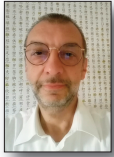


Thucydides' Trap and Matteo Ricci's Sapiential Dialogue: Looking for a Way Out from a Not Inevitable Sino-American War



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The Chinese giant has risen

In 2015, an essay written by Graham Allison and published by the *Atlantic*, the title of which was “The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China headed for War?”, ignited considerable debate—not confined to academic circles.¹ In 2017, Allison’s book on the same theme—*Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?*—begins with the following words: “Two centuries ago, Napoleon warned, ‘Let China sleep; when she wakes, she will shake the world.’ Today China has awakened, and the world is beginning to shake.”² In a certain sense, China’s growth “has happened so quickly that we have not yet had time to be astonished;”³ nevertheless, it would be difficult not to agree with Lee Kuan Yew 李光耀, the founder and long-serving leader of Singapore, who once said: “The size of China’s displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance. It is not possible to pretend that this is just another big player. *This is the biggest player in the history of the world.*”⁴

Such a dizzying rise has inevitably put China in confrontation with the Western world, and particularly with the United States. The first bone of contention between the two nations is of an economic nature: in this field, China has already surpassed the United States. China “has become the manufacturing powerhouse of the world,”⁵ and, since the 2008 worldwide financial crisis, it “continued to serve as the primary engine of global economic growth.”⁶ A second area in which the Asian giant is currently outperforming the United States is the field of STEM education

(science, technology, engineering, and mathematics): “in every year of the Obama administration, Chinese universities awarded more PhDs in STEM fields than American universities,”⁷ and—though its strategy is still remarkably inclined to make use of cyber piracy and corporate spying—“with each passing year it is getting harder to dismiss China’s growing power as an innovator in its own right.”⁸ A third ambit, in which China has not yet overtaken the United States but is getting closer and closer to it, is the field of defence: “as China’s economy has gotten bigger, its guns and tanks—and their twenty-first century equivalents— have gotten better, and allowed for a new level of competition with other great powers, especially the United States.”⁹

However, the most peculiar element which exacerbates the confrontation between China and the United States is of a *cultural* nature: the Chinese civilization and the Western civilization are far too different from each other to easily meet. In this connection, Allison recalls Samuel Huntington’s thesis about “the clash of civilizations.”¹⁰ “According to Huntington, China and a few other states form the ‘Confucian’ civilization, while the United States fits into a group of states that collectively comprise the ‘Western’ civilization.”¹¹ It is not easy to summarize all the cultural differences between China and the United States. Huntington tried to identify five key ways in which Confucian and Western societies tend to differ: China’s belief in the supremacy of the state over society and of society over the individual; the United States’ belief in liberty, equality, democracy, and individualism; China’s definition of its own identity in racial terms; China’s pro-

jection of its internal order outwards, whereas it has a deep mistrust of any external interference in its home affairs; the different time scales adopted by the Chinese and the Westerners in order to project their future.¹² This exemplification is inevitably sweeping, yet it points out the core differences between the two worlds, and the difficulty in finding an agreement beyond such differences: “being overtaken by a rival who shares common values—such as Britain grudgingly watching an upstart America surpass its power but largely preserve its cultural, religious and political beliefs—is one thing. It would be quite another to be surpassed by an adversary whose values are so strikingly different.”¹³

Taking careful note of the confrontation under way between the world’s two superpowers—which cannot but sharpen within the coming years—Allison poses a crucial question: are America and China *destined for war*? That is, is an imminent war between them not just plausible or probable, but *inevitable*?

