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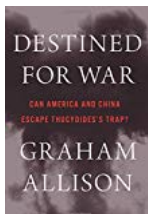
MUST WE FIGHT?



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Graham Allison's much-heralded new book warns that China's challenge to American strategic dominance sets us on a path to war. He calls this peril the "Thucydides Trap," because he claims that it is similar to other great-power conflicts in history, above all Athens' challenge to Sparta before the Peloponnesian War in 431–404 B.C. Expanding on a 2015 *Atlantic* essay admonishing American planners to avert a looming war with China, *Destined for War* urges Americans to accept China as a great power.

A professor and outgoing director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School, Allison can't be faulted for timing. In July and August of this year, North Korea's tests of nuclear-capable missiles with range sufficient to strike American territory put the China problem at the top of our strategic agenda: apart from a military confrontation no one wants, America seems to have no alternative but to ask China to use its good offices to restrain North Korea. As a result, China has more influence in matters that bear on vital American interests. In an August 2017 *Wall Street Journal* essay that drew public praise from National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Henry Kissinger argued for strategic cooperation with China in the Korean peninsula. McMaster distributed a dozen copies of Allison's book to senior National Security Council staff earlier this year.

The Thucydides Trap thus demarcates a crucial turn in the thinking of America's foreign policy establishment. Through most of the George W. Bush and Obama Administrations, conventional thinking held that America would promulgate the liberal international order in the Middle East and elsewhere, while China would struggle with the internal weaknesses inherent in a dictatorial regime. Allison's book offers a different and darker vision: he argues, correctly in my view, that China's economy will continue to grow in breadth and depth to challenge America, and concludes, wrongly in my view, that America can do nothing except to accommodate the rising Asian superpower.

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America can make reasonable concessions to certain Chinese security concerns, to be sure. But China and the United States compete in a global economy where digital technology has digital outcomes. China now dominates high-tech electrical manufacturing, while America's manufacturing sector is imploding. Not too long from now this trend will have grave national security implications for the United States and become a source of strategic instability. The issue is not whether America allows China more power in the South China Sea, for example, but whether the migration of manufacturing out of the United States will lead to a fundamental change in the great power relationship—comparable, perhaps, to America's technological superiority over the Soviet Union during the last years of Communism. That did not lead to war; on the contrary, it led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The hollowing out of American industrial and military capacity isn't likely to lead to war with China, either, but it well might lead to national decline and severely diminished economic prospects for the American people.

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But why call on the authority of Thucydides to make the case for American strategic decline? Victor Davis Hanson, the classicist and military historian, observes: "When statesmen pontificate about idealism or noble intentions, Thucydides is ready to differentiate *prophasis* (pretext) from ulterior or real motive (*aitia*)." Fairly may we inquire about Allison's *aitia*. Conservative writers cast America in the role of Athens and saw a precedent for President Bush's 2006 "Freedom Agenda." Hanson wrote in his 2006 history *A War Like No Other*:

Contemporary America is often now seen through the lens of ancient Athens, both as a center of culture and as an unpredictable imperial power that can arbitrarily impose democracy on friends and enemies alike. Thomas Paine long ago spelled this natural affinity out: “What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude...” Americans...in a very Athenian mood, have sought to remove oligarchs and impose democracy—in Grenada, Panama, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq—enemies, allies and neutrals alike are not so impressed. They understandably fear American power and intentions while our successive governments, in the manner of confident and proud Athenians, assure them of our morality and selflessness.

Athens’ defeat, Hanson added, “has been troubling us supporters of democracies these past 2,400 years.” Historians still replay the tape in hope of isolating the arbitrary error that ruined Athens, hoping to show that Athens really should have won (Hanson blames the daring and ambitious Alcibiades, while Yale classicist Donald Kagan blames the blunders of the Athenian general Nicias). In my view the interests of imperial Athens were radically different from ours. Athens’ democracy, moreover, was not our democracy. It was the sort of democracy that Alexis de Tocqueville warned that a corrupted America might become, the kind of state the might have emerged if the Confederacy had won the Civil War and extended its slave empire deep into Central and South America.

