



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Is War with China Coming? Contrasting Visions

November 1, 2017

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Summary

As China increasingly threatens to supplant America's place on the international stage, four scholars review Graham Allison's "Destined for War" and Thomas Wright's "All Measures Short of War."

Editorial Note: It is our pleasure to present our first book review roundtable, in which one or two books are reviewed by various experts from their perspectives. Van Jackson, one of our associate editors and senior lecturer in international relations at Victoria University of Wellington, chairs this first roundtable. In this and our other book review roundtables, the authors of the books will be given an opportunity to respond.

1. Introduction: To War or Not to War?

U.S.-Chinese Relations as the Central Question of Our Times

Van Jackson

The future of the Asia-Pacific hinges, to a great extent, on the interaction of U.S. and Chinese foreign policy. Yet articulating what either state's foreign policy will or ought to be requires assessing a number of connected and underlying issues, including the trajectory of U.S. and Chinese power, the balance of resolve between them, and the durability of an international rules-based order. The disagreements that have surfaced about these analytical issues provide a useful way of understanding the vast disparity in the content of scholarly counsel on U.S. foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific.

Enter the four contributors to our roundtable review of *Destined for War* and *All Measures Short of War*, by Graham Allison and Tom Wright respectively. Each one teases out the relative merits of the advice these books offer to policymakers. In so doing, however, our contributors reveal just how much the big questions about U.S. foreign policy and the future of Asia hinge on debatable assumptions and historical interpretations. Each emphasizes different analytical assumptions and insights from the two books that, in turn, suggest different answers to the question of what the United States ought to do.

Do the United States and China feel structural pressures that favor war, or are they deterred from war while still experiencing a high-stakes competition? Our contributors disagree. The former argument resonates with Australian National University's Hugh White, who believes the United States is in a competition with China that it cannot win short of disastrous war, while Neville Morley — a classicist at the University of Exeter —

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challenges the logic of such a claim. Mira Rapp-Hooper of Yale and Rosemary Foot of Oxford suggest the United States and China share incentives to cooperate as much as they share incentives to fight, making it unlikely that structural pressures will determine Asia's future.

The contributors also raise questions about the uses of history to illuminate the present moment. Morley takes issue with Allison's use of historical analogy between today and Thucydides' time, in part because of how the world has changed, but also because of the analytical distortions that arise from admitting evidence from the highly contested historiography of the Peloponnesian War generally. Foot, Morley, and Rapp-Hooper all find fault in Allison's interpretation of specific historical cases occurring between the Peloponnesian War and today. Foot in particular comments on the multi-causal narrative that Thucydides himself presents, an implicit criticism of modern scholars and policymakers quick to reduce his monumental *History of the Peloponnesian War* to a sparse structural model. And yet White dissents, believing the present moment ought to be simplified from the complexity of modern life to a historical essence—the balance of resolve between the United States and China.

Finally, on the question of lessons for U.S. policy, the contributors render different assessments. While the power transition thesis convinces White that the only way for the United States to avoid a conflict is to cede ground to a rising China, Rapp-Hooper views Wright's "responsible competition" approach as the necessary path forward. If anything, Rapp-Hooper sees the competitive approach Wright recommends as insufficient to preserve U.S. centrality amid China's growing sphere of influence in Asia. She makes the same observation as Foot: that "responsible competition" differs little from President Barack Obama's policy of "rebalancing" to Asia. Morley, meanwhile, cautions that a belief in structurally induced conflict could lead to prescriptions for "military expansion and

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more aggressive responses to perceived challenges” rather than accommodation. Indeed, the entire realist theoretical tradition has been built on such expectations.

The question hovering over both *Destined for War* and *All Measures Short of War* is how to view and respond to the present moment in world politics. This roundtable review suggests neither book has the answer, but both are a good place to start.

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2. Two Differing Views on U.S.-China Conflict Find Common Ground in their Solutions

Rosemary Foot

Inter-state war is on our minds again, despite the decline in the incidence of such conflicts. This is hardly surprising. Sweden's fears of Russia in the face of its belligerence in the Baltics are steadily and understandably rising; in East Asia North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear weapons' programs evoke spine-chilling language and threaten dystopian outcomes.

Two stimulating and timely books, Graham Allison's *Destined for War* and Thomas J. Wright's *All Measures Short of War*,¹ are similarly preoccupied by the prospects for major inter-state conflict. Both focus on the possibility of war, especially between China and the United States, though they align themselves at different points on the spectrum in relation to those prospects. For Allison, "a disastrous war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than most of us are willing to allow."² Indeed, Allison reinforces the sense of this possibility in his choice of title for the book, in his inside flap description which warns that "China and the United States are heading toward a war neither wants" and in his constant reminders that 12 of the 16 cases of power transition that are in his and the Belfer Center's "Thucydides's Trap

¹ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017); Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

² Allison, 184.

