

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

By Graham Allison

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Reviewed by James R. Cricks

Harvard sage Graham Allison has chosen to focus his considerable foreign policy expertise on the preeminent question of our age: how can we avoid a future war between its two most powerful nations? This book is a historically driven analysis of a topic he previously discussed in a prominent 2015 *Atlantic* article on the “Thucydides Trap.” In the classic work on the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides described the case of a disastrous conflict between a rising Athens and an established Sparta that brought Greek preeminence to a close. As a new U.S. administration grapples with a similar relationship, Allison provides key insights on the nature of the current problem while offering clues on how it can be successfully managed. He asserts a U.S.-China war is not inevitable, but conflict will continue to intensify as

rising Chinese strength causes great concern for the United States and its allies.

Destined for War begins with a summary of the present operational environment in which China has surpassed the United States economically, as measured by several key indicators. “Grand Master” Lee Kuan Yew, former leader of Singapore, provides critical comments on China’s “true nature” and its potential as the “biggest player in the history of the world.” The second part of the book provides a perspective of U.S.-China relations using a 500-year survey of superpower relationships. Of the 16 cases (16th-century Spain-Portugal to the current German rise), no less than 12 of them ended in war. Allison ominously offers the case of the rivalry between pre-World War I Germany and Great Britain as the closest analogue to our current global situation. Finally, he assesses that the United States must make radical changes in its attitudes and actions if it is not to follow the same path. His prescription involves a better understanding of the clash of civilizations that his colleague Samuel Huntington earlier outlined in his own seminal work. Importantly, Allison calls for deeper reflection before we “sleepwalk” into another 1914-like catastrophe.

It is hard, but necessary, to critically evaluate Allison’s argument in spite of his stellar reputation since John F. Kennedy’s Cuban Missile Crisis. His impressive listing of colleagues can also create another type of trap for readers easily awed by Western academic credentials. Could this book be weakened by some intellectual arrogance as the author assembled evidence from elite circles? He does not acknowledge any major knowledge gaps that should be focused on during a U.S. “pause for reflection.” Xi Jinping and the current Chinese Communist Party leadership are significant players, but so are Jack Ma of corporate giant Alibaba and other groups outside of Beijing. In the last century, the United States focused on Chinese nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek and missed other underlying currents. Academic modesty may be in order as we struggle to better understand

China and Eastern thinking. Richard E. Nisbett’s *Geography of Thought* (Free Press, 2003) could help military strategists with key cultural insights on the differences between Western Aristotelian and Eastern Confucian-based thought patterns. Allison does state that civilizational differences “are growing more, not less, significant as sources of conflict.”

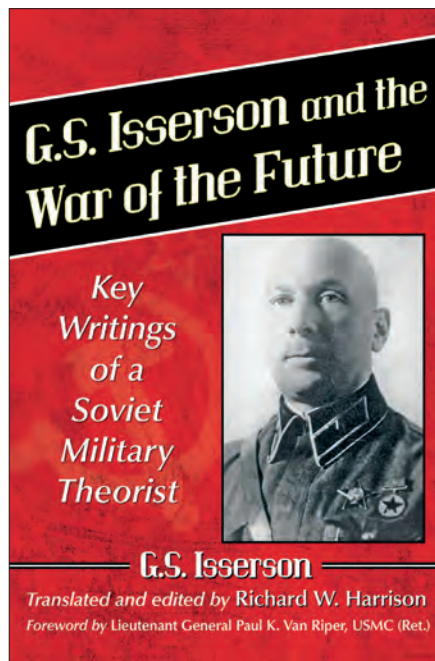
Allison lays out several strategic options the United States should consider after its reflection. He cautions that accommodation is not the same as appeasement and should be rationally considered. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea may be part of an exchange for Chinese denuclearization of the North. With the 1963 U.S.-Soviet Union confrontation in mind, he realizes any miscalculation producing an all-out nuclear war from Asia would be madness. His next option would be to undermine the Chinese Communist leadership, which has a fragile hold on its 1.4 billion fellow citizens. The core Communist ideology is not compatible with increasing demands for freedom, especially in areas where non-Han Chinese populations live. This confrontational U.S. option is problematic because many Chinese are sensitive to previous Western manipulation during a “century of humiliation.”

