

A Second Korean War?: US-China Relations, Thucydides, and War

Graham ALLISON

Harvard University

Graham T. Allison was Director of Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs from 1995 until July 2017. He also served as Dean of the Harvard Kennedy School from 1977 to 1989. Allison is a leading analyst of U.S. national security and defense policy with a special interest in nuclear weapons, terrorism, and decision-making. He has served as Special Advisor to the Secretary of Defense under President Reagan and as Assistant Secretary of Defense in the first Clinton Administration. His latest book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' s Trap?* (2017) quickly became a national bestseller. Dr. Allison was educated at Davidson College; Harvard College (B.A., magna cum laude, in History); Oxford University (B.A. and M.A., First Class Honors in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics); and Harvard University (Ph.D. in Political Science).

Edited by Intaek HAN (Research Fellow, Jeju Peace Institute)

Distributed by Hyeun Jung CHOI (Research Coordinator, Jeju Peace Institute)

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The hallmark of US-Korea joint command is its readiness to “fight tonight.” The scenario on which most focus is one in which the North attacks the South. Because the US-South Korean forces are ready and able to defend and ultimately defeat North Korea, our deterrent posture has succeeded in preventing war for more than six decades.

But beyond that, I believe we must now recognize another potential trigger to a second Korean War: Thucydides' s Trap. The current Thucydidean rivalry between a rising China and a ruling US creates a vulnerability to third party actions or even accidents that could trigger a spiral of reactions that end in war.

1. What' s happening in relations between the US and China?

The past hundred years have been what historians call an “American century.” Americans have become accustomed to their place at the top of every pecking order. The very thought of another nation becoming as big and strong as we are, strikes many Americans as an affront to who they are.

For perspective on what we are seeing in this rivalry between a rising China and a ruling US, it' s useful to locate current events on the broader canvas of history. In the last 500 years, the world

has seen 16 cases in which a rising power has threatened to displace a ruling power. Twelve ended in war.

To help us get our minds around this challenge, I'm going to introduce you to a Great Thinker and present a Big Idea.

The great thinker is Thucydides. Yes, his name is a mouthful—and many people find it difficult to pronounce. So, let's say it out loud together: Thucydides. Again: Thucydides.

Who was Thucydides? He was the father and founder of history. Thucydides wrote the first ever history book—titled the History of the Peloponnesian War, about the conflict between Sparta and Athens in Greece, 2,500 years ago.

About the war that devastated classical Greece, Thucydides wrote:

It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.” .

So, the rise of one and the reaction of the other created a toxic cocktail of arrogance, pride, and paranoia that led to war.

Which brings us to the Big Idea: Thucydides' s Trap. Thucydides' s Trap is a term I coined to make vivid Thucydides' s insight. The Trap is the dangerous dynamic that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power. As Henry Kissinger has pointed out, this concept is the best lens available for cutting through the noise and news of the day to the underlying dynamic driving current US-China relations.

2. In a Thucydidean rivalry in which neither the rising power nor the ruling power wants war, how do wars happen?

One of my most surprising discoveries in exploring the history of rivalries between rising and ruling powers was the fact that in most of the cases, neither the rising power nor the ruling power wanted war. In few of the cases did either the rising or ruling power initiate war. So, the puzzle: how did war occur?

The answer: an external shock caused by the action of a third party, or even an accident, is misunderstood by one or both of the principal protagonists. As a result, it triggers a spiral of reactions that drags both to a war neither wants.

In the history Thucydides wrote about the war that destroyed the two great city-states of the

classical Greece, a dispute between Corinth (which was a Spartan ally) and Corcyra (a neutral naval power) dragged Athens and Sparta to an unwanted war.

3. How did the assassination of the Archduke in June 1914 spark a conflagration that destroyed Europe?

“Ah, if we only knew.” That was the best that German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg had to offer when pressed about how it could have happened.

At the dawn of the 20th century, Britain had ruled the world for a century with an Empire on which the sun never set and a navy that ruled the waves. But after unification, in the final decades of the 19th century Germany grew rapidly, its GDP overtaking Britain in 1900 on a trajectory to be substantially larger in the decades that followed.

Amidst this rivalry, on June 28, 1914, a terrorist assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The event appeared so inconsequential that it did not make the front page in either London or Berlin. Nonetheless, the Austro-Hungarian Emperor felt obliged to respond by punishing the Serbs. Russia came to the defense of its fellow Serbian Orthodox Christians. Germany stood by its only ally Austria-Hungary. France honored its military alliance with Russia. Britain had become so entangled with France that it could not extricate itself. Thus, in six weeks, all the great nations in Europe found themselves caught up in a conflagration that claimed more than 20 million victims.

4. How could events in the next 20 months of the Trump Administration’ s first term end in war?

If the Singapore “deal” that many experts now dismiss as a delusion collapses, what will happen next? If Trump concludes that he was trumped, what should we expect? Will Kim return to ICBM tests that could give North Korea a reliable capability to conduct nuclear attacks on the American homeland? If he does, will Trump act on his threat to attack North Korea’ s launch sites? In response, will North Korea attack Seoul? If it does, will that lead to a second Korean War? And where would that war end?

In the first Korean War, more than 1.3 million people died?most of them killed by American or Chinese combatants. A second Korean War would be much more deadly. In 1950, the American military commander Douglas MacArthur could not believe that China would attack the United States.

After all, Mao had just one year earlier finally won a long and bloody civil war, and was attempting to consolidate his own control, thinking about Chiang Kai-shek and the Guomindang who had escaped to Taiwan. But as American troops marched towards the Yalu River that marks the Chinese border, they awoke one morning to find themselves under assault by Chinese forces who subsequently beat them back to the 38th Parallel.

Could the current Chinese government accept an American-South Korean victory that consolidated Korea under the control of Seoul that remained an American military ally?

5. What's to be done?

That's the topic of this conference-and I've come to listen and learn. But watching developments to this point, I applaud President Moon's imagination. I suggest we take his advice and recognize that "the important task right now is to maintain the momentum of dialogue," and test his theory that "advancement in inter-Korean relations is the driving force behind denuclearization."

