

# WAR BETWEEN US AND CHINA





# WAR BETWEEN US AND CHINA



WINSTON LANGLEY

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## DEDICATION

To the young people of the world, who should not  
be forced to experience World War III.





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<https://chinasage.info/south-china-sea.htm>





[https://www.researchgate.net/figure/South-China-Sea-Map-The-red-dotted-line-shows-the-furthest-extent-of-Chinas-island\\_fig1\\_323214499](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/South-China-Sea-Map-The-red-dotted-line-shows-the-furthest-extent-of-Chinas-island_fig1_323214499)







## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume is the result of four interrelated concerns having to do with the future of US–China relations, perhaps the current most important bilateral international relations for each country and the peoples of the world. Each of these concerns is centered on a book, *Destined for War*, which was published in 2017 and became a best seller among scholarly works.

I read the book in 2018 and became very disturbed by its tone and much of its content. Many facts and issues are presented in a distorted manner; some partake of prejudices, including subtle racial ones, that have been part of the West since the latter term emerged as a geopolitical and cultural category, and it subtly embodies scenarios that, on their face, offer the appearance of insightful possibilities when, in fact, they are part and parcel of an overall strategic position of the US. Second, I began to hear people, many outside international relation or politics, speak of the “Thucydides Trap,” the central concept in the book, and to realize that the work was having an even greater impact than I had assumed. When a physician colleague of mine asked what I thought about the concept, I began to think that the work ought to be rebutted. That which proved to be a turning point in my decision, however, was my meditating on the fact that the author is a professor at perhaps the nation’s most prestigious university, teaching students, doctoral students—tomorrow’s leaders—who often have little historical appreciation (because of the limited historical content found in the approach to teaching international relations in the US) to question, seriously, the claims of the book and what such teaching can come to mean for a broader socialization, including that for potential future decision makers and policy influencers.

The fourth concern stems from the Cold War, under which I grew up, and its damaging impact on the world, including possibilities envisioned by individuals and subnational groups. The tensions occasioned by that war, although not ever having resulted in an actual physical exchange between its two principals—the US and the former Soviet Union—never ceased to threaten one, and other countries and areas of the world, especially the Global South and the least socially favored everywhere, who experienced conflict, destruction, and socio-political reversals in their processes of development. For many young people in the US, disillusionment and distrust of the government increased, and a progressive militarization of international and national life came to be. Almost every social institution was adversely affected.

Another war, a second Cold War, this time between the US and China, would return the world to a regrettable and, in some cases, shameful past, with even greater socioeconomic damage resulting, because of the increased interdependence among peoples and countries and our being faced with threatening global problems that the world of 1945–1989 (duration of the Cold War) never faced. The lethality of weapons of mass destruction has also grown, and more countries have those weapons.

In writing this book, I tried to show (where the evidence suggests it) that in many areas in which the US has been depicted in ideal terms and China as the opposite of those ideals (the US), Washington may not be as cast and, often, China as well. In so doing, the appearance of my being less than objective could be mistakenly inferred. All such efforts, on my part, in fact, are either to expose certain hypocritical behaviors or claims or to suggest that an item of conduct is incident to all states or individuals (not peculiar to China or the Chinese) or that a weakness ought not to be used to define a country or people when all countries have weaknesses.

I offer thanks to the Boston Athenaeum, Boston University Law School, Harvard University Law School, the Avalon Project Collection at Yale Law School, the Healey Library at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and the Lamont Library at Harvard. A special “thank you” goes to all those who helped me to procure important research materials. I, of course, am solely responsible for the contents of the work.



## INTRODUCTION

*Destined for War*, by Graham Allison, argues that war between the US and China is very likely because both countries are caught in a trap from which neither can easily escape. That trap, called the “Thucydides Trap,” argues that when an up-and-coming power acts to challenge a ruling one, this challenge lets loose or unbinds so many destabilizing and disruptive forces that the latter overwhelms decision makers and war results. In making this claim about the trap, Allison did not simply operate on the basis of an abstract assertion. He located this claim within the office of history and, to substantiate it, brought to bear persuasive eye-witnessing historical events. He also invited, to support his argument, respected contemporary experts in international relations and politics, country-specific specialists, and even a respected former statesman ostensible clothed with what is often called “inside information.”

