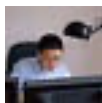


Graham Allison & Henry Huiyao Wang on Escaping Thucydides's Trap in China-U.S. Relations

At Munich Security Conference's "Author Reading," the "Founding Dean" of Harvard Kennedy School again bets the upside.



[ZICHEN WANG](#) FEB 17, 2025

As noted in yesterday's newsletter, [Graham Allison](#), perhaps the U.S. scholar and former senior government official with the best access to the Chinese leadership in the past year, engaged in an "[Author Reading](#)" with Henry Huiyao Wang, the founder and President of the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), the Beijing-based non-governmental thinktank, on Wang's book **Escaping Thucydides's Trap: Dialogue with Graham Allison on China-US Relation** (in [English](#) and [Chinese](#)) at the Munich Security Conference Bookstore on Saturday, February 15.



Escaping Thucydides's Trap

Dialogue with Graham Allison
on China-US Relations

Henry Huiyao Wang

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Allison was the only U.S. scholar alongside American business tycoons who [met](#) Chinese President Xi Jinping in March 2024. In December 2024, he was [received](#) one-on-one by Wang Huning, member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, China's highest echelon of power.

And on Friday, Feb. 15, he was the only non-governmental person Wang Yi, China's top diplomat [met](#) on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, according to Chinese foreign ministry's press release.

Allison published [Is Trump a China hawk? How Trump, like Nixon, could form a partnership with China.](#) in the Washington Post on Feb 5. He also told a World Economic Forum panel in Davos last month that ['We'll be surprised' by US-China improvements.](#)

In half an hour, Allison and Wang talked about the book, U.S.-China relations, and the 47th U.S. President Donald Trump's China policy, where Allison again, in his own words, "bet the upside."



Henry Huiyao Wang:

Thank you very much to the Munich Security Conference for hosting us. We've been coming to the Munich Security Conference for quite a few years now. And Graham is a very old friend.

Graham's first book, "Destined for War," which was published in 2017, was a great book and it got a lot of attention, particularly also in China. And since 2018, the US-China relations have actually deteriorated. There's a lot of geopolitical tension going on. There's a trade war going on. There's a lot of people worried, I think, on both sides.

So particularly during COVID, I had the opportunity to dialogue with Graham quite a number of times. And also, I visited Graham twice at Harvard, at the Kennedy School. So we thought it would be a good idea to have this dialogue to clarify some of the misunderstandings and then we can actually have a better, more authentic view of Graham and also some Chinese concerns. So I think that's where the idea for this book came from. And so I was very honored and privileged to have the opportunity to talk with Graham. And of course, I spent quite some time at Harvard. Almost 15 years ago, I was a senior fellow at Harvard Kennedy School. So we had a very good friendship.

But this book, I think, has a lot of meaning. It has become one of the best-selling books in China. We have a Chinese translation. And this book actually, Professor Graham Allison, met Chinese leader, President Xi, actually in March last year. And then President Xi mentioned about this book. I think recently you met top Chinese leaders again, Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning. And also, just at the Munich Security Conference, you met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. So quite knowledgeable. So I would like to start with Graham. And you've been witnessing all those changes between China and the US, but also the great changes taking place in China and the US, and in their relations.

But of course, since President Trump took office, there are some positive signs coming up between China and the US. So we're hoping that we can have a better relation, probably during his term. So maybe you can give me your update, and we can have more discussion after that.

Graham Allison:

Thank you. So I thank you again for hosting us and thanks to Henry for the idea of creating this book and for Henry and his associates at the Center, especially for the work that they did in doing it. I was a little uncertain how this was going to work out. But when I finally saw the product, I was very happy because what they did is take efforts to go beyond the argument in the book in 2017 that I've done in writing articles and presentations and otherwise. And essentially take questions that people ask today and then the things that I've written or said that provide the answers, all in very short order. So that's a short question and a short answer.