The Thucydides’ Trap: a prediction model in Applied History

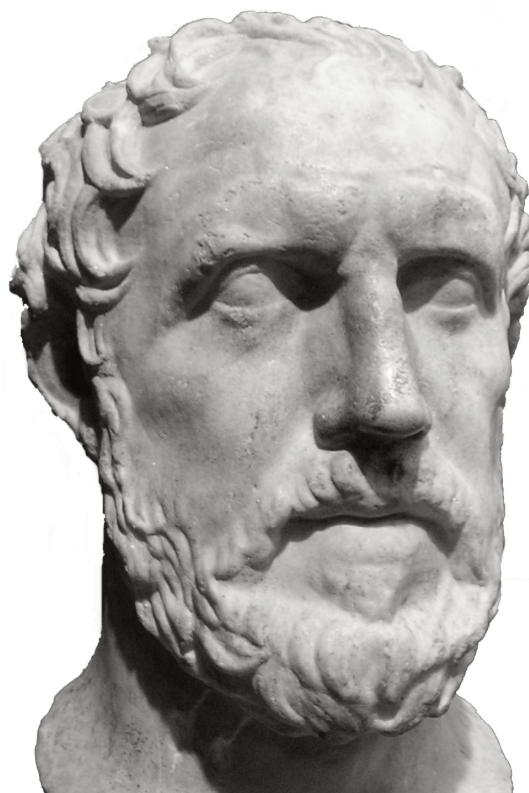
Applied History is a discipline which, by analysing historical precedents and analogues, throws light on current predicaments and choices so as to find the most appropriate policies and strategies.¹⁴ Of course, as Henry Kissinger said, “history is not [...] a cookbook offering pretested recipes”; nevertheless, it can “illuminate the consequences of actions in comparable situations.”¹⁵ Faced with the US-China competition, applied historians ask: “Have we ever seen anything like this before? If so, what happened in earlier episodes? What insights or clues can we draw from these cases for dealing with the issue at hand?”¹⁶

In order to answer these questions, Allison resorts to the analogical model called, by himself, “Thucydides’s [but we prefer Thucydides’] Trap.”¹⁷ The Greek historian wrote his masterpiece, the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, aimed at understanding the deep reasons that drove Athens and Sparta into a devastating conflict, which racked the ancient world and irreparably weakened both competitors. The core of his reflections may be expressed with these words: “it was the rise of Athens and the fear that instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”¹⁸ Thus, according to Allison, Thucydides’ Trap is “the severe structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to upend a ruling one. In such conditions, not just extraordi-

nary, unexpected events, but even ordinary flash-points of foreign affairs, can trigger large-scale conflict.”¹⁹

Thucydides’ Trap may be included amongst the general laws of human nature: whenever a subject B rises relentlessly, putting at risk the consolidated supremacy of the subject A, even if B believes its advance benign, A reacts with insecurity, fear, and a strong determination to defend the *status quo ante*. Is always a violent clash the only inevitable outcome of this situation? Not necessarily: no clash will take place, provided that 1) A collapses, and retires from competition, or 2) B collapses, and retires from competition, or 3) A and B succeed in finding a new condition of coexistence, which is satisfying for both subjects.

In the field of political and military history of the last five hundred years, the Harvard Thucydides’ Trap Project—lead by Allison—has identified sixteen cases in which an ascending power challenged an established power: twelve of these contentions resulted in war, four of them ended with the preservation of peace.²⁰ The peaceful outcomes from the Trap were the following: in the late 15th century, the ruling power was Portugal, the rising power was Spain, the dispute was about global empire and trade, the solution was the establishment of a new agreement; in the early 20th century, the



ruling power was the United Kingdom, the rising power was the United States, the dispute was about global economic dominance and naval supremacy in the Western Hemisphere, the solution was the adoption of a policy of appeasement; in the 1940s-1980s, the ruling power was the United States, the rising power was the Soviet Union, the dispute was about global supremacy, the solution was the collapse of the rising power; from 1990s to the present, the ruling powers (in Europe) were the United Kingdom and France, the rising power was Germany, the solution (until now) has been given by the progressive weakening of the ruling powers, combined with their common belonging to the same supranational entity (the European Union).

The contemporary confrontation between China and the United States fits the scheme of Thucydides' Trap perfectly, with the aggravation of an (apparently) insurmountable civilizational divide. As we have already seen, the Trap gives only three possibilities of escape: 1) the collapse of the ruling power; 2) the collapse of the rising power; 3) a win-win strategy, which leads the two competitors towards a mutually satisfying way of coexistence. In order to avoid the not strictly inevitable—but certainly very probable—war between China and the United States, how could the course of history be inclined towards one of these emergency exits?

A critique of Allison's proposals

Since Allison is a loyal US citizen, a former assistant secretary of the US Department of Defense, and a leading analyst of US national security and defence policy, it would be unrealistic and unfair to expect from him any suggestions in the direction of the first solution—namely the collapse of the United States...