Allison’s third option is to negotiate a long peace similar to our arrangements with the former Soviet Union during the time of détente. The United States could link an end to its human rights litany to South China Sea concessions by the Chinese. Although there were advantages to this strategy when we faced the Soviets, the Chinese have a patience that they can use to their advantage against the numerous U.S. administrations that Xi could face. His final option is to redefine our relationship with China and work together on such “mega-threats” such as climate change or global terrorism. Presidents Xi and Barack Obama began down this path with the 2016 Paris Agreement but continued cooperation does not appear likely as the United States is now skeptical of many global efforts. The recent “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region was underwhelming in execution, and few American strategy

documents are even read by senior members of the U.S. national security team. Allison notes with hope that the Chinese leader is not irrationally nationalistic, allowing his daughter to attend Harvard and reap the benefits of international cooperation among elites. Allison's main caution is that our strategic dilemma requires some major bilateral adjustment to avoid an impending catastrophe.

This is an important book that strongly contributes to the body of international relations work. Strategists and military officers should read it carefully to better understand the high stakes involved in this U.S.-China rivalry. George C. Marshall struggled with the Chinese relationship himself, especially as Secretary of Defense, even after personally knowing Mao Zedong and other leaders in China. Marshall marveled at the complexity of the Chinese problem in 1950 and the challenge, including North Korea, has not gotten any simpler today. We no longer have Marshall or Lee Kuan Yew to provide advice, so we are obligated to increase our own knowledge and empathy. Reading *Destined for War* is one way to fulfill that obligation. JFQ

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G.S. Isserson and the War of the Future: Key Writings of a Soviet Military Theorist

Translated and Edited by Richard W. Harrison
McFarland, 2016
332 pp. \$45.00
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Reviewed by Ofer Fridman

On December 8, 1594, William Louis of Nassau, one of the commanders of the Dutch army, sent a letter to his cousin, Maurice of Nassau, in which he suggested a new way to deploy musketeers on the battlefield that significantly increased their rate of fire. He argued that six rotating ranks of musketeers could produce a continuous hail of fire, keeping the enemy at bay. This “volley” technique (known as the “European Countermarch” today) soon became the standard way of force deployment in European armies. It was part of the emerging military revolution that changed not only the ways to conduct wars but also the geopolitical balance in Europe and the general course of history.¹ In 1532, 62 years before this pivotal work of the Counts of Nassau,

another work of military significance was published—*The Prince* by Niccolo Machiavelli. While this book did not deal with military deployment per se, its significance as one of the fundamental works on political-military relations has been widely acknowledged through the centuries.

On the one hand, both these works deserve our recognition as important keystones in military history. On the other, their contributions to the phenomenon of war were entirely different. While the first had an instrumental and practical nature intended to solve problems in the context of 16th-century military technology and tactics, the second shaped the philosophical understanding of *why* states fight and *how* they should do it. Therefore, it is not surprising that while the military genius of the Counts of Nassau is remembered only by a small circle of military historians, Machiavelli maintains his position as one of the founders of modern political-military thought.

Reading Dr. Richard Harrison's translation *G.S. Isserson and the War of the Future* calls to mind the work of the Counts of Nassau more than that of Machiavelli. On the one hand, Isserson truly deserves his place in the pantheon of all great military thinkers, as one of the most prominent developers and promoters of the concept of deep operations that proved itself so profoundly on the battlefields of World War II. Without doubt, his concept of deep operations was the European Countermarch of the 20th century that changed the way of war. On the other, Isserson is too practical and instrumental in solving the technological and tactical problems of his time, focusing on functional improvement of force deployment, rather than on the broader phenomenon of war or its evolution in the 20th century.

Reading through Harrison's selection of six of Isserson's works that comprises the book, it is difficult to see their relevance today or for the future of war. Thus, I do not share the enthusiasm of retired Lieutenant General Paul K. Van Riper's foreword, which states that Isserson still has “much to offer for those