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**BOOK REVIEW: DESTINED FOR WAR. CAN AMERICA AND CHINA ESCAPE THUCYDIDES'S TRAP? BY GRAHAM ALLISON, HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT. BOSTON – NEW YORK, 2017**

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The subject of a replacement of the United States as a hegemon of the international system with China is not new. One notable author who devoted an important part of his work on the issue of the rise of China is John J. Mearsheimer, who argued about “China’s [u]npeaceful [r]ise” (Mearsheimer: 2006) and the possible frictions that can be caused between China and the United States, even in North-East Asia (Mearsheimer: 2001).<sup>[1]</sup> Being aware of the Chinese developments in many areas, such as infrastructure, economy or military, Graham Allison is another author who discusses a possible clash between China and the United States, by invoking an ancient author – Thucydides. The presentation of his ideas will be the subject of the current book review.

The aim of this paper is to review the book *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* by Graham Allison. This book is part of a wider project<sup>[2]</sup>, coordinated by Allison, and dedicated to the research of the historical record of sixteen conflicts between the great powers<sup>[3]</sup> from the past five hundred years. The main question addressed by the author in his research refers to the eventual possibility of a war between great powers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a war between the United States of America, as the hegemonic power in the international system, and China, a state which is on the rise. An eventual discord between these two great powers can lead to a hegemonic war that can resettle the international arena<sup>[4]</sup>.

The theoretical framework of the research rests on the concept of *Thucydides’s Trap*, inspired from the ancient author, who had written *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (431 – 404 BC), a hegemonic war, fought between Sparta and Athens, together with their allies, for preeminence in the Greek world. The rise of Athens - the naval power - caused distress and fear for Sparta - the land power - and triggered a war for hegemony. Therefore, the concept of Thucydides’s Trap refers to “the severe structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to upend a ruling one. In such conditions,

1 Also see Mearsheimer (2010);

2 For more details about the project see the official website: <https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/overview-thucydides-trap>;

3 Another part of the project takes into account also conflicts involving minor powers. For 14 more additional cases see: <https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/methodology/thucydides-trap-potential-additional-cases>.

4 One of the best definitions about hegemonic war comes from Robert Gilpin, “[h]egemonic war historically has been the basic mechanism of systemic change in world politics” (Gilpin: 1981, pp. 209-210), with three main features: (1) direct fight between the leading state/s and the challenger/s, by encompassing all the great and some minor powers, (2) the greatest interest is represented by the entire nature of the international system and (3), given the high stakes involved and the general scope, there are few restrictions (Gilpin: 1981, 199-200).

not just extraordinary, unexpected events, but even ordinary flashpoints of foreign affairs, can trigger large-scale conflict” (Allison: 2017, p. 42). This concept is applied by Allison on the other past five hundred years conflicts between great powers, from which twelve ended in war, and to analyze the eventual possibility of a hegemonic war between the United States and China.

Beside the introduction and conclusion, the book is separated into four parts: (1) *The Rise of China*; (2) *Lessons from History*; (3) *A Gathering Storm*; and (4) *Why War is not Inevitable*. The first part concentrates on the rise of China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the main competitor to the United States. As the author shows, the Chinese economy has surpassed the American one in PPP GDP in 2014 (\$ 18,228 to 17,393 bln.), the difference being expected to grow in the favor of China by 2024 (\$ 35,596 to 25,093 bln.) (Allison: 2017, p. 24). Moreover, China has surpassed the United States in other sectors, such as constructions, infrastructure building (roads, highways, railways), with other improvements in education, healthcare and reducing poverty (Allison: 2017, p. 28). After organizing BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa group) in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, starting with 2013, China started to elaborate its own initiatives to connect economically Asia with Europe and North Africa, embodied in the \$ 1.4 trillion “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) project (Allison: 2017, p. 37).

In the second part, Allison analyses the Peloponesian war between Sparta and Athens, by making use of the concept of Thucydides’s Trap and concludes that the war between the two city-states was difficult to avoid (Allison: 2017, p. 53). Next, Allison briefly presents the sixteen great power conflict cases identified in the past five hundred years, from which four resulted in peace and the other twelve in wars caused by a power that challenged the established one (Allison: 2017, p. 54). I find this to be the most interesting part in the entire book, a collection of cases that represent the most important conflicts for domination between great powers in the past five hundred years. The fact that twelve of the sixteen conflicts between great powers ended into war represents an important clue that a hegemonic war between China (the challenger) and USA (the established power) can become a reality. Looking from another perspective, a contemporary war between China and USA can also be avoided. This is because in the period before the Cold War (a conflict ended in peace, without a hegemonic war between USSR and USA) (Allison: 2017, p. 54), war was more acceptable and a common reality of the international relations, especially in the era preceding the First World War<sup>[5]</sup>. The interwar period witnessed the failure of the League of Nations as an international organization designed to maintain international peace and security, but after the Second World War, international relations became more and more regulated by multilateral agreements designed to ensure peace, the most important example being the United Nations Organization, where the United States and China are both permanent members in the Security Council. Another argument against a hegemonic war can be the ever more increased interdependence<sup>[6]</sup> between nations, an argument that Allison brings into discussion later in the book. Third, in this

5 I also take into account the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928) by which the signatory states rejected war as an acceptable instrument in international relations (Kissinger: 1994, pp. 280-281), even though the entire international architecture (Versailles System, alliances, pacts, treaties) during the interwar period failed to prevent the Second World War.