Case File” (TTCF)³ have resulted in war. The most salient frame for understanding what is going on, Allison argues, is the structural crisis that accompanies a power transition between rising and status quo powers, especially when the former is dissatisfied, and the latter in decline. Allison’s world-view encompasses much of Thucydides’ perspective on the ways of the powerful: the strong do what they can while the weak suffer what they must.

Wright, on the other hand, writing about China, Russia, and parts of the Middle East (especially Iran), argues that the future challenge to the United States will not take the form of a major conflagration because all of the great powers want and intend to avoid it. Instead, they will “compete fiercely to gain an upper hand in ways short of a major war.”⁴ For this, they will use a range of measures including coercive diplomacy, economic leverage, cyber tools, and perhaps even engaging in proxy wars. Wright also exhorts his readers to focus their attention at the regional level, for it is the “health of regions” that will determine the overall condition of global order.

When it comes to China, Wright suggests the United States needs to view Beijing primarily as a peacetime test that pertains almost entirely to East Asia and that pits China’s preference for a spheres-of-influence system against the continuation of the U.S.-led liberal world order. At the global level of the international system, he notes areas where China is either deeply integrated or willing to cooperate. But within its own region, the country is enacting a strategy that represents a subtler contest of U.S. predominance: Beijing is working, Wright states, to avoid a war that would be “massively

³ “Thucydides’s Trap Case File,” Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, accessed October 18, 2017, <https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/case-file>

⁴ Wright, xi.

counterproductive” in order to achieve its primary goal of gradually shifting the balance of power in its favor.⁵ Wright’s frame of reference is the emergence of a geo-political competition in global politics reminiscent of the Cold War. However, if we add to that the characteristics we associate with globalization, this becomes a global arena where Beijing and Washington – to recast Thucydides for the contemporary era – cooperate where they can and compete where they must.

Thus, the two books have different visions of the current order and its proneness to war. Moreover, with respect to the U.S.-China relationship, where Allison sees America in decline and a wrenching power transition in progress, Wright sees the United States not in decline, but rather as a key actor in shaping the condition of regional order(s), the outcomes of which define and constitute the global system.

Despite these different assumptions, however, the two authors come together in unexpected ways. These instances of overlap emerge most obviously when both engage in commendable attempts to find a way out of this dangerous era in world politics. Allison, in particular, has taken on a mission to educate the elites in both China and the United States about the dangers they face if they get this relationship wrong. And he seems to have caught the ear of policy makers on both sides, with top Chinese and U.S. officials referring to the concept of the Thucydides Trap, and the need to avoid its pitfalls.⁶ In addition, Allison urges the need for deeper reflection on a range of strategies to deal with these challenging circumstances, which include accommodating China, working to

⁵ Wright, 77.

⁶ For two examples see “Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s Exclusive Interview with the Financial Times,” January 29, 2014, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t1124367.shtml>, and Daniel R. Russel’s remarks at “China’s Growing Pains” at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, April 22, 2016, accessed October 23, 2017, <http://china.usc.edu/daniel-russel-remarks-uscis-china-s-growing-pains-conference-april-22-2016>

overthrow the party/state regime, crafting a form of Cold-War style détente and redefining the relationship such that it encourages the two countries to work together to address a number of severe 21st-century global problems.

Wright's main aim is more straightforward and is designed to encourage U.S. policy makers to recognize the benefits the country has derived from playing a pivotal role in supporting the liberal international order, although this task is proving increasingly difficult in the Trump era. But he also advocates that a policy of "responsible competition" be developed in the U.S., in which the areas of competition are restrained by internal and external balancing strategies and U.S. allies play important roles. The desired outcome is to create a "global situation of strength" to incentivize competitors to cooperate on key global issues. Since either accommodating China or working for regime overthrow seem unlikely to be high on Allison's list of preferred strategies, the remaining options appear to land him quite close to the position that Wright is advocating.

There are yet other areas where the two authors come together. One is in their assessments of China's strategy. As stated earlier, Wright notes Chinese efforts and desire to shift the balance of power in its favor. To do this, he argues, Beijing will work to ensure it makes marginal gains that are without major consequence. Surprisingly, given Allison's preoccupation with war as a likely outcome, he also argues that China seeks victory "not in a decisive battle but through incremental moves designed to gradually improve their position,"⁷ often referencing Sun Tzu to illustrate the historical basis for this preference. In addition, both Allison and Wright acknowledge that war may come through miscalculation. On the economic front, they both tend to treat that dimension of

⁷ Allison, 149.

the Sino-American relationship not as a basis for cooperation, but more as a source of tension, complaint or leverage.

