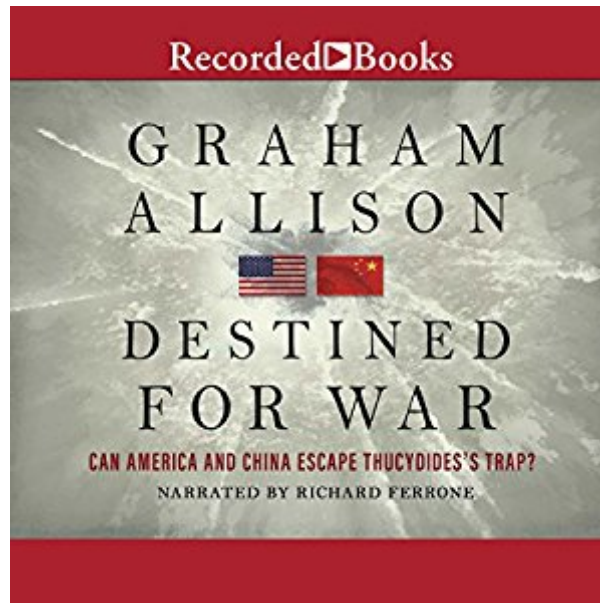




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# Destined For War: Can America And China Escape Thucydides's Trap?



## Synopsis

War with China is much more likely than anyone thinks. When Athens went to war with Sparta some 2,500 years ago, the Greek historian Thucydides identified one simple cause: A rising power threatened to displace a ruling one. As the eminent Harvard scholar Graham Allison explains, in the past 500 years, great powers have found themselves in "Thucydides's Trap" 16 times. In 12 of the 16 - from war between the French and the Habsburgs in the 16th century to the two world wars of the 20th - the results have been catastrophic. Today, the same structural forces propel China and the United States toward a cataclysm of unseen proportions, even as both sides insist that such a war could never occur. In *Destined for War*, Allison compares the US-China conflict to its closest parallel: World War I. There, a rising Germany threatened the supremacy of the British Empire. He sketches several scenarios in which America and China might slide, against their intent and better judgment, into a similar conflict. But he also examines the rare instances when two clashing powers have avoided disaster. Can our current standoff be one of those exceptions? Allison's answer is essential listening for our age and ages to come.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I wondered if this book might be a hackneyed view of China with a sensationalized scenario of improbable war. However, Author Graham Allison quickly back-peddles away from the provocative title:=====The possibility that the United States and China could find themselves at war appears as unlikely as it would be unwise.=====So much for THAT title! The title was written to sell books, of course, and not to represent the true content of the book.Allison primarily frames the USA vs. China

rivalry in the well-known paradigm of superpower rivalries going back to Athens vs. Sparta, Britain vs. , and finally the USA vs. the Soviet Union. These stories are well-known. However, Allison tells them in interesting ways. For example, he explains that Germany's desire to acquire much of the world dates from the late 1800s. Hitler did not originate the idea, but rather put it into action by attempting to wipe out the Soviet Union and repopulate it with Germans. That's not relevant to China, but it is interesting history in its own right. He also tells the interesting story of how the USA's rise rattled Great Britain and its Canadian Dominion. Fortunately, we "upstart Yankees" and the imperious Brits always compromised before armed conflict resulted --- the most severe incident being the Venezuela crisis of the 1890s when the USA accused Britain of violating the Monroe Doctrine by trying to re-colonize part of Venezuela's territory. Fortunately, Britain took the long view that maintaining its investments in the USA, plus having us as allies against anticipated future aggression from Germany, was far more important than inciting us to war over Venezuela. Britain backed down, knowing that Venezuela was a prestige issue for the USA that we could not back down from. The implication is that we should not allow ourselves to be drawn into war with China over petty incidents that are vital to China's prestige, but not to ours. Allison explains that China is fundamentally a peaceable country that regards war as the last resort of barbarians. The Chinese tradition is to prevail economically, by attaining dominance in trade. Nevertheless, we did fight the Chinese during the Korean War when they massively intervened to keep our armies away from the Chinese border. The Chinese did not fear our nuclear weapons, nor did they fear those of the Soviet Union when they provoked the Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969. Allison tells the interesting story of how Soviet Chairman Brezhnev asked our President Nixon to join him in a preemptive nuclear attack on China. Nixon declined of course, and then succeeded in establishing détente with China as well as the USSR. The USA and China have historically been in alliance against other expansionist powers, especially during WWII when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor after we demanded that the Japanese withdraw from their brutal conquest of China. Nevertheless, the possibility of war between the USA and China cannot be ignored. It happened in Korea and could happen again if relations are not carefully managed. After all, some of history's bloodiest wars, including WWI, the Chinese intervention in Korea, and our own Civil War were considered impossible until the day they ignited. Allison outlines the scenarios of possible USA / China war: a conflict in the high seas around China that China claims as sovereign territory; a conflict over the trade imbalance; a declaration of independence by Taiwan; and of course a renewal of the conflict in Korea that could accidentally involve both the USA and China in a war neither wants. The book explained to me why President Trump appears to be proceeding very