Among the eye-witnessing accounts are many case studies of historical conflicts and wars, which are advanced as precedents—precedents evidencing parallel or similar circumstances and like results. With an urged proper respect for the past, Allison then invites readers and policy influencers to pursue the path that prudence counsels and see whether it might be possible to avert that for which we are seemingly destined. He, however, presents no course of action that does relieve the US of its current position as *ruling* power, one of the two cornerstone conditions that supposedly bring the trap into being in the first place. This would appear to mean that “ruling” powers, perhaps by divine right, should not be challenged, or there will be a war, in which case the blame should be on the audacity of would-be challengers. This has

been the case throughout history—blame the challenger, unless the latter wins in such wars and can write its own history.

In this book, I argue that war may very well come about between the US and China, stemming from the increasingly escalating differences between them, but the core cause will not be because of the trap suggested by Allison. Further, it contends that there is no “Thucydides Trap,” namely, when a ruling power’s standing is challenged by an emerging one, the fear of that rise and the likely replacement that the rise entails for the ruling power result in war. Rather, the historical evidence advises that wars, in the circumstances described, result from the ruling power’s inability or unwillingness to accept equality and live by the norms that principle embodies.

Suffusing Allison’s work are three other associated factors in the elaboration and application of the trap. First is the expressed or implied position that human moral agency is weak and can be easily overridden by historical “forces.” I again dispute this position (and one wonders why, in face of such weakness, we would insist on gaining and retaining nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction in general) by showing how leaders associated with the very case studies that he selected to persuade readers deliberately manipulated events to invite war or to justify entry into war. Second, the structure of thinking that governs the entire presentation of *Destined for War* is one that is the offspring of a theoretical outlook in political science called realism, which sees human nature in the most negative light. This outlook (and belief) is pervasive in the book because Allison argues that it is present in all human group relationships—the son seeking to topple his father from the standing the latter has in the family, the sports team or business that seeks to replace the champion, forgetting the role of government, including umpires, and the “rules of the game” that forbid the father, champion team, or business from being rule maker, prosecutor, and judge in defense of their respective dominant positions. Given the view that human nature is evil and the weak position of human moral agency, the exercise of power and dominance is the only reliable means by which social and political order as well as human thriving can be established and securely protected.

The third is more protean than the first two and so, especially for the general consumer of foreign policy, difficult to master. It has to do with a widely shared view, often supported by popular news presentations, their associated commentators, and, as well, “experienced specialists.” It is that the US’s worldwide preeminence is more the result of makeshift or improvised decisions made to satisfy domestic constituencies and unpredictable international developments rather than a product of a coherent, strategic design.<sup>1</sup> When this view is presented by scholars such as Allison (his scenarios encourage it), that presentation makes it easier to attribute results to wrong causes and manipulate facts to lend the appearance that the US but reacts to events. It is true that the US’s foreign policy has been significantly influenced by domestic constituencies and international events, as is the case with all countries. The evidence suggests, however, that responses to domestic and international constituencies are, on most occasions, the periphery that operates around a strategic core, referred to as the Grand Area (to be elaborated later), as well as an ideological conception of the self and that self’s purpose that is global in reach and has been either unchanging or resistant to all but minor changes.

*The War Between US and China* seeks to prove its attempted refuting arguments by way of making its readers acquainted with an alternative history, including the history of a selected number of historical case studies that Allison, in *Destined for War*, proffers as proof for the claims it makes. This refuting covers fifteen chapters plus a conclusion, and the chapters, in turn, are arranged in four parts.

Part I, entitled “The Trap and Its Application,” consists of the first three chapters and deals with the trap as understood by Allison, its application to China, and its dramatic historical expression in the Peloponnesian War, between Athens and Sparta—a likely mirror of the US–China relations. Part II, entitled “Case Studies, Gathering Storm, and Another Past,” covers Chapters 4, 5, and 6 and brings to bear on our discussion the case studies of Japan versus the US and Germany versus Britain, along with some underlying ideas and the international political structure that governed the thinking of the periods under discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 10 of a later cited work by Henry Kissinger, “America at the Apex.”

Part III, entitled “Counter-Narrative on Cases,” encompasses Chapters 7, 8, and 9 and has, as its burden, the elaboration of a past that differs substantially from the one portrayed by Allison and is supportive of the idea that *equality*, not *replacement*, has been the historical problem (if one wishes, the trap) that has troubled the instances of leading powers and their paired historical challengers, as evidenced in the cases of Germany versus Britain and Japan versus the US. Part IV, entitled “Dynamics of US–China Relations,” roofs Chapters 10 to 15. It continues the alternative history and includes issues of race, cultural outlooks, trade, technology, economic development models, and how the changes of fluctuations in the sweep of Washington–Beijing relations have encompassed the globe as a whole, including the Global South, in part because of the US’s ideological and geopolitical identity, in part because of changing international norms and problems, and in part because of Beijing’s efforts to deal with Washington’s policy of containment.