Both *Destined for War* and *All Measures Short of War* are rich and provocative contributions to the debate about one of the most crucial issues in global politics. However, there are some inconsistencies in the arguments and points that are underdeveloped. In Allison's book, for example, there is a tension between his argument concerning power transition and that relating to his assessment of China's strategic world-view, outlined briefly in my previous paragraph. The conclusion to the book unexpectedly downplays the causal role of severe structural stress as the likely trigger for a Sino-American conflict, reminding us that Thucydides' history "provides a factual record of the choices Pericles and his fellow Athenians made of their own free will," noting that "Different choices would have produced different results."⁸

However, the main concern with *Destined for War* relates to the thorny issue of case selection and interpretation. Consider the former Soviet Union, a major dissatisfied power that was overtaken in size by China, Germany, and Japan in the late 20th century, and yet, does not qualify for consideration in the Thucydides' Trap Case File. Russia is not rising but has been in economic and demographic decline for some time. Nevertheless, Moscow remains capable of testing and undermining many of the central pillars of the post-war order, including non-use of force except in self-defense, the inviolability of territorial integrity except in extreme conditions, and the capacity of institutions built for deterrence to hold the ring. These are critical challenges that are capable of transforming the post-1945 world order.

⁸ Allison, 233.

Indeed, the Russia example and others like it raise a number of issues about the cases chosen for placement in the TTCF. Such critiques of case selection and the ambiguities that arise from power measurement have been made before: Steve Chan, for example, in his valuable examination of power transition theory published in 2008, notes that the United States by the 1870s had overtaken the United Kingdom to become the world's largest economy with the most dynamic industries, but was not recognized as a central contender prior to 1914. If it had been so recognized, then Germany's overtaking of the U.K. would not have qualified as a central transition challenge on which to concentrate.⁹ The example of World War I and Germany's rise is also worth deeper exploration given that several prominent scholars have offered other explanations for that devastating conflict, many of which point to Germany's fear of Russia's rising power.¹⁰ Allison himself at times concedes the historical complexity of the matter of causation, though the topic is not given sufficient emphasis because of his overwhelming determination to focus on the Anglo-German power transition.

Another potential case is that of Japan, which posed a major economic challenge to the United States from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. Japan's rise to become the second largest economy in the world does not feature in this first stage of Allison's project; yet the country's rise led Paul Kennedy to feature a cartoon on the dust jacket of *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* showing a Japanese national supplanting "Uncle Sam" from the pinnacle of power.¹¹ More importantly, Tokyo's rise led U.S. policy makers and

⁹ Steve Chan, *China, the U.S. and the Power-Transition Theory: A Critique*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 3-4.

¹⁰ For one recent example and one that references the "Thucydides' Trap" see Charles S. Maier, "Thucydides, Alliance Politics, and Great Power Conflict," in *The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.-China Conflict*, eds Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller, (Cambridge, Mass: the MIT Press, 2015), 91-9.

¹¹ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, (New York: Vintage, 1989)

commentators to rage against a Japan that allegedly had taken advantage of the liberal order, failed to offer reciprocal benefits and, in addition, had worked to subvert that order through its continued adherence to a value system antithetical to America's own. Apparently, some 68 per cent of Americans in 1990 believed Tokyo's economic threat to be greater than that of the military threat from the former Soviet Union.¹² According to Wright, Bill Clinton's main challenger in the democratic presidential primaries, Paul Tsongas, used as his slogan "the Cold War is over and Japan won."¹³ Neo-realist international relations scholars fully expected Tokyo quickly to acquire the full spectrum of great power capabilities, raising – for the neo-realists at least – the distinct possibility of a future war between the United States and its formal ally.

That conflict between Japan and the United States did not come to pass, of course. Factors aiding the move towards stability and peace included the Clinton administration's decision in 1995 to undertake a detailed review of its East Asian strategy as well as the Japanese government's decision the same year to conduct its first comprehensive defense review in 20 years. The two governments thus confronted the broader implications of their seriously strained relationship and, in 1997, adopted revised guidelines for U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. This case, among others, raises the central importance of issues other than structural stress during transitions in power as potential triggers for war, such as state agency, strategic choice, and historical context.

There is also the matter of Thucydides' own interpretation of the causes of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides actually offers a multi-causal explanation of that war,

¹² Michael Mastanduno, "Do Relative Gains Matter? America's Response to Japanese Industrial Policy," *International Security* 16, no. 1 (Summer 1991): 73-113.

¹³ Wright, 9.

including the pressure of allies, Pericles' refusal to give way over Megara, and a range of grievances. Nevertheless, the Athenian general insists that the dominant reason for Sparta's decision to go war against Athens was the fear that growing Athenian power inspired, despite there being no direct evidence offered for that Spartan perception, or a weighing of this conclusion against other plausible explanations.

Allison promises to consider a number of additional cases in the next stage of the power transition project. However, the problem is that his elaboration of the Thucydidian foundation, based on an "unacknowledged" cause, as Thucydides puts it, together with the "12 out of 16 cases" refrain, have both been promoted with such vigor that this interpretation may have begun to take on the status of an iron law. Perhaps it should be viewed instead as something that is as malleable as copper.