cautiously (more cautiously than I would prefer) in asking the Chinese to restrain their trade imbalance with us, and in helping us defuse the nuclear ambitions of North Korea. I was educated to the subtleties of our relations with China that I had not been previously aware of. Like many Americans, I approached this book with both affection for China's people, culture, and history. I have invested profitably in Chinese stocks, but have also seen how severe trade deficits with China severely hurts the USA and cost millions of Americans their jobs. The book confirms my belief that if we do not constrain our trade with China, we are destined to be destroyed as a major economic power. I travel abroad, and have seen how China copies American products, then pushes our American companies out of foreign markets and even our own domestic market. If the trend is not stopped, China will own the USA in 50 years or less. They will conquer us by combining the Chinese government and Chinese business into a unified, irresistible force that steals American technologies and repackages them as Chinese-made products sold around the world; while forbidding American companies to do business in China. Allison makes no bones about China's intentions:=====China is ready to use the carrots and sticks of its economic power" buying, selling, sanctioning, investing, bribing, and stealing as needed until they fall into line....China enjoys such superiority in its balance of economic power that many other states have no realistic option but to comply with its wishes, even when the international system is on their side....The fact is that China's economic network is spreading across the globe, altering the international balance of power in a way that causes even longtime US allies in Asia to tilt from the US toward China=====I thus learned more than I expected from the book. It is comprehensive in providing a broad perspective of all our current issues with China. Allison explains these issues objectively, and seems to have no hidden agendas to advocate for. I am rating this book four stars instead of five, only because the "Sparta vs. Athens" theme is long-winded and used to pad the book a bit more than necessary. I would also recommend another book as a companion to this one, that portrays the USA / China relationship in more historical depth, and with a more positive spin: THE BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY (the USA is called "the beautiful country" by Chinese) AND THE MIDDLE KINGDOM (China) BY John Pomfret. That book explains the past history of our relations with China. This book by Graham Allison has a more immediate impact of explaining our relations with China as a current and future event that may have an unhappy outcome if care is not taken on both sides. These two books together provide a thorough briefing on the opportunities, challenges, plus the threat of trade war or armed conflict with China. My takeaway from both is: "We can manage our relations to China constructively so as to have a fascinating and prosperous future of mutual benefit to us and all humanity; but only so long as we are very careful not

to disrespect each other, underestimate each other, or do something stupid that will provoke a war, that does not need to be fought. Of course that idea is self-evident, but the books delve into the specific details of policy on HOW the vision of cordial relations and mutual prosperity between the USA and China can be achieved by both nations. Obviously, this will be one of the top two or three issues that shape our destiny, and the world's, during the 21st Century.

Graham Allison is a brilliant analyst of the political aspect of some of the most confusing and conflicted crises in American history. His text on the Cuban Missile Crisis serves as the seminal analysis of that terrifying time. Once again he has provided us with a brilliant template for understanding the key players and their likely next moves. With North Korea rattling sabers, it's critically important for us to keep our eye on China. Allison gets it right on the money!

I really liked it, but then again, I'm a fan of Thucyclides. Most of my friends hated it, and in the reading learned how to hate Graham Allison for "being superficial and silly," though I thought it to be worthy of a lot of consideration. I hope that President Trump reads it, though I know he won't. Well, maybe VP Pence will read it . . . I understand that he reads. I certainly hope that Rex Tillerson reads it.

A compelling argument for the natural escalation of conflict between the U.S. and China. In addition the information describing China's rise is eye opening. It makes you wonder what the political and economical landscape of the world will look like in twenty years.