As revealed by the evidence in the previous case studies, including that of Athens versus Sparta, a fairly extensive examination of US–China relations discloses very clearly that the principal issue between them is not and has not been the publicly asserted or textually offered threat of replacement but the feared prospect, on the US’s part, of equality with China. This equality would mean, mainly, that the US would no longer have its relatively unrestricted way in the world. This is what is and has been at stake and the unswerving strategic focus, on China, sponsored under various modes of containment, regionally and globally. Until today, there has been no official, public reference to China other than as a regional power, as we now refer to Russia, and when China has refused to conform to this ascribed status—as in the case of women, minorities, and small or “weak” states—that refusal is characterized as angry, hostile, ambitious, or informed by indignation.

The conclusion attempts to summarize much of what the first fifteen chapters house, looks at the direction in which globalization is seen as going as well as the extent to which the values espoused by the US and China better prepare them for adjustments consistent with that direction, and suggests some area within which, for the sake of the well-being of each and the rest of the world, the US–China relations might

be selectively restructured. The latter implies moral agency capable of controlling historical forces.

The principle of equality, so manifestly implicated in this study, is not being emphasized only as the accurate historical foundation on which to judge the case studies of wars covered in this volume. It is not, in other words, in its evidentiary use in this work, simply an exercise in the refutation of a thesis, as important as doing so is and should be. It is also a wrestling with what undergirds the US Declaration of Independence—a self-evident truth, the drafters of that declaration claimed—and the basis of what we regard as human dignity. It is also the conceptual substructure of liberty and freedom and of self-determination writ large. It is the obverse of domination, and almost every ethno-racial, indigenous, linguistic, religious, sexual orientation, woman, worker, or immigrant minority, among others, will attest to it.

To have any country claiming to be a democracy, in antiquity or today, frown at the principle in favor of domination is to lay bare a hypocrisy that is subversive to all the other associated values just mentioned. (Of course, since democracy is a moral entitlement of everyone under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), it is also hypocrisy on the part of any state engaged in a like frowning.) It is also to remove from the historical and future challengers to domination the heavy burden of responsibility that they have unfairly borne for wars and to unveil the often equal or greater responsibilities of ruling powers in causing such wars. An emphasis on the truth of equality in the complex relationship among countries can also help in the mapping of our individual and collective path toward our common future, in which equality is playing and will play a very important role. From all the evidence I have garnered in US–China relations, I have found nothing to indicate that China has been other than defensive in its military behavior, including in the Korean War, and pre-modern China exhibited a like defensive orientation.

The fact that the “never again” mantra against war and the United Nations’ (UN) legal and moral structure, as well as that structure’s review and amendment, were not points of any significant focus in *Destined for War* speaks eloquently. We are left with political realism alone, condemned to an indefinite replication of the “Thucydides Trap.”

My view is that we have many alternative futures and should leave behind the realist thinking that has kept us trapped.

The approach that the book has followed is a largely historical one, with concepts linked to time and circumstances, although some have become trans-historical (and are treated as such). Use was made of a variety of sources, including original documents, policy statements of presidents, secretaries of state, or foreign ministers, intergovernmental resolutions or treaties, judicial decisions, historical studies by reputable historians, economic treatise, scholarly and semi-scholarly journals, popular magazines and newspapers (the latter from both China and the US), statements from lectures, and even television appearances by officials. In all these areas of sought help, I have tried to be fair, although not always neutral.



# **WAR BETWEEN US AND CHINA**

**There Is No Thucydides Trap**





# PART I

## The Trap and Its Application





# CHAPTER 1

## The Trap as Understood by Allison

### *Who Was Thucydides?*

Thucydides was an Athenian general and historian who wrote about the fifth-century war between Athens and Sparta, which lasted from 431 to 404 BC. Because of his approach to the writing of history—which, unlike that of earlier historians, excluded speculation, spectacles, or the invocation of divine intervention—his work came to attract favorable attention. This work, under discussion in this book, has been known for more than what it was not, however; indeed, it is best known for what it was and has been regarded as representing. It has come to be viewed as limiting its focus to evidence-based analysis, recounting what has been observed according to the highest standards of impartiality. As such, Thucydides has come to be called the father of “modern” or what is sometimes labeled “scientific” history.