Much less were the Athenians like today’s Chinese, whom Allison casts in the role of the “Athenian” challenger to the United States, today’s Sparta by analogy. By reversing the historical roles, Allison wants to nullify the notion that America is the heir to Athenian democracy as well as to its foreign ambitions. If America-as-Athens was a Shibboleth for Wilsonian idealism and neoconservative nation-building, America-as-Sparta encapsulates Allison’s realism. That is a clever move, but enormously overdone.

* * *

The nub of the so-called Thucydides Trap is the assertion that an established power, happy with the international status quo, is “destined for war” against a rising challenger. In Allison’s account this becomes a Procrustean bed in which the history of warfare is stretched or lopped off to fit his thesis. Allison derives from Thucydides the axiom that “the fundamental explanation” for conflicts up to and including war “lies in the depth of the structural stress between a rising and a ruling power.”

As this rivalry led Athens and Sparta into successive standoffs, the most passionate voices in each political system grew louder, their sense of pride stronger, their claims about threats posed by the adversary more pointed, and their challenge to leaders who sought to keep the peace more severe. Thucydides identifies three primary drivers fueling this dynamic that lead to war: interests, fear, and honor.

Among these he is most impressed by the last: Thucydides’ concept of honor “encompasses what we now think of as a state’s sense of itself, its convictions about the recognition and respect it is due, and its pride.” Allison has little to tell us of the interests that lurked behind the pride. That is unsatisfactory, because the devil in strategy always is in the details.

“Self-interest” is indeed a powerful geopolitical motive, but imperial Athens’ interests were radically different from ours, so different that Athens offers a very misleading example. Athens and Sparta were nothing like modern nation-states. They were, rather, fragile and ultimately unsustainable slave economies at constant risk of catastrophic disruption. Neither interest, fear, nor honor fully explains why Athens fought to demographic exhaustion. Men do not bleed their nation dry for honor. They do so in the face of existential threats. To identify such threats we must consider economics and demographics, subjects which classical historians too often disregard.

Dependent on foreign trade for half its food supply and to replenish the ranks of perhaps 115,000 slaves, Athens could not restrict its empire without a wrenching disruption in its way of life. Its lifeline of grain imports as well as its source of new slaves stretched to the Black Sea. Athens had long ceased to be a city of small-holding farmers, its celebrated leisure supported by imported grain, timber, and slaves, in a maritime empire at constant peril of disintegration. Empire transformed Athenian society and underwrote a burgeoning class of state dependents. Tribute exacted from the 200 member states of the Delian League funded Pericles' ship-building program and built the Parthenon. Athens asserted its authority by means as cruel as any empire in history, notoriously the massacre of the inhabitants of Melos in 416.

Against the 40,000 citizens of Athens stood 32,000 Spartans ruling perhaps 170,000 *helots*, at perpetual risk of mutiny. The war was a clash between two inverted pyramids, inherently unstable and threatened by ruin through an interruption of the maritime lifeline and a rebellion of the helots, respectively. Sparta, moreover, suffered from a long demographic decline noted by Aristotle in the *Politics*. Sparta parried the threat from Athens, only to find its fears realized a generation later by Epaminondas, the Theban general who defeated Sparta and liberated the helots. As Paul Rahe observes in *The Spartan Regime* (2016), “[t]he Spartans were acutely aware that they were interlopers in the Peloponnesus, that they had invaded and seized Laconia by force, and that their servants—the ‘old helots’ of the provinces—were descended from the original Achaean stock, which had ruled Lacedaemon in the epoch described by Homer.”

An external power supporting a helot rebellion could have ruined Sparta. Sparta planned to invade Athens in response to the latter's attack on the island of Thasos in 470, 40 years before what we call the Peloponnesian War began, but demurred after a severe earthquake led to a helot rebellion. In 465 Athens sent troops to support Sparta, still its nominal ally, but the Spartans sent them home. Thucydides comments that the Spartans feared the Athenians would back the helots instead, adding, “It was because of this expedition that the Spartans and Athenians first came to an open quarrel.” Athens and Sparta warred from 460 to 445 B.C. before signing the Thirty Years' Peace. The rebellion of Athens' dependency Samos in 440, with Persian assistance, showed how easily the Delian League might collapse. Sparta might have finished Athens then but elected not to go to war. It was not the established power responding to an emerging challenger that undid the Thirty Years' Peace, but Pericles' decision to starve out Sparta's ally Megara, 33 kilometers west of Athens.

