

BOOK REVIEW KİTAP İNCELEMESİ

Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap
Graham Allison, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company,
2017, 384 pages, ISBN: 978-0-544-93527-2

Orhan Çifçi*

In his outstanding book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap*, Graham Allison, the founding professor of Harvard Kennedy School of Government and assistant secretary of defense of the US under every administration from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, comprehensively explores China's challenge to the US dominance in world politics. Although a significant amount of studies has been conducted revealing various aspects of the US-China relations, the key characteristic that distinguishes Allison's piece is that he utilizes Thucydides' famous thesis "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable", to make sense of the existing US-China rivalry. Allison divides his book into four main chapters. In his first chapter, "The Rise of China", he elaborates on China's rapid economic growth in detail given China has had 40 percent of global economic development since the Great Recession occurred in early 1930s. In the second chapter, "Lessons from History", Allison analyses sixteen case studies about great power rivalry and points out that twelve of them end up with wars. The author, then, attempts to examine China's main foreign policy objectives and grand strategy in the third chapter, "A Gathering Storm." Eventually, in his last chapter "Why War Is Not Inevitable", Allison presents why confrontations of rising and dominant states do not necessarily result in a major war.

To prove his argument, Allison first examines Greek historian Thucydides' book *Peloponnesian War* written in the 5th Century BC chiefly posing that "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable". Thucydides' assertion concerning great power competition is that rising powers in international politics always threaten or challenge dominant powers of the system along with their increasing military and economic capabilities. In addition, confrontations between rising and dominant states inescapably end in major conflict

* Research Assistant, Turkish National Police Academy, Institute of Security Sciences, Department of International Security, orhan.cifci93@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-5746-4258

or war which may alter structure of the system entirely. Allison calls this portrayal of the relations between rising and dominant states as “Thucydides’ trap.” Finding Thucydides’ Trap” a realistic approach, Allison takes it as a guide to make sense of the US-China competition, and to avoid a possible next great power war between the two (Allison, 2017: 8).

Accordingly, the first chapter “The Rise of China” considers that China has recently begun to keenly use its economic rise and soft power instruments in world politics to consolidate its position in international system. For Allison, China is dissatisfied with recent world order based on liberal rules, norms and institutions founded by the US after World War II. Therefore, China’s decision makers strive to alter current order in its favour by adopting revisionist and assertive foreign policy agenda (Allison, 2017: 67-68). In this respect a puzzle occurs: How can China change the current order? To come up with an answer, Allison takes China’s economic growth indicators such as GDP, import-export levels and foreign aids into consideration. Alongside these, Allison also analyses other Chinese tools to increase its sphere of influence in global politics such as cyberattacks and foreign economic investment. Looking at its policies, Allison concludes that China’s become regional hegemon in Asia-Pacific. In this respect, China, for Allison, challenges not only the US hegemony but also its regional allies in the region, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam.

In the second chapter “Lessons from History”, Allison scrutinizes sixteen cases in the past that corresponds to rivalry between hegemonic and rising powers in a broad sense. These cases are below:

Period	Hegemonic Power	Rising Power	Outcome
15 th century	Portugal	Spain	-
16 th century	France	Hapsburgs	War
16 th and 17 th centuries	Hapsburgs	Ottoman Empire	War
17 th century	Hapsburgs	Sweden	War
17 th century	Dutch Republic	England	War
17 th and 18 th centuries	France	Great Britain	War
18 th and 19 th centuries	United Kingdom	France	War
19 th and 20 th centuries	France/United Kingdom	Russia	War
20 th century	France	Germany	War
20 th century	China/Russia	Japan	War
20 th century	United Kingdom	US	-
20 th century	United Kingdom/France/Russia	Germany	War
20 th century	USSR	Germany	War
20 th century	US	Japan	War
1940s-1980s	US	USSR	-
1990s-present	United Kingdom/France	Germany	-

Historical records regarding dominant and rising states confrontations demonstrates overtly that rivalries between them do not necessarily lead war. Despite intense enmity, four confrontations among them were able to escape from "Thucydides' Trap". Taking lessons from these cases, Allison attempts to understand why some fall into the trap while the others do not.

In the third chapter "A Gathering Storm", Allison describes thoroughly fundamental determinants of China's grand strategy approach. As stated by him, China has four principal goal in its foreign policy. The first is to become dominant power as *Greater China* in the past in the Asia-Pacific region. Second goal of China's foreign policy is firmly attached to the first one. In this respect, China, focusing on critical and controversial geopolitical areas such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, South China Sea and Tibet, has sought to increase its sovereignty control on these particular regions. As the third and fourth goals, China has striven to increase its domain along these regions and to earn its reputation in world politics.

Allison comments that with Xi Jinping coming to power, the above-mentioned Chinese foreign policy objectives has become more obvious in practice. Xi, who called himself as the core leader of China, has ringed considerable changes in both foreign policy and domestic politics. Alongside Xi, China's Communist Party (CCP) as the most crucial and prominent institution in China lies at the heart of the changes. The CCP has been strengthened extensively as its authority has been amplified radically by Xi since 2012. From then onwards, China's military and economic development has become another pillar of Xi administration's foreign policy agenda. China, having achieved a rapid economic development process with a growth rate of roughly 9.5 percent after 1979 and initiated *Belt and Road Project*, has created strong national army *PLA* which is now the second biggest of the world after the US in the fields of defense budget and military technology. In the area of conventional capabilities, China's military power surpasses US' in six out of nine different areas. For example, space weapons and air force supremacy are two considerable areas claimed by Allison. For Allison, another foregrounding driver of China's power is its technological and scientific achievements. In the light of these, China's decision makers under the leadership of Xi are determined to make China become a leader not only in Asia but in the world (Allison, 2017: 253).

