

China, US and manifest destinies



BOOK REVIEW

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Historical analogy is an effective tool for analysing contemporary international relations and Graham Allison, the well-known Harvard professor, is certainly adept in its use. He coined the phrase "Thucydides Trap" to highlight the tensions that are generated when an emerging power challenges an established one; more often than not, these tensions seem to lead inexorably to war, even when neither side wants war. The historical analogy goes back to the 5th century BC when ancient Sparta, the established power, went to war with the rising power, Athens, and the results were tragic for both. The war, known as

the Peloponnesian War, was chronicled by the great Greek historian, Thucydides. Why did the war take place? Thucydides' answer: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable."

In order to avoid the charge of historical determinism Graham Allison claims that in using the word "inevitable" Thucydides was indulging in hyperbole, that war is not always predestined in such situations. He presents 16 historical case studies, from the 15th century onwards, to demonstrate that while in 12 instances war was, in fact, the outcome of a contestation between an established and an aspiring hegemon, there were four cases in which a clash of arms had been avoided either through a mutual respect of respective spheres of influence or through self-restraint by the established power. Thus in the 19th century, Britain conceded to the US dominance over the

western hemisphere while retaining its command over the European theatre and its colonial empire, in particular India. In contrast, the First and Second World Wars resulted from Germany's search for unchallenged dominance in Europe and its aspiration to rival British naval power.

Graham Allison looks at the Cold War relationship between the US and Russia as a success in preventing the outbreak of war between the two superpowers even if there were near misses like the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Although he tries to sound an optimistic note on the trajectory of US-China relations going forward, the analysis he presents offers more reasons to expect the worst rather than hope for the best. For example, China is already, in Purchasing Power Parity terms, the largest economy in the world, having surpassed the US. It is on track to overtake the US in nominal currency terms by 2022, if not earlier.