He is also regarded as the father of a school of political thinking (one may say political theory) that has been known as political realism. This school views political behavior—at the individual or group level, including states—as grounded on and fundamentally influenced by self-interest. His historical masterpiece, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (a war between Athens and Sparta), is shaped by this thinking, which has informed the deliberations and actions of political leaders, policy

makers, and policy scholars (especially in the West but elsewhere also) for centuries.<sup>2</sup> Associated with realist thinking is what has come to be called moral skepticism, a view that is defined by a deep doubt about the effectiveness of morality in international relations, where, it is believed, power and only power is determinative of outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Born in a leading Athenian family, this Athenian general was stationed in Thrace (part of Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey today), where he was exiled and spent most of the war years as punishment for his failure to prevent the capture of Amphipolis (a small Greek city) by Sparta. It is possible that the time and other opportunities allowed by this exile facilitated his writing of the book. The seeming independence and scholarly integrity that have characterized his recounting of the war, along with the lessons he claims to have deduced from the events narrated, have made his *History* a manual of sorts to future would-be political leaders and actual statespersons, serving as a “lighting of the way” on the decisions, motives, circumstances, and nature of leadership that produce war, inform its continuation, and define its contours and consequences. Aptly, Thucydides himself tells us why he wrote the book and, in the process of so writing, distinguished it from other histories. He indicated that he did not write his book to elicit excitement and sensation (romance):

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<sup>2</sup> One finds this thinking dominating the foreign policy of the US, from the beginning of the republic, but especially so after World War II, when Washington assumed leadership of the West. George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and Brent Scowcroft were or have been among the names of the more influential thinkers, practitioners, or mentors in the field. Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1932) and Hans Morgenthau’s *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1954) have served as teaching tools for generations. Kissinger, whose dissertation at Harvard dealt with the balance of power concept and practice in post-Napoleonic Europe, has never been able to move outside this concept, so dear to political realists.

<sup>3</sup> See Niebuhr’s work cited above as well as Terry Nardin’s *Law, Morality, and the Relations of States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). The latter work provides a broader context within which to reflect.

The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest, but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which, in the course of human things, must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content . . . I have written my work not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment but as a possession for all time.<sup>4</sup>

Thucydides embraced a cyclic outlook on history, meaning he saw past occurrences as recurring, in analogous if not identical forms, as indicted in the just-cited quote. Humans, therefore, could profitably learn from certain causes and effects and deduce patterns or trends despite apparent ambiguities. As such, particular occurrences, properly understood, hold within them distillable lessons from which generalizations can be made.<sup>5</sup> Graham Allison shares this view—that Thucydides’ work has direct relevance to this century and beyond and is a reliable guide to the future. The position of this book is that the work of Thucydides is *not* a reliable guide for the future because—at least in the claim concerning the cause of the war—he erred. Allison, in relying on him, has likewise erred.

### ***Statement of the Trap***

The term “trap” refers to something (including circumstances) by which an entity is caught or otherwise confined without having foreseen the developments leading to the confinement or entrapment and its consequences. Allison begins his book, *Destined for War*, by noting that none of the leaders of the major powers of Europe wanted World War I—at least, the war they faced—and that none of them would repeat the choices made (they were all men) if given opportunities to make them

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<sup>4</sup> See Thucydides, *The Complete Writings of Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War*, unabridged Crawley translation with an introduction by John H. Finley Jr., Eliot professor of Greek literature, Harvard University (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), pp. 14–15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii in Finley’s introduction.

again. In short, each of them was trapped. More important than specific sparks that may be seen as causes of a war, as Thucydides (according to Allison) teaches us, “are the structural factors that lay at its foundations: conditions in which otherwise manageable events can escalate with unforeseeable severity and produce unimaginable consequences.”<sup>6</sup>

Focusing on what he saw as the central structural factor that sponsored the war, Thucydides wrote that the “real cause, I consider to be one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon [Sparta] made war inevitable.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, while others may have focused, in his view, on an array of contributing causes, they overlooked what he considered the “real cause.” Allison, in turn, sees this “real cause” as a “primary driver at the root of some of history’s most catastrophic and puzzling wars.”<sup>8</sup> He then elaborates,

Intentions aside, when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, the resulting structural stress makes a violent clash the rule, not the exception. It happened between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century BCE, between Germany and Britain a century ago, and almost led to a war between the Soviet Union and the United States . . .<sup>9</sup>

### ***Sparta and Athens: An Elaboration of the Trap***

Athens and Sparta were two city-states in ancient Greece, between which developed a rivalry that resulted in a catastrophic thirty-year war. Sparta, defined by an agriculture economy, was a land-based society that built its identity around a culture grounded on military discipline.