It is also not surprising that one of the four strategic options envisaged by Allison in order to prevent war between the two world superpowers is in line with the second way out from Thucydides' Trap: that is, the collapse of the rising power. "By splintering China at home and keeping Beijing embroiled in maintaining domestic stability, the US could avert, or at least substantially delay, China's challenge to American dominance,"²¹ he says; and provides a detailed explanation of the way in which such undermining of China's internal cohesion could be obtained.²² But, however agreeable to American ears this proposal may sound, it appears contradictory and dangerous:

every attempt to compromise China's stability from outside is, in itself, an act of hostility, and the inevitable unmasking of it by Chinese authorities would bring war—or, at least, "cold war"—considerably closer.

Aware of the "ugliness"²³ of such an option, Allison devotes three out of four of his strategic proposals to the third possible exit from Thucydides' Trap: that is, the mutual pursuit of an acceptable coexistence. The strategy of accommodation (which is not to be identified with appeasement) consists in "a serious effort to adapt to a new balance of power by adjusting relations with a serious competitor—in effect, making the best of unfavorable trends without resorting to military means;"²⁴ the strategy of negotiating a long term peace could lead the two superpowers "to take a quarter-century hiatus that imposes considerable constraints in some areas of their competition, leaving both parties free to pursue advantage elsewhere;"²⁵ the strategy of redefining the mutual relationships could foster closeness between China and the United States so as to avoid "mega-threats" menacing both giants, compared to which "the vital national interests the two powers share are much greater than those that divide them."²⁶

However, also these "cooperative" strategic proposals lay themselves open to criticism. As a matter of fact, every form of cooperation is based on a shared tendency towards the common good: which is to be considered "a common final cause, according as the common good is said to be the common end."²⁷ But the identification of what "the common end" is presupposes a common identity of views, which is very difficult to find if the interlocutors are separated by profound cultural differences. This is the case of America (the West in general) and China, estranged by an exceedingly deep civilizational divide that only the most superficial and foolishly optimistic observers can underestimate and consider easily surmountable... Thus, before trying to elaborate cooperational strategies between the US and China based on a shared consideration of the "common good," it would be advisable to ask oneself: how can the Western and Chinese civilization be led to a more developed awareness of what really is their "common end?"

One could answer: through dialogue. But dialogue can be intended and performed in different ways. There is a "utilitarian" dialogue, that is, an exchange of knowledge by which each subject

seeks to obtain an advantage for himself; in this case, the interlocutors may be compared to two travelers walking together along the same road for a while, their paths then separating (perhaps to opposite directions). There is also a “sapiential” dialogue, by which the interlocutors seek effectively a mutual benefit; they are like two travelers who wish to become friends and walk together to the end of the road. Allison seems very optimistic about the globalization of knowledge that is increasingly involving Chinese students: “some 800,000 of China’s best and brightest go abroad for their education, 300,000 studying in the US.”²⁸ But he forgets the old Chinese saying: “知己知彼方能百战百胜”(“to know oneself and to know the enemy is the sure way to fight and win a hundred battles”)... The Chinese longing for Western knowledge is probably to be set in the perspective of utilitarian dialogue, which does not exclude a future clash between “them” and “us;” only a tenacious and prolonged effort to pursue sapiential dialogue can enlighten a sure way out from the Thucydides Trap.

Matteo Ricci’s way of a sapiential dialogue between Western and Chinese civilizations

Father Matteo Ricci was an Italian Jesuit who lived in China from 1582 to 1610, the year in which he died in Beijing.²⁹ Endowed with outstanding intellectual qualities and a powerful memory, provided with excellent education, he studied the language, the literature, the customs and traditions of China, and was accepted as a privileged interlocutor by the class of mandarins—the bureaucrat scholars who then administered the Middle Kingdom. Ricci’s leading criterion in his cultural and social exchanges with mandarins was the correct use of reason. He constantly made reference to “natural” reason—which is common to all human beings of all times, places and cultures—with its cardinal principles of causality, finality, and non-contradiction; he had no difficulties in finding examples of such a structure of thought in Chinese classics. Then, Ricci introduced his interlocutors to the use of modern “scientific” reason; he presented them with the results of Western research in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, geography, cartography, and even in some technological fields (such as the drawing of geographic maps and the construction of clocks, armillary spheres, astrolabes and sundials),³⁰ with the explicit in-



