

# The New Criterion

Features September 2017

## The Chamberlain trap

by *Arthur Waldron*

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Books in this article

*Graham Allison*

*Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 384 pages, \$28.00

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*On the misapplication of Thucydides to international relations.*

According to one prominent Harvard professor and, briefly, much of the policy elite, history shows that powers about to be overtaken attack the rising power to preempt it. The *locus classicus* of this purported insight is one much-quoted sentence from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*: "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." Graham Allison uses this highly doubtful judgment, plus pages of weakly supported statistics, to suggest in *Destined for War* that China will somehow soon overtake the United States (and, presumably, all our allies and the West in general) both economically and militarily, which would thus, according to the model, force us to start a preemptive war or face relegation.<sup>1</sup>

Published on May 30, this book was clearly intended to be the international-relations must-read for this past summer. But things have turned out differently. Allison clearly never did his homework on Thucydides; of China he obviously knows very little; and his conclusions diverge even from commonly accepted concepts of political science (though this of course does not make them wrong). Since late spring, a rainstorm of scholarship has doused the triumphal parade.

Classical scholars have researched the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) exhaustively, particularly over the last century, reaching surprising conclusions. Speaking broadly of the whole line of analysis that flows from this assessment, on which Allison hangs his interpretation, the late Harvard professor Ernst Badian (1925–2011), one of the greatest classicists of the last century, begins his discussion in *From Plataea to Potidea: Studies in the History and Historiography of the Pentecontaetia* by saying: “It is a well-planned piece of apologia . . .” before spending the rest of the chapter dismantling the Thucydidean account.

Thucydides’ lapidary sentence is often taken as one of the first, and the clearest, attempts to understand the deep causes of wars, which indeed it is. But is it accurate? Can it be generalized? Let us have a quick look at some relevant history. Do declining powers in fact tend to attack rising powers? The case is difficult to make from evidence.

Japan was the rising power in 1904 while Russia was long established. Did Russia therefore seek to preempt Japan? No: the Japanese attacked Russia in 1904. In 1941, the Japanese were again the rising power. Did ever-vigilant America strike out to eliminate the Japanese threat, even though Tokyo was already at war? No. Roosevelt considered it “infamy” when Japan surprised him by attacking Pearl Harbor when the world was already in flames.

Did the French move actively in 1914 when it was clear that German invasion was imminent? No: they waited to be saved unexpectedly by the Belgians who, contrary to German calculations, slowed the Germans enough that they could not win as

planned (quickly) at the First Battle of the Marne (1914). In the 1930s Germany was also obviously the rising menacing power. Did France, Russia, England, and the other threatened powers move immediately? They could not even form alliances, so the USSR eventually joined Hitler rather than fight him.

Who struck first as, over more than a decade, North Korea became a dangerous nuclear power? Nobody. Today China is building a massive military force with which it has already occupied and militarized some two million square miles of adjacent sea and land territory, in violation of international law. Under the Obama administration, almost nothing was done, lest alleged Chinese cooperation over Iranian nuclear weapons be undermined. Today one could not characterize the actions of the United States or regional players as even adequately defensive, let alone preemptive.

It is true that the hapless Napoleon III (to be fair, he thought his was the superior power) did invade Germany in 1870, but that was owing to German deception: a series of non-existent slights, created by Bismarck, a master of psychology, who needed an invasion to bring Bavaria and other states who were purely defensive allies into his new German empire. This he did by deliberately falsifying reports of the German–French meeting at Ems, so that what had been completely proper in fact appeared in the press as a grave insult to France. He thus accomplished the amazing feat of manipulating France into invading Germany—never a wise idea.

Without the element of perceived personal insult, the French Emperor and his parliament would not have been goaded into a rage that led to the impulsive and disastrous decision to invade Germany. Had the French simply not moved, the great German empire would never have been completed, let alone proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Without Bavaria she would have been gravely vulnerable from the West. With such examples one can continue indefinitely . . . .

The pattern appears to be that rising powers move aggressively against existing and established powers. The established powers by contrast avert their eyes, seek negotiations, appease, but they do not preempt. One counterexample might be the devastating British attack in November 1940 on the Italian fleet, at Taranto, which was almost totally destroyed by biplane Fairey Swordfish torpedo bombers launched from carriers. This in November 1940, when the war had been well underway for a year. The relevant piece of the story here is the years of ignoring the Third Reich, seeking to understand and appease it—and failing even to prepare any military response, hence the utterly obsolete aircraft.

Powers that are rising or aspire to rise tend to move first, for it is only by crippling the powers that would otherwise crush them that they can get ahead. Now we have a book that, if to be taken seriously, must turn all this history on its head. *Destined for War* has revived a prestigious brand name in Thucydides, to make an argument that even the facts in the Greek text almost indisputably disprove, as is well known to classical historians.

**T**hucydides' work is so brilliant once mastered that falling in with his analysis is simply too easy. Scholarly battles over it have been fought since the nineteenth century. Detail after detail has been analyzed. The most important scholarship is probably that of Yale's Donald Kagan, whose four volumes on the war, *A New History of the Peloponnesian War* (1969–1987), are regularly compared by reviewers to the work of the English historian Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), at least in ambition; arguably Kagan is the better historian.