Thucydides was a partisan of Pericles, and blames not the hubristic “first citizen” of Athens but rather the fearful Spartans for the war. Allison takes Thucydides at his word:

The Spartan king Archidamus II and Pericles were personal friends. Archidamus could see the situation from the Athenian point of view, and he recognized that his people were moved more by emotion than reason. Appealing to the Spartan virtue of moderation, Archidamus urged the Spartan Assembly not to demonize the Athenians.... But Sparta's hawks disagreed. They argued that Athens had become so arrogant that it posed an unacceptable danger to Spartan security.

Allison does not inform the reader how controversial this reading was and remains. Donald Kagan observes that Athenian opinion in 430 blamed Pericles for starting the war. Thucydides was the revisionist, a member of Pericles' party anxious to shift the blame to an amorphous Spartan fear of Athenian predominance. We have in several surviving comedies the testimony of Aristophanes—a traditionalist who despised Pericles and his popular support, bought with the Delian League's tribute—that Pericles was responsible for the ultimate ruin of his *polis*. That also was the view of Plato's Socrates as well as Aristotle.

We are so beguiled by Thucydides, however, that we readily blame the nasty Spartans and absolve democratic Athens. Not the fearful major power but the upstart challenger started the war—an anomaly repeated in numerous of Allison's examples of his thesis: Japan in 1905, Germany in 1939, and Japan in 1941. The economics of empire helps explain why the Athenians, who gave logic to the West, acted illogically in war. Allison writes:

Athens [during the Thirty Years' Peace] continued to use its powerful navy to dominate—and extract gold from—its own subjects throughout the Aegean. It amassed a strategic reserve amounting to the previously unheard-of sum of 6,000 talents of gold, and was adding 1,000 talents per year in revenue.

Athenian democracy had fallen into what one might call the Tocqueville Trap: the Athenians voted themselves rich, in this case at the expense of the Delian League. Aristophanes' play *The Wasps* bemoaned the deterioration of civic mores: "We have now a thousand towns that pay us tribute; let them command each of these to feed twenty Athenians; then twenty thousand of our citizens would be eating nothing but hare, would drink nothing but the purest of milk, and always crowned with garlands." Thucydides later blamed the mob for some of Athens' worst decisions, for example the catastrophic Sicilian campaign of 413–415. The polis voted to attack Syracuse "on a slight pretext, which looked reasonable, [but] was in fact aiming at conquering the whole of Sicily.... The general masses and the average soldier himself saw the prospect of getting pay for the time being and of adding to the empire so as to secure permanent paid employment in the future."

Without its empire Athens' economy would have collapsed. This dependency led to the willingness to take risks and make sacrifices unfathomable today. Sixty percent of Athens' military-age male population died in the Peloponnesian War, the historian Barry S. Strauss estimates. By contrast, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War, and the Second World War ended after the defeated side lost 30% of its military-age male population.

* * *

There are few modern parallels to the circumstances of 430 B.C. One not cited by Allison was the American Confederacy on the eve of the Civil War, 60% of whose wealth (according to historian Eugene Genovese) was in the persons of slaves. Cotton planting destroyed the soil and thus required a never-ending supply of new territories; Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, pledged to prevent the further spread of slavery, threatened to suffocate the cotton monoculture of the South. The South understood from the outset that its livelihood was at risk. In this case an emerging power started a war with an established one, quite the opposite of the Thucydides model Allison treats as paradigmatic.