So one of the things that people most often get wrong about the original book, which is called "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?", is the suggestion or the belief that it says war between the US and China is inevitable. And I think this comes from Thucydides' great line in which he said it was the rise of Athens and the fear this instilled in Sparta that made the war inevitable. But as I explained in the book, even Thucydides didn't mean by inevitable 100%. He meant very likely. So my argument in this book is that when a rapidly rising power seriously threatens to disrupt a major ruling power, most often the outcome is war. So the structural factors probably account for 75 or 80% of what's going to happen. But that doesn't eliminate human agency. There's still 20% or 25% there in which human leaders, taking advantage of the lessons they may have learned in previous cases, can make them successful without a war. And in the book, there are 16 cases over the last 500 years where a rapidly rising power seriously threatened the ruling power. And in 12 of the cases, there was a war, catastrophic war like World War I, when Germany rose to challenge Great Britain. But in four of the cases, there was no war.

So this is not a fatalistic book. This is a book about how the US and China, if they were wiser, could escape Thucydides's Trap. But that's why the name. Now, if we fast forward to today, I would say we were pretty well on track to find our way into a war and have been since the book. So I think it was last year, in a meeting, yeah, I was asked what would Thucydides say now? I'd say if he was watching, he would probably say the two parties are right on script, each of them trying to see whether they can be the most outstanding rising power or the most outstanding ruling power, but they're on a collision course. And war is the most likely outcome. And my old professor and mentor, Henry Kissinger, who died a year ago, but the last year of his life, he and I would talk every week or so. And every week or two he would say, "Graham, I'm hearing louder louder the echoes of 1914." So he thought the US and China were stumbling faster to war than he had imagined before. And he thought the most likely outcome would be a catastrophic war between us and China. And if I were having a debate, just if I were, you know, Martian on a different planet watching this, I'd say that's the way it most likely turns out, but not inevitably. And that's why I like that effort to try to work this out.

And I think the reason for being slightly more optimistic at this point is that in President Trump, we have this new change agent. Now, there's lots to be said about him. Much of it, and especially here that we're in the Munich Security Summit after the last three days, makes one think, oh my god, okay, and I may be stretching a little bit to try to find silver linings. But at Davos this year, I was asked to try to be constructively optimistic. And I said I'm now prepared to make a bet, and I made a public bet about the proposition that a year from today, so January 2026, relations with the US and China will significantly improve. So we'll be surprised on the upside. And I think the main reason why that's the case is that I think if you ask whether President Trump is a China hawk or not, and you then go back, the broad consensus, broad bipartisan consensus in the US today is quite hawkish towards China and most people would be some version of China hawks.

So what about Trump? And if you go back and look at the election that we just had, so we had a whole year of campaigning until November 5th. 1,000 people running for national office for 435 seats in the House, 100 seats in the Senate, President, Vice president. 80% of Americans have negative views of China. Not one candidate had anything nice to say about China. All 1,000 except for one. And this one said things like, "I respect China." He says here, he said, "I respect, I very much respect Xi Jinping. Xi Jinping is brilliant. People tell me I shouldn't say this, but he's brilliant. I know him. He says, I want China to do well." So I think it's quite likely that, I mean, why would you say such things like that in an election? You're trying to appeal to people's votes. There's no, those are not applause lines if 80% of people think negative. So I think he might actually believe what he said or some portion of it. So I think he may have quite a different conception of what the US-China relationship could be like.

And now watching what's happening since the election, on the one hand, you have the appointment of Rubio as Secretary of State. He's a classic Republican hawk on China if you look at everything he ever said about China until he became Secretary of State, now he's falling completely in line because Trump is setting the terms and everybody else works for him. Look at Mike Waltz who's the Secretary of Defense. He's a traditional Republican, a hawk. Ratcliffe, the Director of CIA. But here is Trump. And Trump is determined to be the CEO and to be running things.