6 For the issue of interdependence, see Nye and Keohane (2012).

part, Allison presents in brief four cases that led to war: the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Franco-Prussian war, Anglo-Dutch wars from 17<sup>th</sup> century and the Habsburg House versus France in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Allison: 2017, p. 54).

The third part is reserved for a presentation about how the United States behaved as an emerging hegemon at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The process of American ascension on the international arena was started by Theodore Roosevelt, first as Assistant Secretary of the navy under the mandate of McKinley, then as the president of the United States (Allison: 2017, p. 99). For the American rise in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the author takes into account the Spanish-American war (Allison: 2017, pp. 103-105), the Monroe Doctrine (Allison: 2017, pp. 105-107), the Panama Canal (Allison: 2017, pp. 107-112) and the Alaska dispute with Canada (Allison: 2017, pp. 112-114). This enumeration of cases represents a comparison made by the author in order to emphasize the fact that China has taken the same path in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in its region: the Senkaku issue with Japan, Taiwan, Chinese military provocations in the South China Sea etc. It seems that China is trying to implement its own version of the Monroe Doctrine in East Asia.

Allison also makes another parallel with the United States, by introducing the slogan of “Make China Great Again” (Allison: 2017, p. 117), which has four components: “[r]eturning China to the predominance in Asia it enjoyed before the West intruded”; “[r]eestablishing control over the territories of “greater China,” including not just Xinjiang and Tibet on the mainland, but also Hong Kong and Taiwan”; “[r]ecovering its historic sphere of influence along its borders and in the adjacent seas so that others give it the deference great nations have always demanded”; and “[c]ommanding the respect of other great powers in the councils of the world” (Allison: 2017, p. 118). Also, Allison states that “[a]t the core of these national goals is a civilizational creed that sees China as the center of the universe” (Allison: 2017, p. 118), which seems to be a kind of Chinese exceptionalism as was for the American case in the precedent century. I consider that Allison attributes the same historical role to Xi Jinping, as a state leader, with Theodore Roosevelt, who started the process of American emergence as a respected leader, first in the Americas, then in the world, a position that China might challenge. According to Allison, Xi’s internal objectives relate to the revitalization of the Communist Party, boosting nationalism and patriotism, making “a third economic revolution” and reorganize the military forces (Allison: 2017, p. 124).

In the fourth part, as the title reveals, the author tries to explain the fact that a hegemonic war between China and United States is not inevitable. Allison begins his argumentation by mentioning that “fortunately, escaping Thucydides’s Trap is not just a matter of theory” (Allison: 2017, p. 190) and recalls the four cases in the past five hundred years when the conflicts between ruling and challenging powers were resolved without war: Spain-Portugal, United Kingdom-United States, United States-Soviet Union and German predominance in Europe after the Cold War (Allison: 2017, p. 190). Allison argues that these cases “offer a rich set of clues for leaders seeking to make the rise of China a fifth case of no war” and he takes into account “twelve clues for peace” (Allison: 2017, p. 190). Given the space requirements, I will insist only on those stating that nuclear war under MAD is not an option (7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>) (Allison: 2017, p. 208-210), and the one (the 10<sup>th</sup>) that points out the importance of

interdependence in avoiding war (Allison: 2017, p. 210).

In this part the author also proposes a strategy for the United States, comprised of a number of principles, in order to escape Thucydides's Trap in the contest with China (Allison: 2017, p. 215). First, the United States must "recognize new structural realities", in a world where China experiences a high economic growth rate and estimates show that the Chinese economy will be three times larger than the American one by 2040 (Allison: 2017, p. 215-216). Second, a Council of Historical Advisers – similar to the economic council – should be created by the White House to analyze and compare the precedent events and to be taken into consideration in defining the strategy for dealing with the emergence of China (Allison: 2017, p. 216-218). Third, the American leadership must recognize that the post-Cold War strategy of "engage but hedge" towards China is contradictory and the Chinese state will demand recognition according to its power (Allison: 2017, p. 218-220). Fourth, the American leadership must consider all the strategic options regarding China, even the unpleasant ones: "[a]ccommodate", "[u]ndermine", "[n]egotiate a long peace" and "[r]edefine the relationship" (Allison: 2017, pp. 220-226).

In the concluding remarks, Allison advances several "core ideas" for the American strategy: (1) "clarify vital interests" in order to be able to defend them, (2) "[u]nderstand what China is trying to do" in order solve the disputes, (3) "[d]o strategy" as strategy is not seriously taken into consideration at Washington and (4) "[m]ake domestic challenges central", as today the United States experience problems with the political system (Allison: 2017, pp. 233-239).

To conclude, Allison's book represents an interesting and fascinating work, especially since it represents a part of a wider project that analyzes the war between great and small powers in the past five hundred years. The most interesting part of it is, I believe, the construction of arguments around the concept of Thucydides's Trap, extracted from a book written almost twenty four centuries ago, highlighting the actuality of the ancient author's thinking.

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