Of all the actual and potential conflicts we can invoke, however, the current Sino-American strategic relationship bears the least resemblance to a collision two-and-a-half millennia ago between fractious little slave-states. China and the United States need not pose a threat to each other's existential interests. Among the world's great powers, moreover, China and America stand out for their lack of interest in colonialism. After expanding to its natural borders in the 8th century under the Tang Dynasty, China has shown little interest in adding territory. Their trading relationship has elements of mutual benefit as well as tension, particularly as China gains industrial market share at America's expense. Internally, China is more stable than at any time in its long history. Household consumption rose 16-fold in the quarter century from 1986 to 2011. In the past generation 550 million people have moved from countryside to city. For the Chinese, sinologist Francesco Sisci observes, this is a Golden Age, the first time in Chinese history when no one need fear hunger or war. Athens

exacted by tribute and lavishly spent the savings of its subjects in the Delian League; China, by contrast, is the world's greatest saver and, next to Japan, the world's largest exporter of savings, including \$1 trillion lent to the U.S. Treasury.

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Allison emphasizes China's achievements, rejecting the common prejudice that China has grown simply by stealing technology from the West:

A generation ago, China stood at the bottom of most international rankings of nations in education, science, technology, and innovation. But after two decades of determined investment in the country's human capital, it has become a global competitor. Today it rivals, and by some measures outperforms, the United States.

Chinese high school students entering Stanford University to study engineering and computer science, he notes, "arrive with a three-year advantage over their American counterparts in critical-thinking skills." China and the U.S. each have four of the world's top 50 engineering schools. Chinese universities award 1.3 million STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) degrees per year vs. our 300,000. He adds, "China has seen its share of total global value-added in high-tech manufacturing increase from 7 percent in 2003 to 27 percent in 2014...over that same decade, the American share of this market declined from 36 to 29 percent."

"Many Americans," he adds, "have sought refuge in the belief that for all its size and bluster, China's success is still essentially a story of imitation and mass production." In fact, "China will surpass the U.S. to become the world leader in research-and-development [R&D] spending by 2019."

Allison does not relate that China is devoting enormous resources to achieving dominance in high-tech manufacturing within the next decade. Chinese planners view this industry as infrastructure, and subsidize it the way the West might underwrite highways and airports. Mobile broadband has unleashed a grassroots revolution in China, opening to small entrepreneurs global distribution and capital markets. The mobilization of China's human capital through e-commerce and e-finance is one outcome. The displacement of the cash economy by electronic payment, enabling an efficient system of taxation, is another. Other Third World economies stagnate because their most talented people are trapped in subsistence farming or devote their days to selling goods in the village square. China is the first emerging economy to open the world market to its most capable citizens. A primary goal of its "One Belt, One Road" infrastructure program is to reproduce this system from Thailand to Turkey. If it succeeds, it will unleash a tsunami of value creation unlike anything we have yet seen.

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China's economic challenge to the United States is of an entirely different order than the space race with Russia during the Cold War. Russia's military was a parasite atop a backward civilian economy, which could not support the investment required to match America's breakthroughs in military technology in the 1970s and '80s. The ingenuity of Russian engineers gave the Soviet Union a head-start into space, but did little for the civilian economy. China focuses instead on dual-use technologies that enhance civilian productivity while giving the People's Liberation Army the upper hand in China's coastal waters.

This revolution has only just started. E-commerce is growing by nearly 30% a year. China made 45% of the world's smartphones in 2008, and nearly 90% in 2017. By the mid-2020's, industry experts believe, China will become the world leader in 5G mobile broadband, an order of magnitude faster than today's technology, with two-thirds of the world's 5G smartphones.

Allison concludes, “In the three and a half decades since Ronald Reagan became president, by the best measurement of economic performance, China has soared from 10 percent the size of the US to 60 percent in 2007, 100 percent in 2014, and 115 percent today.”

If the current trend continues, China’s economy will be a full 50 percent larger than that of the US by 2023. By 2040 it could be nearly three times as large. That would mean a China with triple America’s resources to use in influencing outcomes in international relations. Such gross economic, political, and military advantages would create a globe beyond anything American policymakers can now imagine.

Allison observes that China already possesses surface-to-ship missiles that can destroy American aircraft carriers hundreds of miles from its coast, diesel-electric submarines that can run silently on battery power, and satellite-killer missiles. With the acquisition of the Russian S-400 long-range air defense system, China will gain anti-aircraft coverage over Taiwan. He leaves out that if China and the United States destroyed each other’s communication satellites at the outbreak of war, China has alternative communications in reserve in the form of cheap, dispersed high-altitude balloons with coverage over its own territory and a couple of hundred miles from its coast.