Although Wright's thesis is more compelling, he too could have dug a little deeper into various components of his argument. His statement that the United States is not in decline is nowhere seriously investigated, but his argument about U.S. promotion of "healthy regions" requires the dependability and application of a wide range of U.S. power resources – both material and social. He also argues that, until recently, there was a "great convergence" toward the liberal international order. This is typical of the assumptions made in the early post-Cold War era and reflects the fact that too many of us in the West have relied heavily on those writings that come predominantly from within our own geographic regions. Those writing outside of the liberal West have long been offering competing conceptions of justice in a post-colonial world, especially once the redistribution of power and globalization of technology had generated greater opportunities to express a range of interests and values. Finally, Wright's definition of "responsible competition" sounds remarkably similar to the Obama administration's "rebalance to Asia" strategy. That Obama strategy combined elements of balancing, the

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development of networked relationships with allies and friendly states in the Indo-Pacific, frequent summitry, and the search for areas of cooperation with Beijing. However, it was viewed in China as threatening – a form of encirclement and containment. Wright could profitably explain why his version of this strategy might have a more positive outcome.

Both books also would benefit from a deeper exploration of the Sino-American economic relationship. Certainly, both governments may seek to use some dimensions of that economic relationship for the purposes of competition and leverage, but the relationship is also vital to Beijing and Washington in ways that constrain that leverage. The U.S.-China Business Council estimates that U.S. exports to China will rise from \$165 billion in goods and services in 2015 to about \$525 billion in 2030 – a faster rate of growth in exports than available elsewhere in the world. In 2016, some 29 states in the United States exported goods worth more than \$1 billion to China and 12 states exported services worth more than \$1 billion.¹⁴ On the other side of the economic ledger, economic performance remains vital as a form of political legitimacy for a Chinese government determined to break out of the “middle-income” trap. This makes the country reluctant to disturb relations with its major trading market and growing investment partner. Chinese cumulative investment in America has gone from virtually nothing in 2000 to over \$100 billion in 2016.¹⁵

¹⁴ Oxford Economics, “Understanding the US-China Trade Relationship,” January 10, 2017, *The U.S.-China Business Council*,

<https://www.uschina.org/sites/default/files/OE%20US%20Jobs%20and%20China%20Trade%20Report.pdf>.

See also “U.S.-China Business Council 2017 State Export Report,” *The U.S.-China Business Council*, accessed October 23, 2017, <https://www.uschina.org/reports/us-exports/national>.

¹⁵ Thilo Hanemann and Cassie Gao, “Record Deal Making in 2016 Pushes Cumulative Chinese FDI in the US above \$100 Billion,” *Rhodium Group*, December 30, 2016 <http://rhg.com/notes/record-deal-making-in-2016-pushes-cumulative-chinese-fdi-in-the-us-above-100-billion>.”

Moreover, there is a steady move in academic circles and countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to explore the consequences of China's central involvement in global supply chains, often as final assembler of inputs that originate elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific. China's envelopment in networked trade imposes political constraints, and should also change our estimates of the true size of the U.S. trade deficit with China, cutting it in half if we take into account the foreign components of the products China sells in America. Those working on the globalization of production describe economic interdependence as qualitatively different from past forms of such interdependence, implying that references to Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* should be laid to rest. As John Ravenhill has argued, the implications of this networked production for the outbreak of conflict are potentially profound. Not only would there be damage to or loss of access to export markets, but also loss of access to inputs, to distribution and marketing channels, as well as to brand names, all of which critically affect levels of international economic competitiveness.¹⁶

Robert Jervis wrote in 2011 that optimism is “generally derided in the cynical academic community,”¹⁷ and there is little to be optimistic about these days. However, we could conduct a thought experiment and begin our consideration of the contemporary Sino-American relationship from the basis of the elements that help with the management of these great power relations and that may even result in something between cooperation and a cold peace. We could start with the question, what is it that engenders cooperation

¹⁶ John Ravenhill, “Production Networks in Asia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, eds Saadia Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 358-9. See also John Ravenhill, “Economics and Security in the Asia-Pacific Region,” *The Pacific Review*, 26, no. 1, (March 2013):1-15.

¹⁷ Robert Jervis, “Force in our Times,” *International Relations*, 25, no. 4, (December 2011), 410-11.

despite geopolitical competition? This approach could form a useful alternative to an assumption of the deep-rootedness of conflict and the movement toward war. We may end up in a similar place; but by approaching the relationship from these perspectives we may better understand the decision-making dilemmas of policymakers who have to operate within a complex and hybrid world order.

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3. History Can't Always Help to Make Sense of the Future

Neville Morley

What does history, let alone the history of classical antiquity, have to offer the study of contemporary global politics? It's common practice in this context to invoke George Santayana, who wrote: "those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." (Graham Allison paraphrases this in *Destined for War* as "only those who fail to study history are doomed to repeat it").¹⁸ The conventional understanding of Santayana's claim departs a fair distance from his original discussion in *The Life of Reason*, where he focuses on humans learning from their own experiences as the basis of progress, an idea he subsequently applies by extension to the "life-cycle" of nations and religions.¹⁹ Santayana then offers a Nietzschean counterpoint about the necessity of forgetting and the dangers of a vain repetition of the past, because "in a moving world, readaptation is the price of longevity." In brief, this maxim is not about history in any scholarly or literary sense, and, insofar as we might want to read it in those terms anyway, it offers a warning against assuming that the past can tell us all we need to know to make sense of the present.