This book is really about the rise of China. America is facing its first serious economic competitor since it overtook Britain in the 19th century. The US has also been the dominant power in Asia since 1945. It has fought in Korea and Vietnam and protected Taiwan, Japan, Philippines, and the sea lanes in the region. When President Xi became China's leader in 2012, he announced that his aim was to make China great again. This has meant a more assertive China. The book is a little disappointing because it points out that both countries are on a collision course but it does not present any good options for the US. Graham Allison is a professor at Harvard. He reviews history and observes that when a new superpower emerges the reigning hegemonic power feels threatened and often (but not always) decides to crush the upstart before it gets too powerful. Often this results in a catastrophic war. Allison calls this the "Thucydides trap" after the ancient Greek historian. He starts with the Sparta-Athens war (431 BC - 404 BC). Sparta decided

that it had to defeat Athens before it became too powerful. Thucydides tells us that war between the cities was more or less inevitable. Allison picks sixteen similar examples of great power conflicts over the last 500 years, only four ended peacefully. Allison describes the behavior of the US after it became the world's leading economic power in the 1890s. This sets a worrying precedent should the Chinese choose to follow our example. America started to apply the Monroe Doctrine and regarded the Western Hemisphere as its backyard. Teddy Roosevelt made it clear to the Europeans that the US would not tolerate interference in the Americas and it would fight to protect its interests. The US threatened Britain and Germany with war. Fortunately, the Europeans backed down. China now regards the South China Sea as its backyard and has started to flex its muscles. Xi talks of "Asia for the Asians" and wants the US to withdraw its military from the region. It is not clear what happens next if we try and maintain the current status quo. Foreign policy experts such as Ian Bremmer and Robert Kaplan have advised appeasement and suggested that we should terminate our obligations to Taiwan and Japan. John Mearsheimer is a history professor at the University of Chicago and he has also written about China and America. Mearsheimer believes that once countries become economically dominant they seek to dominate their region militarily. He calls this "offensive realism". The neo-cons who worked for the first President Bush wanted the US to become a global hegemon and they created the Wolfowitz Doctrine, which Allison does not mention. The doctrine wanted to prevent any new rising power becoming a rival as powerful as the Soviet Union. This is the "Thucydides Trap" as foreign policy. Mearsheimer predicts that China will attempt to dominate Asia so that conflict with the US is probably inevitable. This is the crucial foreign policy problem of our age, what happens in Syria is irrelevant by comparison. Allison believes that both America and China assume that they are special and inherently superior to other nations. They expect other countries to follow their lead and be submissive. This could present problems in Asia for the US. China has made it clear it does not want to be part of a world order dominated by the US and its liberal democratic values. Like the US, it wants to lead. Allison believes that there will soon come a time when the US would probably lose a military confrontation in the South China Sea. The Chinese have developed land based missiles which could sink America's carriers if they get too close to the Chinese mainland. Does that mean we should respond like Britain in the early part of the 20th century and back-off? What would that mean for Taiwan, Japan and South Korea? Allison does not offer any real answers. Some of Allison's chosen historical lessons were not particularly relevant to the coming conflict with China and I often disagreed with his analysis. Allison describes WW1 primarily as a struggle between Britain and Germany. Germany's decision to go to war in 1914 was mainly about

its rivalry with Russia and maintaining hegemony over the European mainland, something Britain never had any interest in. Germany was concerned about protecting its backyard, which meant its long border with Russia. Moltke, the head of the German army, wanted to crush Russia before it was too late. The Tsar had a huge army and the country was rapidly industrializing. Russia had always been an expansionist power. A modern Russian army would be a real threat. Allison's list of key players in 1914 (e.g., Churchill, Edward VII, Bethmann Hollweg, and the Kaiser) is also wide of the mark. He focuses on Churchill, who was Britain's navy secretary at the time. On the British side, Sir Edward Grey (Foreign Secretary) and David Lloyd George ultimately called the shots. Grey hated the Germans and wanted to help France. Lloyd George became prime minister in 1916 and his support was needed before war was declared. The German chancellor (Bethmann Hollweg) did not control the army or foreign policy. Moltke sidelined the Kaiser. The objective of the German army's Schlieffen Plan was to remove the Russian threat. The German army believed they could defeat the French easily, as they had in 1871, and they did not worry about Britain's tiny army. Britain entered the war only because Germany invaded Belgium. Overall, the book is easy to read and very informative. What Allison makes clear is that we don't have any good options. By 1905, Britain had no economic interests in the Western Hemisphere that it was prepared to fight over, apart from Canada. It may be different for the US in Asia. If we choose to withdraw from Asia, it would raise fundamental questions about the global role of the US. We probably would no longer need to spend \$600 billion annually on defense. This is a difficult and risky call for the US. We need a book which can hopefully explain the pros and cons of the various options.

Thoughtful and informative

Good read. As emerging power we need to reevaluate/ negotiate our positions with China.

This book is well written and extremely thoughtful . I learned so much about China and its history. . A good book to read on the future of the US and how China will affect us.

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