tention of sharing with the Chinese the power and beauty of a rigorous style of thinking they had not yet known in their five-millennium-old culture, but which they could easily—and advantageously—acquire. Finally, Ricci unravelled/unfolded before his Chinese friends the “sapiential” use of reason, of invaluable help to attain what they themselves considered their highest aim: “夫修己之学，世人崇业。凡不欲徒禀生命与禽汇等者，必於是殫力焉。修己功成，始称君子；他技虽隆，终不免小人类也” (“The search for self-perfection is a goal considered by everybody of supreme importance. Anyone who wishes to measure up to the life which was given to him and does not want to be compared to an animal, must certainly exert himself to the highest degree. He who succeeds in perfecting himself can be considered a noble man; otherwise, despite having other qualities, he will remain a petty man.”)³¹ Whereas scientific reason is abstract, and cannot directly implement in man the good it knows, sapiential reason is affective and experiential, and deeply involves the whole person of those who practice it: to follow its way is to become wise. Only sapiential reason can support sapiential dialogue—the only kind of dialogue that leads both partners to the supreme common end, which is also the supreme common good.

However, the quest for the supreme common good is of a religious nature. Is it possible for people belonging to different cultures to speak of religion without falling into fanaticism and

bigotry, and to share a common way to self-improvement? Is it possible to conduct an interreligious dialogue under the guidance of sapiential reason, so as to preserve and respect all mutual differences in order to attain together a higher unity, which surmounts any civilizational divide and makes the very possibility of war highly remote?

Matteo Ricci's masterpiece 《天主实义》 (*The True Meaning of "Lord of Heaven"*, also known as *Catechism*), published in Beijing in 1603, is a dialogue between a Westerner and a Chinese, which reflects the author's experience in speaking with mandarins about the search for supreme wisdom. Four centuries-old, it is probably the best practical guide at our disposal for those wishing to learn how to deal seriously, whatever it takes, with Chinese civilization, and thus to obliterate that dangerous cultural extraneousness which is making it so difficult for the United States and China to escape Thucydides' Trap.

NOTES

¹ See Graham ALLISON, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China headed for War?", *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

² Graham ALLISON, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston—New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), vii.

³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁴ Graham ALLISON, Robert D. BLACKWILL, and Ali WYNE, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 42.

⁵ Yi WEN, *The Making of an Economic Superpower: Unlocking China's Secret of Rapid Industrialization* (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing, 2016), 2.

⁶ Stephen ROACH, "Why China Is Central to Global Growth," World Economic Forum, September 2, 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/09/why-china-is-central-to-global-growth>.

⁷ Allison, *Destined for War*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Samuel HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2003).

¹¹ Allison, *Destined for War*, 136.

¹² See *Ibid.*, 138-139.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁵ Henry KISSINGER, *White House Years* (New York: Little, Brown, 1979), 54.

¹⁶ Allison, *Destined for War*, 218.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸ THUCYDIDES, *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1996), 11.23.6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 245–286.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

²² See *Ibid.*, 223–225.

²³ See *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 221–222.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

²⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, transl. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, I-II, 90, 2 ad 2, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.FS_Q90_A2.html.

²⁸ Allison, *Destined for War*, 230.

²⁹ See Gianni CRIVELLER, *Matteo Ricci: Missione e ragione* (Milano: PIME, 2010).

³⁰ See Criveller, *Matteo Ricci*, 37.

³¹ See Matteo RICCI, *Catechismo 天主实义. Il vero significato di «Signore del Cielo»*, transl. Sun Xuyi and Antonio Olmi (Bologna: ESD, 2013), 107. The expression "noble man" (君子), literally "son of lord," was used by Confucius to indicate the person who excels in virtue. It can also be translated as "superior man," "man of quality," "man of value." The expression "petty man" (小人), literally "little man", can also be translated as "lower man," "worthless man," and indicates, in the Confucian tradition, the person who has the opposite qualities to those characterizing the "noble man."