Obviously, the idea of learning from history or applying it to present-day problems can't be dismissed simply on the basis of the deficiencies of its favorite slogan. It isn't only historians, desperate to defend their corner against the encroachments of other disciplines and the demands of governments that justify their existence, who make such claims about the usefulness and relevance of knowledge about the past. Our sense of

¹⁸ 2017: xvii.

¹⁹ *The Life of Reason: or, the phases of human progress. Vol. I: Reason in common sense* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1905), 284.

ourselves, as individuals, social groups, or nations, is grounded in stories we tell or are told about where we have come from; and the attempt to learn from experience and precedent, to pose counterfactuals like “if we had done this, then x would have happened” or “unless we do this, y will occur,” is an established pattern of human thought. Indeed, academic historians are as likely to find themselves criticizing the way that others are using the past, objecting to excessive simplification and insisting that “it’s actually more complicated than that,” as they are to be promoting themselves as purveyors of “lessons from the past” or “applied history.”²⁰

The most straightforward role for historical knowledge is broadening our understanding of the present by exploring how it came to be: the origins of institutions, the background to relations between states, the roots of ruling ideas and assumptions, and so forth. Thomas Wright’s *All Measures Short of War* offers a clear example of this, establishing his view of the current state of the world through a survey of key global developments over the past few decades, especially in relation to his core theme of the end of convergence and the changing nature of geopolitical competition. Of course, like any account of the past, this is *a* version rather than *the* version, emphasizing some events rather than others and offering *his* interpretation of the connections between them; criticism of his argument from those with deeper specialist knowledge than I possess will certainly include, if not focus upon, alternative accounts of this period of history, and therefore draw different conclusions about the present.

²⁰ Useful discussions of the possible uses of history in Richard E. Neustadt & Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: the uses of history for decision-makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986) and Jo Guldi & David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014).

The timeframe of Wright's analysis is, uncontroversially, restricted to the recent past. He makes passing reference to the wider context of modernity, the period of technological, economic, and societal change that has made such global convergence and interdependence possible, but his focus is primarily on the events of a few decades – long enough to detect significant medium-term changes rather than getting caught up in the flood of individual events, short enough so that these changes don't disappear from view. He offers a few broader historical generalizations – “History suggests that instability is at its greatest in the early phases of a new paradigm,” “what was it about an age of convergences that distinguished it from all other eras in modern history?” or “historical order is created by powerful states – it never emerges organically or by accident” – but these are presented as starting points for detailed discussion of the present situation rather than as the foundations of substantive claims or normative laws. The function of such phrases is primarily rhetorical, to present certain observed tendencies in the present as predictable and others as unusual or unprecedented, and above all to emphasize the complexity of the world and the openness of the future: we can't reduce everything to single relationships or simple invariable principles. We need to look at the situation in sufficient depth and detail to discern what is actually going on.

One welcome consequence of this focus on recent history is the absence of essentializing claims about “the Chinese world view” or “the nature of the Chinese state,” based on a schematic and patchy overview of several thousand years of history.²¹ It wouldn't occur to anyone working on such a topic to generalize about “American attitudes” as something unchanging since the 18th century – indeed, it seems likely that Wright's emphasis on continuity of policy across the 42nd, 43rd, and 44th presidencies will strike some as

²¹ Cf. T. Greer, “The Chinese Strategic Tradition: a Research Programme,” *The Scholar's Stage*, May 26, 2015, <http://scholars-stage.blogspot.co.uk/2015/05/the-chinese-strategic-tradition.html>.

excessively simplified, ignoring significant differences for the sake of generalization – let alone to interpret U.S. foreign policy in terms of values and concepts extracted from ancient Greek philosophy. The idea that the decisions of the Chinese regime can be usefully anticipated through a broad-brush summary of Confucianism is surprisingly prevalent and it's nice not to have to wade through another version.

Allison's *Destined for War* makes far stronger claims for the continuing relevance of the past as a guide to the future, and moreover a different kind of claim: not only that the prior history of a state or a situation can illuminate its present, but also that entirely unconnected events in the more distant past can illuminate our present. In terms of its content, this approach is familiar to mainstream social science: a normative principle is elaborated in the present and, if framed in sufficiently general and transhistorical terms (for example, general realist principles of International Relations, rather than a context-specific idea like nuclear deterrence), it can be applied to past societies as well. This is sometimes done as an aid to historical interpretation – historians argue extensively about whether or not modern social scientific theories and concepts can usefully be applied to pre-modern and non-western societies – sometimes as a form of disciplinary imperialism (as the essayist Thomas de Quincey once proudly declared, offering his reading of an obscure passage of the ancient philosopher Theophrastus, “it was not Greek, it was political economy, that could put it to rights!”), and sometimes as a source of confirmatory evidence for the theory.²² The crucial issue is always how far one emphasizes continuity – the existence of a universal human nature or of the eternal validity of certain principles of economic behavior, that provides grounds for viewing

²² Thomas de Quincey, *Logic of Political Economy* [1844], in *Collected Writings*, ed. D. Masson (London, 1896-97), IX, 194. On the uses of the classical past in the study of modernity, Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

different historical contexts as sufficiently comparable – and privileges this over change and the undeniable differences between historical societies.

