

## **Book Review – I**

### **Allison, Graham T. (2017). *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* London, United Kingdom: Scribe Publications**

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The geopolitical landscape of the world has seen rapid deterioration, in terms of the stability of the existing international system. But even before this deterioration, the international has been termed as being anarchic in nature. The current 'global disorder' – as I prefer to refer to it – is witnessing a whirlwind in declining Western power. One can say that we – as an international political community – are at a Y-Junction, where the world makes do with the global hegemony of the United States, where the choices are between another unilaterally-decided world system or a reformed and inclusive multi-lateral one.

Graham Allison's book is a fabulous work that discusses Thucydides' trap and its relevance in history from both the far past as well as the present. Having assessed the historically crucial Peloponnesian war, Thucydides in his volumes delves into the heart of the matter, identifying root factors that led to war. He suggests that when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, there comes around a structural crack in the existing power structure which inevitably leads to war as "the rule, not the exception" (Allison, 2017). However, the book does not discuss only the Peloponnesian war. It discusses some of the most puzzling wars in human history (as shown in Annexure I). An interesting way that the author explains this concept is through the example of successful start-ups such as Google, Apple and Uber, who enter the market with great success and challenged existing champions of the industry such as IBM and Taxi operators.

This book intends to focus on the previously gradual and now rapid ascension of Chinese power in the international system. A revisionist state, the People's Republic of China has worked on building its economic might to match with, and even exceed, that of the United States. It challenges Washington not only in the economic domain but also in the politico-military domain, wishing to expel the American presence in the Asia-Pacific wholly and completely. History, as portrayed in this excellent work, has revealed

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that Thucydides' trap of power struggle among competing states has resulted in war twelve times, of the sixteen discussed in this book.

The author suggested in 2017 – when this work was first published – that “on the current trajectory, a war between the US and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognised” (Allison, 2017). As per the US Department of Defense in November 2021, the People's Liberation Army Navy moved up to become the largest naval force in the world, in terms of the number of vessels operated. This in itself gives the proper credit that the factual information, that Graham Allison discusses in such plain language, deserves (Shelbourne, 2021).

The author very appropriately draws China as being the single greatest threat to the existing international structure, and the way the world conducts itself. Through numerous instances and arguments, the reader cannot help but feel that China will not be the responsible stakeholder it shows itself as being. This does not and should not, in my opinion, take away from the attention of the world that the United States – the current, dominant authority in the international order – has also acted irresponsibly in several instances. While one may find the extensive research tilt the way of Washington, it would be unwise to suggest that Beijing is not the greater threat to a potential multilateral, rules-based world order.

The vast array of examples discussed in this book makes it absolutely compulsory reading for every single observer, commentator, researcher, analyst and student of the expansive field of international relations, security & strategic studies and foreign policy; for this book does not discuss only the arguments against China but also explores solutions to dealing with and managing its rapid rise. Taking from the leadership portrayed by President John F Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis, Graham Allison lists out critical values that the American leadership must keep in mind while handling China. It must clarify vital interests, prioritising elaborating in great detail the interests that define American values and policy-making. It must also parallelly understand the motive behind Chinese actions, understanding and appreciating appropriately Beijing's core interests which define its policies. The book also discusses the lack of initiative among America's political elite to engage in strategic thinking and planning, writing that “though deliberate crafting of strategy does not guarantee success, the absence of a coherent, sustainable strategy is a reliable route to failure” (Allison, 2017). Having authored a publication on Lee Kuan Yew – Singapore's ‘founding father’ and one of the finest statesmen in modern history – Allison discusses the need for thinking along the lines of Lee's school of thought: the answers to the problems beyond borders lie within. America's degrading democracy is one of the central factors impacting its declining stand in the international arena. In my opinion, sitting President Joe Biden has already lost this battle and has failed to solve America's domestic problems; it lies upon the

shoulders of his successor to ensure that unity in American politics makes a return, for America to truly be back.

To conclude this review, this book very comfortably articulates both the American and Chinese perceptions of the threats germinating from one another. It is of vital importance that the leadership of these countries understand their interests, like the Americans did the Soviets, and vice-versa, which ensured that the cold war never turned hot. One of the interesting parts of this book is 'Appendix I: Thucydides' Trap Case File' which discusses the sixteen examples very well for the common man or beginner student to comprehend. Overall, the author deserves a thundering round of applause for the research invested in this book, which quite certainly will make its way to the Politburo in Beijing and the Oval Office in Washington.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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