With total control of the text and all relevant literature, as well as his characteristic modesty, Kagan has shown that the war erupted primarily because the elite leaders of the Greek city-states, who were mutually acquainted while their populations were not, and who had in the past managed to keep interstate relations relatively peaceful, in this case (for contingent reasons: Pericles' death in 429, Archidamus's in 427, and the end of the elite community, of which they were crucial members) lost control of the peace-keeping mechanism. The result was that new, aggressive leaders who were

not from the old elite filled the vacuum. Pericles and King Archidamus had been friends. As Athenian strategy failed early in the Peloponnesian War, the two men could probably have hammered out a peace, as in the elite-dominated past. But without them popular grievances escalated into a war that proved uncontrollable. Failure of the personal mechanisms of diplomatic order, then, permitted the war—not some imaginary contest between the rising and the setting sun.

After noting that the two scholars Kagan and Badian are probably the greatest of their generation (though, stunningly, neither is listed in Allison's bibliography), let us pay attention to their focus, which above all is the *cause* of the war. Kagan takes issue with Thucydides' narrative. Badian, among other things a brilliant miniaturist, looks at the complicated period leading to the war, squeezing hard every vital and telling detail, with equally negative results.

China believes herself to be a rising power, as President Xi Jinping vigorously asserts, through resounding rhetoric, massive militarization, and hard-line policies, although his specific goals—what he wants the world to look like after China rises—are extremely unclear. China is also identified as such a rising power by our policy elites, in spite of doubts from many experts, particularly regarding politics, society, and economics.

Therefore, as some see it, we have a “Thucydides Trap” emerging: China's rise will arouse fear in the hearts of the currently hegemonic Americans (as well, we might add, of all of China's neighbors, Russia included) who will see military preemption as the only recourse to avert loss of power and a Chinese-dominated world.

But Chinese expansion should not lead to war. We should simply cut them slack: they are only going into their back garden. Moreover, they are simply bound to rise, regardless of what the United States, Russia, Japan, or a dozen other powers wish.

The Thucydides Trap line of argument is mostly wrong (in fairness, Prussia did preemptively annex Silesia in 1742), unsupported by solid historical analyses. Will a war start because of a preemptive United States? This is like saying that Washington's interfering with Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was the most basic cause of the Pacific War.

This leads Allison to some carefully composed flannel to the effect that we must therefore somehow find a way to give China what she is going to get in any case, but without really changing much. Arms are not the answer: sensitivity, nuance, flexibility, talk, and historical perspective are.

**N**ow let us ask what the Peloponnesian War really teaches us, taking not Allison, neither a classicist nor a historian, but Kagan and Badian as our guides. We must examine two questions, adduced in the case of the causes of the war with China, which is said to be approaching unless we rethink.

One is the status of the existing international peace-keeping system. We should start here. We will examine proximate cause presently. In 1995 China simply seized a maritime feature called Mischief Reef from the Philippines, which had always thought it was theirs (it is part of the Philippine archipelago, separated from China by perhaps a thousand miles of open water). When no reaction at all followed, China was emboldened to declare sovereignty over an area of ocean and islands bigger again by half than the Mediterranean Sea, as well as to declare an Air Defense Identification Zone that intentionally included Japanese and South Korean territories. This area has now been consolidated, armed, and strengthened with artificial islands, long runways suitable for military aircraft, rockets, and so forth.

What of the peace-keeping order? Rather than following international law, Beijing has simply asserted that the territory in question has belonged to China since time immemorial—literally *gu you zhi jiang yu* (“territory that has always been firmly [a part of China]”)—a term of art current at least since the Washington Conference (1921–22).

When the Philippines turned to international law, China's expansion was found entirely illegal by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague on July 12, 2016, under the Law of the Sea, which China had signed and ratified, and whose decisions it had pledged to respect—but in this case dismissed and flouted, continuing her policies of military expansion. In other words, as in ancient Greece, the international system meant to avoid such dangers failed to function, or in this case was simply discarded by China as she changed her policies (for reasons that remain obscure).

As for the proximate causes of the war against which Allison warns, they do not fit his model, for China has already made the first move by annexing territory that has never belonged to her. The only and remote possibility for conflict escalating would be if countries from which territory has been taken should attempt to regain them militarily. Such action would not be preemption; it would be a response to unprovoked aggression, a frequent cause of wars. In 1995, when Mischief Reef was taken, Bill Clinton was president: neither he nor any president before the present incumbent showed the slightest evidence of even considering such an attack. That is twenty-two years of steady and illegal Chinese expansionism with nothing in reply. Given this lack of response to China's alleged "rise," do we face a "Thucydides Trap" here? Clearly not—the threatened have until recently shown no sign of confronting the aggressor. Still, war seems to this reviewer possible, but in the usual way, with no Thucydides Trap: it will come only when China goes a bridge too far—for example, attempts at a military solution to the current standoff over the strategic eastern two-thirds of Bhutan, which China claims unilaterally. India is Bhutan's ally; she has moved troops into the area. Chinese military action against India to enforce her claims would probably prove indecisive, leading to a festering crisis that in turn would have effects in the whole East Asian region.

