are its advances in technology.

Moreover, in 1995, two years before Deng Xiaoping's death, Beijing simply used military force to seize a maritime formation called Mischief Reef from the Philippines - a clear reversal of Deng's policy of always maintaining good relations with the US. By 2012, China had occupied the Philippines' Scarborough Shoal as well, and continues to do so, while fortifying and creating islands in the South China Sea, where runways were built for military aircraft, rockets deployed and submarines anchored, and in the East China Sea promulgating an Air Defence Identification Zone that just happened to include a Korean island that China would like and another group of such Japanese islands.

In other words, since then-ambassador Lilley took his friend to hear the American professor, Chinese policy seems to have changed, but how much and, more importantly, why?

Since the attack on Scarborough Shoal six years ago, my own opinion is that China expected to have occupied a lot more. Its slightly delusional view of its claims, first made explicit in Asean's winter meeting of 2010 in Hanoi, was that "small" countries would all bow respectfully to China's new pre-eminence. This has failed to occur. All of China's neighbours are now building up strong military capabilities. Japanese and South Korean nuclear weapons are even a possibility. Overrelying on their traditional concept of awesomeness, the Chinese expected a cakewalk. They have got instead an arms race with neighbours including Japan and other American allies and India too.

With so much firepower now in place, the danger of accident, pilot error, faulty command and control, et cetera, must be considered. But I'd wager that the Chinese would smother an unintended conflict. They are, after all, not idiots.

Prof Allison also provides us with a melange of statistics showing the great industrial might of China. It produces tonnes of steel, more than markets can absorb, as well as coal, while serving as the workshop of the world, where the computer on which I am writing was manufactured. The mountains of Chinese exports that have shuttered manufacturing in America seem, like the American powerhouse of 50 years ago, set to overwhelm the world, rather as Servan-Schreiber expected American-owned business to do in Europe - but they did not.

China's tremendous economic vulnerabilities have no mention in Prof Allison's book. But they are critical to any reading of China's future. China imports a huge amount of its energy, and is planning a vast expansion in nuclear power, including dozens of reactors at sea. It has water endowments similar to Sudan's, which means nowhere near enough.

The capital intensity of production is very high: In China, one standard energy unit used fully produces 33 US cents of product. In India, the figure is 77 US cents. It gets to US\$3 in Europe and US\$5.55 in Japan. China is poor because it wastes not just energy but water too, while destroying its ecology in a way perhaps lacking any precedent. Figures such as these are very difficult to find: Mine come from researchers in the energy sector.

Solving all of this, while making the skies blue, is a task of both extraordinary technical complexity and expense that will put China's competing special interests at one another's throats. Not finding a solution, however, will doom China's future. Prof Allison might know this on some level, but you have to spend a lot of time in China and talk to a lot of specialists (often in Chinese) before the enormity becomes crushingly real.

---

## LACK OF CHINA KNOWLEDGE

What's more, the Chinese are leaving China in unprecedented numbers. The late scholar Richard Solomon, who worked on US-China relations for decades, remarked to me a few weeks before his death this year that "one day last year, all the Chinese who could decided to move away". Why? The pollution might kill infants, the hospitals are terrible, the food is adulterated, and the system is corrupt and unpredictable.

Here in the Philadelphia suburbs and elsewhere, thousands of Chinese buyers are flocking to buy homes in cash. Even President Xi Jinping sent his daughter to Harvard. Does that imply a high-profile political career for her in China? Probably not. It rather implies a quiet retirement with Mr Xi's grandchildren over here. Our American private secondary schools are inundated with Chinese applicants. For the first time this year, my Chinese graduate students are marrying one another and buying houses here. This is a leading indicator.

If it could be done, the coming tsunami would bring 10 million highly qualified Chinese families to the US in 10 years - along with fleeing crooks, spies, and other flotsam and jetsam. Even Mr Xi's first wife fled China; she lives in England.

Prof Allison, however, misses this; "Immigration" is not in his index. Instead, he speculates about war, based on some superficial reading and sampling of the literature, coming to the question "What does Xi want?" - which I take as meaning that he thinks Mr Xi's opinion matters - which makes nonsense of the vast determining waves of economic development, not to mention his glance at Thucydides, with the opinion following that, somehow, we should try to find out what that is and cut a deal. This is geopolitics from a Harvard professor? This is the great wave of history?

How to conclude a look at so ill conceived and sloppily executed a book? Do not blame Prof Allison. The problem is the pervasive lack of knowledge about China - a country that is, after all, run by the Communist Party, the police and the army, and thus difficult to get to know. This black hole of information has perversely created an overabundance of fantasies - some very pessimistic, some as absurdly bright as a foreigner on the payroll can make them.

Forget the fantasies, therefore, and look at the facts. In the decades ahead, China will have to solve immense problems simply to survive. Neither its politics nor its economy follows any rules that are known. The miracle - like the German Wirtschaftswunder and the vertical ascent of Japan - is already coming to an end. A military solution offers only worse problems.

My advice would be to skip Prof Allison and read instead the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and recall that two of its handful of principal authors were not European or American but rather Lebanese statesman Charles Malik and Chinese academic Chang Peng Chun, whose brother founded Nankai University in Tianjin.

Perhaps not war but cultural and political synergy is what is, in fact, "destined".

---

- **Arthur Waldron is Lauder Professor of International Relations in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania. This article was first published on SupChina.com, a source of information and views on China for English speakers.**

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Sunday Times on June 18, 2017, with the headline 'There is no Thucydides Trap'. [Print Edition](#) | [Subscribe](#)