No, I would say watch the space. The most promising thing on the horizon for me is the prospect of a peace agreement of some sort that brings an end to the war in Ukraine. I believe that's gonna happen in short order. And I see in the tea leaves the possibility that Xi will become part of this process. Even part of the negotiating or the confirmation of whatever is negotiated and maybe part of the guarantor/guarantee framework that'll give people like Zelensky and Europeans confidence that this is not simply a short intermission in a war for Putin to reboot, but that actually it's gonna be a sustainable peace. Now, it won't be the peace that Zelensky would prefer and won't be the peace that the Danish prime minister was talking about today. And which she says, "until

we have a victory in Ukraine and Russia can never again possibly attack Ukraine, we shouldn't give up on the war." So obviously that's her view, but it's not gonna be very relevant, I believe. But I think China may be quite relevant, given both its influential role with Putin and Russia, and also the fact that if it's part of a peace agreement the way it was part of the peace agreement that brought an end to World War II, it has a stake then in ensuring that the parties live up through their obligations. Sorry, that's a longer speech.

Henry Huiyao Wang:

Thank you, Graham. You outline very well the purpose of our dialogue and of course, of this book that we did, which has been doing well. But I agree with you that China and of course the US can certainly avoid/escape, Thucydides's Trap. And I also strongly agree with your observation that President Trump, back, you know, maybe the person who can make some changes. Actually, the Center for China and Globalization is the thinktank we've been very active in China and also we will participate in Munich Security Conference for the last eight years. And we're the only think tank from China to hold a side event here.

What I felt also, I agree with Graham, is that President Trump, he's of course a businessman background. He's really a business nature. I saw him say many things positively. He said, if the US and China work together, there's nothing in the world that cannot be solved. And also he said he wants to visit China and I was totally surprised and for his inauguration, he invited President Xi to attend. And although President Xi didn't go, President Xi sent his vice president, which is also a very senior official, to attend that. And also President Trump said at Davos he needs China to help on this Ukraine-Russian conflict, that China can help. So even though he has some, as you mentioned, Rubio and some other hawkish Republicans in his cabinet. But this time, the second term, you know, Trump is much more experienced now. He has all the lawyers actually around him. So we can see, you know, JD Vance yesterday spoke at Munich, but there's nothing mentioned about China. So we were actually quite surprised to

see that. So it's good. I mean, if the US is thinking China is not really the major problem, and then let's find a way to work together.

I think he's now really surrounded by a number of highly effective businessmen like, you know, Musk and he has a good relation with Apple's Tim Cook, he has during his first term, his business advisor chaired by Steve Schwarzman. So he has all these smart businessmen. And I was so impressed when he announced the ambassador for China. He picked a veteran businessman of 40 years in Asia, and then he said he was the former CEO of Reebok. And then he said he's gonna bring peace and friendship, a friendly relation with the region. So from all those things, I'm quite optimistic. And also he said he wants to visit China in his first hundred days. I hope that happens.

So for all those things, we can see he recently also saved TikTok, which was on the brink of being forbidden. And he actually extended the validity of TikTok in the US. And I saw news yesterday, Apple and Google have now - you can download TikTok again and they opened that also.

So I agree with Professor Graham Allison that if probably if the US is coming back on this economic incentive or maybe tariff and others. China is never afraid of talking business deals. Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3, we could continue talking that. But also he's, if he's less ideologically, as you know, for example, the last administration, they built up the Quad, the AUKUS, the security alliances with South Korea, Japan, and on all those security alliances. I think China really doesn't feel secure if there's all surrounded by US security and that drive up China's defense budget and everything. So it'd be good, pursue an economic approach, attract Chinese investment.

That's what President Trump also said he welcomes Chinese investment to the US. If they set up factory in Mexico, he goes to level 200%. But if they come to invest in the US, he will welcome that. And actually, the CEO of CATL, the largest battery company in the world, wants to invest in the US and Fuyao GLass has already invested \$1 billion in the US and it's doing very well. So I think maybe if we have more Chinese investment there, you know, we could,

you know, like Japanese did in the 80s, 90s or could avoid this kind of tension continues and solve some problems.