It is far from clear, though, just how any of this would lead to war. America has strategic commitments to China’s neighbors—Japan, Korea, and Taiwan—that might in theory become a source of conflict. Allison spins some scenarios in which frictions between China and American allies might lead to war. In practice, though, Korea and Taiwan have already taken Chinese high-tech dominance as a feature of the future landscape. The biggest foreign investors in China’s burgeoning semiconductor industry are Samsung, a Korean firm now the world’s largest semiconductor manufacturer, and Taiwan Semiconductor. Having no prospect of beating China, some of our allies have decided to throw in with China’s high-tech ambitions.

Japan is a sleeping dog that China would rather let lie. Under duress, Japan could assemble nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles in a matter of months. Its capacity for deterrence is buried but nonetheless formidable. Chinese planners well remember the deaths of 25 million of their citizens at the hands of the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. The Chinese strategist General Luo Yuan, frequently cited as an exponent of nationalist and anti-American views, told me that the United States had done the Chinese a favor by keeping Japan away from them. India will remain China’s competitor, but there isn’t much for China and India to have a war about except for disputed territory in the Himalayas.

America does not present an existential threat to China’s regime, but could try to create one. “Could [Washington] openly call into question the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, the way Ronald Reagan bluntly called the Soviet Union the Evil Empire in 1983?” Allison asks. “If democracy is the best form of government for all nations, why not for China?” The Chinese people have shown little interest, however, in changing the character of their government. The Hong Kong democracy protests of 2015 had no resonance on the mainland. The revolution in mobile communications, moreover, has given the Chinese authorities unprecedented power to control public debate, and there is not much America can do about it.

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China’s insistence on a dominant position in the South China Sea stems from this deep-seated anxiety. Per the proverb, China is killing the chicken for the instruction of the monkey, the monkey in this case being Taiwan. If China is willing to take risks for uninhabited reefs, it will *a fortiori* go to war

over Taiwan. It invests enormous resources in high-tech coastal defense, but spends about \$1,500 to equip an infantryman, roughly 1% of the American expenditure.

That contrast sums up China's strategic priorities. If the United States abandons the One China policy and takes a stand for Taiwanese independence, we will have war with China. It would be the most foolish of wars: China is willing to let Taiwan conduct its internal affairs as it sees fit so long as the principle remains intact that Taiwan remains a Chinese province. Washington, Beijing, and Taipei can tolerate this arrangement indefinitely, and it would require a paroxysm of folly on the part of an American government to attempt to change the status quo.

Taiwan is a tripwire because China's leaders fear nothing so much as a rebel province. As a civilization, China emerged by means so different from ours that Westerners struggle to grasp its strengths and weaknesses. China began from the Shang Dynasty in the Yellow River valley in the middle of the second millennium B.C., gradually enlarging itself by half-incorporating neighboring ethnicities. The genius of Chinese expansion was the character system that allowed all Chinese to write the same language while retaining their spoken dialects.

The socializing power of Chinese culture is hard for Westerners to grasp. From the ages of roughly six to eleven every Chinese child will spend several hours a day learning the characters. Until very recently only a minority of Chinese understood Mandarin, the official dialect. Underneath the porcelain crust of imperial culture remains the indelible residue of the dozens of ethnicities whom China absorbed. Unlike Japan or Korea, China is multilingual and multiethnic. The old fault-lines remain. The Chinese grudgingly accept the imperial order because it is preferable to chaos, but it commands no love. That is reserved for family and clan. The nightmare of every Chinese dynasty is the rebel province that inspires others to follow suit. The warlordism and banditry that prevailed during the Century of Humiliation remain within living memory.

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Allison raises the prospect of a trade war with China that might lead to a shooting war. This is possible, but also most unlikely, for the simple reason that China is prepared to make tactical concessions in the service of longer-term strategic objectives. Beijing does not want to drop the American frog into hot water, but rather to boil it gradually. The Trump Administration, for example, may impose tariffs on Chinese steel. After a great show of national resentment, the Chinese will make concessions that give Washington an apparent political victory. China already has promised to increase its imports of U.S. agricultural products and liquefied natural gas. Nothing would please China more than for the United States to approximate the export profile of Brazil, concentrating on agriculture, extraction, and basic industries, while China dominates high-tech manufacturing.