Yet Allison’s presentation of his revised version of power transition theory is rather different from the norm; the central idea of *Destined for War* is presented as arising *from* the study of the past rather than being applied retrospectively *to* it. Indeed, he goes further: the central idea is one that was first developed nearly two and a half thousand years ago, and is now seen to have been fully endorsed by subsequent events. Not only does Allison name his idea “Thucydides’s Trap,” he persistently invokes the fifth-century BCE Greek author by quoting him at the head of every chapter, creating the impression that Thucydides had foreseen everything and had already formulated insights that go to the heart of our present situation.

There is a long tradition of readers feeling that they recognize their own times in Thucydides’ account of the war between the Athenians and the Spartans: his depiction of civil war in Corcyra has spoken to the experiences of warring Italian city states, the wars of religion in Germany, and the French Revolution, for example, while the Melian Dialogue is evoked in every confrontation between a greater and a lesser power, most recently in Ukraine, the Greek economic crisis, and Brexit negotiations.²³ The idea that Thucydides

²³ Thucydides in the Ukraine: Sir Tony Brenton, “Putin Will Have Calculated on a Response Strong on Rhetoric,” *Financial Times*, March 5, 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/22e85546-a2ef-11e3-ba21-00144feab7de>. Thucydides and Greece: Johanna Hanink, *The Classical Debt: Greek antiquity in an age of austerity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2017) and Yanis Varoufakis, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must? Europe’s crisis and America’s economic future* (London: Bodley Head, 2016). Thucydides and Brexit: Neil Wilson, “Brexit Talks Begin: a Modern-Day Melian Dialogue,” June 19, 2017, <https://medium.com/@etx.seo/brexit-talks-begin-a-modern-day-melian-dialogue-483d51e20bee>. Further examples of the application of Thucydides to the modern world are regularly collected at <http://thesphinxblog.com>.

was a pioneering political theorist rather than a “historian” is also not new; for nearly a century, especially in the developing field of international relations, he has been read as someone whose primary aim was to identify normative laws of inter-state relations or political systems – “ever since the days of Thucydides...” has become a cliché of Realist analysis.²⁴ This is despite the fact there is no statement or elaboration of any such laws in his account beyond a few pithy aphorisms – most of them spoken by Thucydides’ characters, and therefore not to be taken at face value or assumed to reflect his own views. The modern view of Thucydides, inside and outside academia, is to a great extent based on the circulation of such maxims as “the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must,” many of them based on questionable translations of the original Greek, and a fair number of them spurious (such as the line about “peace is only an armistice in an endless war” featured in the recent *Wonder Woman* film).

Thucydides was not a modern social scientist – but he was not a modern historian either, despite the claims of 19th century readers that he had pioneered “History as science.”²⁵ In important respects, he was *sui generis* even in relation to his own times. One way in which his work is more consonant with social science than with conventional historiography is that, however one translates the convoluted syntax of 1.22.3, he clearly *did* intend his account of past events to be useful, to provide knowledge or understanding

²⁴ See David A. Welch, “Why International Relations theorists should stop reading Thucydides,” *Review of International Studies*, 29.2 (2003): 301-319.

²⁵ “Thucydides came to be at home in the ‘modern’ way of thinking,” claimed J.B. Bury, the leading historian in England, in 1909. The French scholar Jules Girard argued in 1861 that “he conceives of history not only as the exact science of facts, but as a new science.” Discussed, with many other examples, in Morley, *Thucydides and the Idea of History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

that extends beyond the facts as an end in themselves.²⁶ Thucydides believed in the existence of recurrent patterns in human events, and so he believed a detailed, accurate account of past events would allow his readers to recognize and understand such patterns.

What patterns did he intend us to recognize? For Allison, Thucydides' work is primarily concerned with the reasons why the Athenians and Spartans went to war (the fact that most of the work is concerned with the subsequent course of that war suggests that it's about a great deal more, but certainly the cause is one of the many things Thucydides was interested in) and with identifying the true rather than merely proximate cause, the structural stress when a rising power confronts a ruling power: "What made war inevitable was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta." Again, there are issues of translation and interpretation here.²⁷ Thucydides certainly distinguishes different sorts of causes, but there is ongoing debate about whether the ambiguous Greek terms he used were meant to contrast: true causes and pretexts; immediate and long-term causes; visible and less visible causes; or some combination thereof. His subsequent narrative makes it clear that it is the *interaction* of different factors, the structural

²⁶ Allison's preferred translation is clearly designed to establish Thucydides as "the original 'applied historian': "If my history be judged useful by those who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to understanding the future – which in the course of human affairs must resemble if it does not reflect it – I shall be content." A more literal version would be: "If it is judged useful by those who will want to have a clear understanding of what happened – and, such is the human condition, will happen again at some time in the same or in a similar pattern – I shall be content." The differences between these versions are not insignificant, but the central point is the same.