So Graham what do you think about this economic prospect, if we all come back to the common sense, coming back to this economic cooperation, even though there's a tariff going on. But interestingly, he hasn't really raised 25% or 60%. He only raised 10%. And China very symbolically responded by choosing 80 kinds of category to respond. So if we pursue economic dialogue and then not really attack each other on its system, on its ideology or culture or values. Maybe we could find a way to talk to each other. I agree. You know, there could be a 4th Shanghai Communiqué that on, on we can have a peaceful unification of Taiwan. So on this economic approach by President Trump and China actually has been pursuing economic all these years and then next year be the 15th five-year plan for China.

So do you think if both country governments pursue economic approach, trade approach, maybe we could find a way to collaborate, an investment approach, rather than geopolitical and military approach. How do you think about that?

Graham Allison:

Again, we can tell the story how things go badly. And I think the Thucydian dynamics already give you a 75% chance things go badly. Then we have American public opinion, which is quite negative about China. That's another powerful factor. Then we have the hawks in this administration. That's another big complicating factor. Then we have the inevitable areas of the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Yes, and maybe even over Taiwan. So I can write that scenario in which things are not badly. But I think if I look at the alternative, and again, stretching a little bit to try to be as realistically but constructively hopeful as I can.

Well, what does President Xi say that he wants in the relationship between U.S. and China? Three things. One, mutual respect. Secondly, agreement, a

peaceful competition. And third, that we reach win-win agreements. Yes, says that over and over in the Chinese way of having their three or five things. Well, almost all Presidents have and certainly almost all of the extreme hawks start with that ideological perspective that China is a communist regime, that the regime itself, the CCP, is unacceptable because there's an inevitable struggle between democracy and autocracy and between democracy and autocracy, free countries and communism.

Well, there's a lot of argument there to be had. Trump seems completely uninterested in that argument. Now, that's for better or worse. But for these purposes, I'd say you put a check by that.

Peaceful competition doesn't wanna have a war. Trump says repeatedly he's proud to be the President who got us out of wars and didn't get us into any other. He wants to be the Peace Presiden, he says. Well, peaceful coexistence has its five principles, but those don't. I think those are consistent with this view. And then win-win situations, anytime you get a bargain, that's a plus for both parties. That's win-win. There's always a question after you have a win-win, who gets the bigger piece of the win? Okay. That's interesting question. Trump thinks he's a great negotiator. Yes. He believes he'll get a better deal than the other party and the other party can do his best job. Now I would say, you know, that's okay in that space.

In the first term, he had tariffs on China and then finally went back to the trade agreement phase one, which he declared to be a great success, to try to substantially reduce the bilateral deficit. Oh, actually, the bilateral deficit has gone down substantially since Trump One. And Chinese imports in the US have gone down. There's still a 3 hundred some billion dollar bilateral deficit.

How hard would it be to find a win-win work on that? I don't. I think that I could describe a way that could happen that would not be too painful for China. So, and I think you, Henry, your point is a very good one that most of the China experts and most of the bipartisan group in the US that deals with China starts with a national security lens. I mean, I do, but because I come

from a security background. So you think, okay, so how could this lead to war? And what are the various aspects, what are the risks of intelligence, somebody spying, and what is the opportunity? All that set of concerns.

But if you ask Tim Cook or Musk, or I think, Trump. Yeah, that's not their lens first. Their first lens is what is the economics of this exchange. I think in Trump's case, it's not just the business perspective, but I do think he's got into his head that he wants to be a peacemaker. So when he talks about Ukraine, he says, look, this is senseless killing of all these people. It keeps going on and on. And to go in, I mean, Ukraine is not advancing its case. It's being, actually, it's losing more territory and more people and more of its economy every year that this goes on.