In the last chapter "Why War is Not Inevitable", the book examines closely the four different case studies which did not end up with a war as shown in the table. These are Spain-Portugal competition throughout the 15th century, Britain-Germany-France competition in Europe from 1990s to present, the US-Britain competition in the early 20th century and the US-USSR competition, known as the Cold War from 1940s to 1980s. These historical four cases, for Allison, demonstrate that Thucydides' thesis on great power competition does not necessarily conform to every case in international politics.

Then, how were these four cases resolved peacefully? Allison attributes these

peaceful resolutions to twelve distinct clues. He depicts the first clue as higher authority above states. In this regard, international law had a considerable function preventing war between rivals. Accordingly, supranational structures or legal frameworks depended on international law constituted by states can enhance cooperation among states and offer peaceful solutions for the conflicts. Allison exemplifies Hugo Grotius' idea of global society and United Nations Charter as his first clue which can avoid conflict among states. Second clue stressed by Allison is about international institutions. Political, security and economic institutions established by states have considerable role on creating peaceful relations among states. By integrating their economies or providing security engagement, institutions formed mainly by great powers have significant functions to prevent conflicts or major wars between them.

Third and fourth clues put forward by Allison is about shrewd statesmen and timing. Allison claims that if a statesman calculates his decisions properly and distinguishes states' main needs from his unrealistic greed, then competitive states can get rid of undesired results. Relationally, Allison believes that timing factor is crucially important for decision-making process in democratic states in order to compete with attempts of other institutions and opposition political parties. During the process, governments in great powers which have democratic structure need to adjust their decisions by taking into consideration other intra-state barriers. Fifth clue which can prevent conflict urged on by Allison is cultural ties and common history among states. One of the most convenient examples of the fifth clue is the US-Britain relations. Deeper rivalries appeared between two throughout the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, both the US and Britain have a common language and shared political culture. Therefore, the values shared by the US and Britain have paved the way for alliance formation between them in many platforms.

With regards the sixth clue, Allison submits the idea of nuclear deterrence and interprets US-USSR case with realist school of thought. Beginning of the Cold War period in the mid-1940s, new arms technologies added a new dimension to great powers rivalry. Given that invention and testing of nuclear weapons by the US and USSR created conditions of mutual assured destruction in the 1940s, both the US and USSR had to avoid direct confrontation. In accordance with seventh, eighth and ninth clues, Allison improves his idea by contributing the previous clue. These clues alleged by Allison are related with MAD (*Mutually Assured Destruction*). With respect to these clues, due to the fact that nuclear war is not a justifiable option because of MAD, leaders of the powers have to calculate properly direct confrontations and hot wars risks. According to Allison, inasmuch as the US and USSR had nuclear weapons during Cold War, both had to avoid waging a war against each other. Another clue claimed by Allison is economic interdependence. Like many scholars from liberal thought in the discipline, Allison lays stress on economic interdependence which can deter possible war among

states. Allison believes that strict interwoven economies generally abstain states from a war given that in the case of a war, states would first damage their own economies to a great extent. Last two clues maintained by Allison is about states' domestic structure and alliances among states.

Though the book classifies thoroughly historical records of great power competition, it should be noted that every clue alleged by Allison are not applicable for all cases introduced in the book. For instance, in the case of Spain-Portugal rivalry in the late 15th century, only the first clue offers explanatory variables, but the others do not. In a similar vein, only last three clues that Allison identifies as nuclear weapons, mutually assured destruction and complex economic interdependence have an explanatory adequacy in order to understand US-China issue. Besides, one may criticise the methodological approach of the book by arguing that all cases selected by Allison are from western history. Therefore, the cases deployed in the book are soaked deeply westernised perspective and Allison ignores any power rivalries in the eastern political history such as China-USSR and China-India enmities. Finally, another issue that should be dwelled on that the author does not specify and explain satisfyingly China's thinking of world politics and its foreign policy culture. Unlike Allison's view, many scholars' arguments mainly based on liberal thought deem that China does not have a revisionist position against the US dominance in world politics due to its traditional policy behaviour.

Allison's book is a great contribution to the relevant literature. A reader seeking to grab the US-China issue will probably find the book fertile and insightful. Similarly, Allison has a fluent language that the readers can comprehend assuredly. He elaborately questions historical records of great power competitions in world politics. In his book, he mainly investigates whether the US and China can escape Thucydides' trap which amplifies that rising powers are always a threat for dominant powers and confrontation between them always concludes with an inevitable war. Allison explicitly refutes the ancient thinker's thesis with four cases. After all, it should not be forgotten that twelve confrontations ended up with war. These ensuing wars make Allison wary and believe that the US-China case should be analysed more carefully. Therefore, as maintained by Allison, if the US and China desire to become a great power and to sustain their potent position in the future, both need to solve their domestic problems and determine truly their vital interests. Being uncertain about peaceful future, Allison makes an end for his book by citing Shakespeare's famous statement "*Our destiny lies not in our stars, but in ourselves*".