This pattern follows what Thucydides tells us. Together Athens and Sparta defeated the Persians, but in the aftermath Athens converted her Delian League alliance into an empire, as Pericles himself candidly considered it. To define Sparta as the established or hegemonic power, of the sort that Allison sees as preempting rising

powers, is deeply misleading. At this point Hellas was at peace, divided, as we have seen, into two leagues separated by a narrow isthmus on which the major city was Megara, by mutual agreement part of the Peloponnesian, which is to say Spartan, league. Sparta was almost indolent: she had no ambitions for dominance. Spartans had their own way of life, used iron bars for money, ate bean soup, and were completely secure in the far south. As a pan-Hellenic power they were declining, in Allison's terms. If Pericles were to teach them the lesson he intended—namely, that Athens, with her impenetrable fortifications simply could not be defeated—and thus secure real hegemony in Hellas, he would have to force the Spartans to attack, which they were deeply reluctant to do. He forced them, however, by imposing “the Megarian decree,” a commercial boycott of a city that all agreed belonged to Sparta's sphere, even as it dominated the narrow isthmus—“the Megarid”—that separated the Peloponnese from the north.

Not wanting war, the Spartans made clear that the Athenians need only lift the Megarian decree and all would be well. Many Athenians thought that was reasonable. Pericles refuted them by saying “Let none of you think that we should be going to war for a trifle if we refuse to revoke the Megarian decree. It is a point they make much of, and say that war need not take place if we revoke his decree.” In other words, Pericles was adamant not because Megara was of importance, but because it was the sole issue he could use to force war-averse Sparta to fight. Athens, the rising power in Allison's nomenclature, went to great pains to provoke a Spartan attack. In no way was this attack an instance of Spartan preemption. It was forced by an Athenian plan that gave reluctant Sparta little choice but to take some action. Even so, many Spartans, including King Archidamus, opposed war. When war came, however, and lasted decades, Sparta destroyed Athens. Even in its model instance, the Thucydides Trap concept cannot be convincingly applied.

**W**hat does all this have to do with the present situation? Fundamentally nothing, because the Thucydides Trap is a myth, invented by a theory-driven political scientist lacking serious knowledge either of Thucydides or of the

current Asian situation. The theory is intended as a catchy slogan—a bumper sticker of ersatz erudition.

At summer's end, however, it is not the specter of China that is haunting our leaders; rather it is that of North Korea. Even the Chinese want North Korea “denuclearized”—and no less than Bill Clinton pretended he believed he had solved the problem, which is insoluble, way back in 1994.

We do not know how many weapons Pyongyang has. Even if they agreed to hand them “all” over, how could we be certain that a few or many had not been concealed in the labyrinth of tunnels under the country's forty-seven thousand square miles? Furthermore, no country will ever denuclearize again, after the lesson taught Ukraine by the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, in which Ukraine gave up her missiles, relying instead on guarantees by Britain, Russia, and the United States—which was followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea and continuing warfare against Ukraine.

If, as seems decreasingly possible, Washington should decide to preempt North Korea, or, even less plausibly, China, the reason will not be because of some wish on the part of the United States to preserve her power in Asia (as Allison wrongly suggests Sparta did in Greece), but rather because of allied concerns, from Japan and South Korea in particular. At heart, Kim Jong-un doesn't care about his people, but probably wants to remain breathing. I am sure he is aware of the utter devastation the United States and her allies could inflict on his country. He knows that one or more of the most devastating weapon systems ever developed lies quietly in the deep off his coast.

An Ohio-class submarine has twenty-four Trident II submarine-launched ballistic missiles each, with up to twelve independently targeted nuclear warheads of between one hundred and four hundred kilotons. That is 288 warheads from one sub, launched in about a minute and traveling in at twenty-four times the speed of sound. One submarine would turn the entire country to glass. North Korea would

have no defense against such an attack. Bear in mind, however, that, like the Peloponnesian War, our action might well develop into hideous escalation, killing millions or tens of millions of quite innocent civilians. (Therefore this author favors plain-vanilla diplomatic recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power and the establishment of secure communications channels. Who knows what Pyongyang would do given a new set of options? They might move slowly or never. But geopolitically the cat would be among the pigeons.)

**W**hat then is really the problem? Why is war involving China or Korea even a worry? It is the same problem to which we alluded at the beginning of this essay: cautious, appeasing behavior toward aggressors, even when their intentions are clear. We might call this the “Chamberlain Trap” after Neville Chamberlain, the good, popular, peace-loving Prime Minister of England, one of the authors of the disastrous Munich Agreement (1938) that sought to avoid war by concessions, while in fact ensuring prolonged war by teaching Hitler that the British were easily fooled. That—and not some scraps of classics and political science pasted together—is the trap we are in urgent need of avoiding.

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<sup>1</sup>*Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, by Graham Allison; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 384 pages, \$28.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 36 Number 1, on page 16

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