What, then, should America do about the rise of China? Allison suggests that we concentrate on our own domestic problems and stop worrying. "If the leaders in each society grasped the seriousness of the problems it faced on the home front and gave them the priority they deserved, officials would discover that devising a way to share the twenty-first century in Asia was not their most serious challenge."

That seems imprudent. If you want peace, prepare for war. China should fear us, lest in the ebullience of its new self-confidence it stumble against regional tripwires and create conflict where none is necessary. If China's domestic content program for semiconductors succeeds, the last remaining industry in which the United States maintains significant market share, namely integrated circuits, will become a Chinese monopoly as well.

Unlike the Soviet Union, which shocked America out of its postwar torpor by sending the first satellite into space in 1957, China has not given us a Sputnik moment. But we should address Chinese

competition with the same focused sense of national purpose and concentration of national resources that characterized President John Kennedy's Moonshot program or Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative. Sadly, the U.S. government now spends just 0.7% of Gross Domestic Product on research and development, much of which funds the previous administration's pet projects in alternative energy. Under Reagan we spent 1.2% of GDP on federal R&D. Sputnik prompted aggressive efforts to train more scientists and engineers. Today only 8% of American college degrees awarded are in engineering, vs. 31% in China. America cannot break out of its long secular stagnation and productivity slump if our high-tech industries continue to atrophy.

We must aim for breakthroughs in basic science in the pursuit of effective missile defense, quantum computing, submarine detection, drone technology, high-energy weapons, and numerous other fields with urgent national security implications. When we set out to win the Cold War, we invented the integrated circuit, the microchip, the laser and the optical network, and the internet—the entire battery of technologies on which today's economy runs.

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China can innovate, as Graham Allison reminds us, but it should be added that China cannot innovate nearly as well as the United States. American ingenuity backed by the resources of American government and industry created virtually all the new technologies of the past half-century. And we have yet another advantage: being a magnet for talent from around the world, despite our best efforts to shoo it away. We know a great deal about China's innovators, because many of them studied at American universities. If the United States made a concerted effort to attract China's top talent, the ensuing brain drain might become China's greatest vulnerability.

At the height of Cold War, the Soviet Union noted the overwhelming superiority of American avionics, displayed in the 1982 "turkey shoot" in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. Moscow knew that it could not win a conventional war against the United States, and that America's breakthroughs in computation would only widen the advantage in weaponry over time. Its sclerotic economy could not give the military enough resources to compete. Not wanting a nuclear war, Moscow folded its cards. We cannot so easily overwhelm Beijing, but we have a fighting chance to leapfrog over China in numerous key technologies.

We should make China cautious to test us out of fear that American innovation will neutralize their enormous investments in high-tech manufacturing. Allison recalls that Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Samuelson predicted in the 1970s that Soviet GDP would exceed America's in the 1980s. Instead, Russia found that its economy lacked most of the new industries that sustained American growth, and a great deal of its productive capacity fell to negative values after the cost of environmental cleanup.

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In short, America should not fight a trade war with China over declining industries like steel, and should not conjure the specter of rebel provinces by promoting Taiwan's independence. But we should make China believe that it cannot overtake America's technological edge for a very long time to come, and fear that American innovation will send its vast investments in existing technologies to the scrap heap.

Whether this effort will succeed is, of course, an unknown. The hour is late and we have been indolent. But if we do not undertake a national campaign for innovation on the scale that Kennedy and Reagan did, the outcome will be certain. America will be reduced to the status of a second-rate economic power as Britain was before us.

If we do not rise to China's challenge, then Allison's approach will become the default response. We will in fact have no choice but to accept Chinese economic supremacy, including a global lock on manufacturing and trade in high-tech electronics. Our living standard will fall and we will be vulnerable to foreign military threats. Those are the implications of the book that now sits atop the desk of the National Security Council's senior staff. One would hope and pray that the United States of American can do better.

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