So this should be, so I think that, so I say I can tell the story how it goes wrong. Yes. But I think we should take this as an opportunity. And I think while Trump will continue to shock and confuse us because he enjoys doing that, that's his kind of style of leadership and it's different than anything else that I've seen, you know, publicly or that I've studied. But I'd say we should look for opportunities where we can. And I think if I watch President Xi and his national security team, they're very professional and they have a pretty good clear idea of things. So I'm betting the upside.

Henry Huiyao Wang:

I think that the business common sense will probably come back and prevail because after eight years of two administration's containment and all those geopolitical tensions with China. You know, China is still there. They are very resilient. They still maintain 5% GDP growth. So I think also for American business, there's actually according to the Chinese statistics, there's 73,000 American-established companies or enterprises in China and every year generate 1.2 trillion in business revenue. So that's a huge business. And you can see that Elon Musk set up this factory in Shanghai, designed and constructed and rolling out the assembly line within the same year. And after that, you know, they become the largest company in the world. And the same

for Apple, you know, 80%, 90% of Apple products are made in China. And then their chips is made in Taiwan. It's all Greater China that really boosted Apple's today's status. So they realize how important this business link is. And Walmart, you know, used to be 80% procurement from China, now 60% probably. So it's still quite a lot.

I think it's good for the US and China to come back. And also we can see, you know, China has a 5,000-year history, different culture, different system. It doesn't have to be exactly the same. So the US should not be too disappointed if China joined the WTO, didn't become exactly like Americans, you know, they could be a little different. So I would think, you know, now Trump's economic policy coming back and more emphasis rather than emphasis on ideology and on those other political issues, probably is the best approach to deal with China.

And the same thing as from Mr. Wang Yi said yesterday here at Munich. China has not changed its policy towards the US. They President Xi used to say that we have 1,000 reasons to be in good relation with the US, not a single reason to be in bad relation. And Wang Yi, the Foreign Minister, said, you know, of course, respect, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence and win-win. So I think that could work. But we also had a meeting yesterday with former US Ambassador to China Huntsman, and he was saying, you were there too, we should find something common to work on. And then to really like whether, you know, it's a peace project or it's a, as you said, maybe health project or people-to-people exchanges. I think China now has opened a visa for all European countries and Japan and South Korea and many...

Graham Allison:

Maybe for the U.S.?

Henry Huiyao Wang:

Yes, the U.S., Canada, and the UK, you know, let's get all that so they can go there without a visa. That would be really a good policy.

Our book, you know, "Escaping Thucydides's Trap," is really great and to really raise the attention - our destiny for peace, not for war. So that's really what this work is about, and we hope we can really contribute to that.

Graham Allison:

One last thing that, one of the other interesting things that the book does, thanks to the work of Henry and the team, is advance a project that I've been working on, but I think other people should work on as well, which is finding examples in history in which parties that were fierce rivals nonetheless managed to survive together and even to cooperate in many arenas. And Chinese history is so long that there's many examples.

Unfortunately, I'm not a China scholar, so I have to kind of come at this more parasitically, looking at secondary sources and finding examples where I can. But I've been doing this project now for some time since I finished the book about Thucydides's Trap. And I found a dozen examples, a very interesting case. And Henry and team found another half dozen examples in the book. So I would say that's for students and for others should wanna contribute. Finding cases where you have essentially Thucydian rivals or even just fierce rivals who discover that in spite of the fact that trying to win all the gold medals we get in the Olympics, we're also cooperating in order to be able to have the Olympics.

So I think that from the historical examples, there's a lot to learn and the book offers a number of those that you all produce that were very helpful for me. So I thank you.

Henry Huiyao Wang:

Yeah, I think you're right. You know, this, Thucydides's Trap and Sparta come from Athens, Greece and then the Olympics also come from Athens, Greece. Maybe we should have the Olympic, the healthy competition style.

Graham Allison:

Yeah

Henry Huiyao Wang:

And then that's revived that spirit with Olympic spirit and faster, stronger, higher together.

Graham Allison:

Together.

Henry Huiyao Wang:

That's really the meaning of working together.

(Enditem)