²⁷ Cf. S.N. Jaffe, "The Risks and Rewards of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War," *War on the Rocks*, July 6, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-risks-and-rewards-of-thucydides-history-of-the-peloponnesian-war/>, and in more detail his new book, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: character and context* (Oxford: OUP, 2017).

pressures, the alleged characters of different Greek states, the personalities and decisions of key individuals, and chance events, that leads to war. Thucydides does not label this development “inevitable,” but rather “compelled” or “forced,” and his account constantly encourages the reader to consider how things could have turned out differently – a reading which actually suits Allison’s overall thesis better than a crude notion of deterministic structural factors making war inevitable.

So, Thucydides does offer us something like the “Thucydides Trap” model, prefiguring power transition theory (as has long been claimed by scholars like Robert Gilpin).²⁸ This observation could have served Allison as an inspiration or theoretical grounding for a discussion of the current state of U.S.-China relations, and indeed he devotes substantial parts of *Destined for War* to doing precisely that – but he also seeks to argue that this is no mere theory or speculative idea, but an objective characteristic of human affairs, whose truth is established by multiple historical instances. This is potentially a stronger argument, at least for an audience who might be skeptical of “mere” theory: “history tells us” that our situation is more perilous than we realize. But it rests on a number of problematic assumptions.

Allison must establish not only that Thucydides identified the underlying cause of the Peloponnesian War, but that his analysis was correct. The fact that Donald Kagan disagrees is certainly not – *contra* Arthur Waldron’s particularly intemperate review of *Destined for War* – evidence that there is no such thing as the Thucydides Trap, but it ought to raise questions about the infallibility of Thucydides’ account.²⁹ Thucydides offers

²⁸ *War and Change in International Relations* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), 191.

²⁹ Waldron, “There is no Thucydides Trap,” <http://supchina.com/2017/06/12/no-thucydides-trap/>, citing Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1969).

a version of events that makes his understanding of them plausible, but it does leave certain things out and underemphasizes others.³⁰

The problem with the Peloponnesian War is that we have Thucydides' account and not a lot else; fragmentary evidence that raises questions about some of what he says, and possible suspicions about his motives. As we move into later historical periods, we have vastly more evidence to draw upon, and multiple interpretations of events. This is clearly a problem for Allison's argument as he seeks to establish the existence of a series of situations analogous to fifth-century Greece where the Thucydides Trap theory can be tested. Of course there have been multiple situations in human history which can be represented in terms of a rising power confronting a ruling power, and that is how they are represented here – but this is not the same as saying that they *were* like that, and they could always be represented differently. Some of these case studies seem less plausible than others, even at this high level of generality; World War I presented as the outcome of Anglo-German rivalry, with the interests and actions of the other great European powers either ignored or reduced to facets of that confrontation, or worse, the idea of the United Kingdom and France as a unitary ruling power confronting Germany in the 1990s. But even if one focuses on the instances that are more obviously bipolar, this is still a case of reading past events through the theory and representing them in those terms, then claiming that they demonstrate the theory's validity.

A similar criticism can be applied to the third stage of Allison's argument, the claim that we *are* in a Thucydides Trap situation and therefore the same dynamics are more likely than not to apply. Of course the current global situation can be represented in these

³⁰ It's a little odd, for example, to see Allison's account of the run-in to war emphasize the Megarian Decree, when this is widely identified as one of Thucydides' most puzzling and suspicious admissions.

terms, seeing everything as secondary to the confrontation of the U.S. and China – but it can also be represented in other terms, as in Wright’s insistence on the continuing importance of different regions and multiple interdependent relationships. One might argue that Allison’s view of world politics is quite an old-fashioned one, focused on the individual decisions and actions of great powers, constrained only by their own resources and the dynamics of the relationship between them. Indeed, this is the point of the model, to reject the idea that today’s world is essentially different from the past; despite globalization and economic interdependence, despite nuclear weapons, despite cultural and intellectual changes, we remain as vulnerable as ever to falling back into war – perhaps more so, as “we” (the comfortable West, at least) have come to take a certain sort of peace for granted, just as Stefan Zweig described his own generation at the beginning of the twentieth century.³¹

Allison’s claim that war may be more likely than we imagine is not in itself problematic; as Wright argues in more detail, complacent Western assumptions about interdependence being a one-way street and a source of ever-decreasing tensions are certainly questionable today. Wright does offer a more nuanced prediction that the new nationalist competition could take different forms, with actual war the most extreme possibility, where Allison offers a stark choice between war and peace – in part, one might suppose, because that is what makes sense in most historical contexts, as economic competition and cyberwarfare are essentially modern phenomena. One might also wonder about the different consequences if their warnings are taken seriously; “prepare for war” has different implications from “prepare for increased competition,” and there must be a risk that the former starts to drive military expansion and more aggressive responses to perceived challenges rather than renewed efforts to prevent conflict and escalation.