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<sup>6</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), p. xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Allison, *Destined for War*, op. cit., p. xv.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

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At age seven, for example, boys were inducted into military schools for disciplined training, and they, together, with a kind of collective identity, would succeed their elders as part of a warrior class in the pursuit of rendering service to the ideal of creating the perfect state.

Spartan citizens themselves did not indulge in farming; that activity was engaged in by a semi-enslaved group or class called helots, who lived on Spartan-owned estates and, along with members of other groups such as those which had been liberated from slavery, were allowed to keep a portion of that which they cultivated.

The values of discipline, frugality, sacrifice, and collective identity, within the warrior class, were nurtured. Spartan women citizens (unlike their Athenian counterparts, who were largely homebound and had little education) were expected to deal with the household economy and the early training of children, engage in civic life, and be disciplined, frugal, and prepared for sacrifice just as their male citizen counterparts. They partook in athletic activities with men and were known for their independence, proficiency in dancing and music, and beauty. (The famed Helen of Troy was a Spartan woman.<sup>10</sup>) They could and did own property also.

Athens, on the other hand, was a commercial city and the commercial center of Greece, with ever-expanding economic interactions with the rest of the Mediterranean and beyond. Unlike Sparta, which was governed by a monarchy, Athens had elected leaders called archons, a major one of whom was Pericles, to whom we will later refer. Because of this election of public leaders, Athens is often viewed as a democracy. It should be understood, however, that only the male citizens of the city could vote, and they constituted less than 15 percent of a population, at least a third of which were slaves. Like Sparta, it also had helots or semi-slaves.<sup>11</sup>

Both Athens and Sparta fought together defending Greece against the Persian Empire, especially during a series of famous battles:

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<sup>10</sup> See Peter J. Brand in “Athens & Sparta: Democracy vs Dictatorship” for a well-written summary of Spartan and Athenian societies, with maps and other visual features that contribute to one’s understanding. It, of course, reinforces certain common assumptions in Western culture ([www.uopeople.edu](http://www.uopeople.edu)).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Thermopylae (August of 480 BCE), Salamis (August–September of 480 BCE), and Plataea (479 BCE). Athens was the star at Salamis, which, like that at Plataea, was a naval battle. There might not have been a Salamis, however, had it not been for the bravery of Sparta in the losing effort at Thermopylae—a bravery that delayed Persian advance and gave Greece more time to organize. After the decisive battle of Plataea, when the Greeks overcame the Persians, two important developments became apparent. First, Athens (unlike Sparta, which had rich agricultural lands to which it could and did return) focused on expanding its commerce, on which it depended, having so little land of its own for agriculture. Second, it progressively began to see its achievements at both Salamis and Plataea (but also during the 490 BCE Battle of Marathon, the first attempt by the Persian Empire to subdue Greece) as entitling it to the leadership of Greece. So consistent with the growing breadth and self-assessed weight of its interest, it used its expanded superior navy to extend its influence, sometimes pressing its allies to pay for the security its navy had before freely offered as a public good. The material returns from this pressure, as well as from commerce, considerably increased Athenian wealth.<sup>12</sup>

It is this expansion of Athenian influence and power, this felt entitlement to have its claims assume greater sway, that Allison contends induced insecurity and fear in Sparta, a country that had hitherto enjoyed a determinative say in the political and military order of Greece. Sparta wanted to preserve the status quo in which it was, according to Allison, dominant; Athens challenged it.

The claimed trap was then in place, associated as it was, in the “natural, inevitable discombobulation that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power,” contends Allison.<sup>13</sup> The threat of displacement “can happen in any sphere,” he argues, and he points to examples of the younger sibling surging to overshadow his elder, or even his father, in family life, an upstart company with disruptive

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<sup>12</sup> In the Battle of Marathon, where Athens played the leading role in defeating Persia, Sparta did not participate. See Jennifer T. Roberts, *The Plague of War: Athens and Sparta and the Struggle for Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Allison, *op. cit.*, p. xvi.



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technologies, such a Google or Uber, threatening older companies, such as Hewlett-Packard, or a young gorilla seeking to replace an older alpha male. In international relations, however, he contends, the “implications are most dangerous.” Why? Just as “the original instance of Thucydides’ trap resulted in a war that brought ancient Greece to its knees, this phenomenon has haunted diplomacy in the millennia since. Today it has set the world’s two biggest powers on a path to cataclysm nobody wants but which they may prove unable to avoid.”<sup>14</sup>

The reader will perceive, from the last-quoted statement, that the trap is defying of subjective human actions.



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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.