



Escaping Thucydides's Trap

Dialogue with Graham Allison
on China-US Relations

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PREFACE

When it comes to China-US relations, nearly everyone has heard of the concept of the Thucydides's Trap. This historical reference is now an inescapable part of the discussion and one of the most frequently cited descriptions of China-US relations. Graham Allison, who coined the term, is one of the world's most renowned political scientists and an influential voice on US strategy and national security. He has particular focuses in nuclear arms, Russia, China, and decision making. Allison has taught at Harvard University for five decades, where he was the founding dean of the Kennedy School of Government and former director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He has also served in a number of senior roles in the US government, including Special Advisor to the Secretary of Defense under President Reagan and Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Clinton.

I first met Professor Allison when I was a senior fellow from 2010–2011 at the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government and since then I have had a number of valuable opportunities to have multiple in-depth conversations with him. We have met many times around the world including at Harvard, the Munich Security Conference (MSC), and China Development Forum. I have also invited him and Larry Summers to speak at CCG's headquarters in Beijing and he has also hosted me at the Harvard Kennedy School. During the pandemic, face-to-face exchanges were not possible, but this did not prevent us from continuing our dialogue as we shifted to virtual formats. Professor Allison has taken

the time to participate in several online public discussions under the CCG Global Dialogue series, which were broadcast globally and attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers. After China completely lifted restrictions on travel, Professor Allison visited China again and we both met again at the China Development Forum and the Boao Forum for Asia. On July 31, 2023, to mark the completion of this meaningful book, I made a special trip to visit him in his office at the Kennedy School while I was in the US and we exchanged many views on topics such as China-US relations, great power rivalry, and the future of globalization.

Throughout the many meetings we've had, I continue to be inspired by Professor Allison's far reaching insights, historical perspectives, and clear-eyed analysis of topics that have become increasingly heated as geopolitical tensions have risen, and I never fail to learn new things each time we talk. During MSC 2023, CCG hosted an official side event on climate change cooperation between the US and China titled "Oasis or Mirage: Analyzing China-US Relations on Climate Cooperation." The event welcomed over 40 thought leaders from the US, China, Europe, and Global South countries to discuss US-China relations from the perspectives of climate diplomacy and develop solutions for reducing geopolitical tensions and explore areas for cooperation. Allison gave a keynote speech at the event saying that China-US relations should not be solely defined by competition, but also by cooperation. He emphasized that competition between China and the United States is unavoidable as China's rise challenges the dominance of the United States, and that there is potential for a collision of historical proportions, especially over the Taiwan issue. However, he is confident that cooperation and competition can coexist and suggests that just as much emphasis should be put on cooperation between China and the United States as there is on competition. Both countries need to cooperate to address climate change if they want to survive and outright war between China and the US would be catastrophic for mankind. Allison has often called on China and the US to calm down and avoid conflict, engage in peaceful dialogue and fair competition, and look for more opportunities for cooperation.

As I write these words, scholars and policymakers are growing increasingly concerned about the dynamics and future of the China-US relationship, arguably the most important bilateral relationship of this century. Whether these two great powers can get along will affect not only their own people, economy, and society, but will also have a major impact on the security, peace, and prosperity of the entire world. China and the US

are the two most influential and powerful countries in the world. They are the world's two largest economies and biggest carbon emitters, leading representatives of the developing and developed world, respectively. The world needs the US and China to work together to address global challenges and prevent another cold war. However, whether China and the US can co-exist peacefully remains an open question.

Graham Allison's book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* has done a great service to the world by exploring this question and warning us of the danger that a seemingly stable world order can fall apart, even though maintaining it is in everyone's interest. Unfortunately, since it was published, Professor Allison's warning has only come to seem more prescient and relevant as tensions on other side of the Pacific have increased. Today, the phrase "Thucydides's Trap" is known by virtually every student and practitioner of international relations and every student and observer of the US-China relationship. However, despite how often the trap is cited, there is still a great deal of misunderstanding about its real argument and implications.

It has never been more important for people in China and the US to engage in sober, objective analysis of geopolitics and the changes reshaping our world and to develop a nuanced understanding of how the other side sees the world. In this endeavor, there I can think of few better guides than Professor Allison.

The American writer Mark Twain once said that "History never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme." This oft-cited insight chimes with the message of Thucydides's Trap. Allison does not argue, as some people have incorrectly claimed, that historical patterns are set in stone and that war between China and the US is inevitable. Rather, he wants to point out that historical experience has shown us over and over that there is a *risk* of war when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power. Far from encouraging a sense of fatalism, in fact, Thucydides's Trap is a call to action, urging us to take proactive steps that will avoid the tragic outcomes that have occurred so many times in the past. The call to action embodied in Thucydides's Trap has inspired our think tank, as well as many other organizations, scholars, think tank representatives, policymakers, and business leaders on both sides of the Pacific to work for harmonious relations between China and the US, recognizing that competition does not have to mean conflict, and that ultimately, the fates of China and the US are deeply entwined, like "inseparable conjoined twins" as Allison has described it.

I hope that, by making Allison's views accessible to a wider audience in China, this book can make some small contribution toward helping people to recognize this reality, and how, in the age of transnational threats like climate change, pandemics, and nuclear weapons, the relationship between our two countries has both competitive and cooperative elements and is not always a zero-sum game.

The good news is that, thanks to the work of Graham Allison and other scholars in this field, leaders on both sides are now well aware of the Thucydidean dynamic and the dangers that it poses. However, we have yet to come up with a feasible plan to escape "history as usual." This is now the next step of our mission. As Allison reminded us at the end of his 2018 TED talk, what is needed now is a surge of imagination and creativity, informed by history, because, in the end, only those who refuse to study history are condemned to repeat it.

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Henry Huiyao Wang, Ph.D.

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