³¹ *Die Welt von Gestern* [1942], trans. Anthea Bell (London: Pushkin Press, 2011).

What is striking about *Destined for War* is not Allison's interpretation of the present situation, but the fact that he devotes so much space to alleged historical analogies – even though this opens him up to innumerable objections from historians, disputing his accounts of their periods, and to analysts of contemporary global politics, arguing that so much has changed in the last hundred years, let alone the last two and a half thousand, that past case studies have nothing useful to offer the present. Ultimately, the turn to Thucydides seems to be primarily a rhetorical move, drawing power from the claims that “history shows...” and “Thucydides says...”; the assumption that the accumulation of past experience points the way forward, and that the Man Who Knows – the powerful image of Thucydides as the illusionless, all-seeing observer and analyst of human folly, for example in Auden's poem *1 September 1939* – has endorsed this reading of the present.

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:

We must suffer them all again.³²

Would that history, much less U.S.-China relations, were so simple.

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³² 1 September 1939, stanza 3, from *Another Time* (New York: Random House, 1940). On the modern image of Thucydides, see Morley, “The idea of Thucydides in the Western tradition,” in Christine Lee & Neville Morley, eds., *Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 591-604.

4. A Long-Term Asia Strategy is Long Overdue

Mira Rapp-Hooper

International relations scholars scarcely need a reintroduction to Thucydides' cautionary tale of Athens and Sparta, or – given all the publicity it has received recently – to *Destined for War*, Graham Allison's swift account of the potential for conflict in the U.S.-China relationship. Thomas Wright's *All Measures Short of War* is just as thoughtful, and diagnoses the nature of great power competition in the 21st century, offering a new framework for engaging in it.

According to Allison, the Thucydides Trap is “the severe structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to upend a ruling one.” He argues that under these conditions, unexpected and ordinary events alike can trigger major conflict.³³ There is a whiff of a strawman in Allison's initial framing: he argues at once that the risk of war between the United States and China is underappreciated, and that officials in Washington oversimplify these dangers when they declare that war is “not inevitable.”³⁴ Policymakers do not simply reject the inexorability of conflict out of hand, of course, but have devoted substantial energy to reducing its risk through diplomatic, economic, and defense agreements.

Few would quibble with the premise that a major power shift makes conflict more likely: when a great power rises in economic and military terms, it becomes able to assert its interests in new ways as it closes the gap between itself and the dominant state. The

³³ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin, 2017), xvi.

³⁴ Allison, xvii

dominant state has been the one to set the rules of the international system; the rising state can now contest them, and as the power gap continues to close, each is beset with uncertainties about where and how the other intends to advance its aims. It is primarily a structural problem, fueled by major material changes, but one that usually requires misperception, inadvertence, or accident to become a war. After all, a rising power need not resort to conflict today if it will be stronger tomorrow; for the dominant state, the rationale for war may indeed exist (it is better to fight now while stronger), but the cure may also prove worse than the disease. While preventive motivations certainly factor in numerous great power wars, it is hard to point to cases where a declining power attacks a rising one with exclusively preventive designs, and rarely does a ruling state permanently derail the rise of a competitor. U.S. leaders certainly do not think this possible or desirable in the case of present-day China.

If the reader is familiar with this structural argument, s/he is therefore somewhat surprised to arrive at Allison's explanation of the proximate triggers of conflict in the U.S.-China relationship—that is, the exacerbating factors that will spark the powder keg. In an unexpected deviation from most power transition accounts, Allison turns to a Huntington-like sub-thesis, arguing that Washington and Beijing may come to blows through a civilizational clash. Independent of the Thucydides Trap, Allison argues that profound cultural differences make the bilateral relationship harder to manage. There is no rule that dictates that a proximate cause of war must have the same paradigmatic origins as the structural one (cultural and material variables can happily coexist in the same thesis), but Allison does not invoke cultural variables in any of his other case studies. In the U.S.-China case, however, Allison presents a chart comparing each country's cultural characteristics along nine dimensions, reducing each to a single word

or phrase.³⁵ If these cultural distillations are catalysts for conflict, similar charts should appear alongside other historical examples, helping to explain both war and non-war outcomes.

Allison devotes substantial energy to analyzing Xi Jinping’s “China Dream,” calling it a “civilizational creed” that aims to place China at the center of the universe, while ejecting the United States from Asia. For Allison, China’s recent foreign policy muscularity appears to be driven largely by these cultural grievances; Wright sees these more as instrumental parts of China’s effort to carve itself a sphere of influence in Asia. At times, Allison compares Xi’s “China Dream” to Trump’s “America First” catchphrase—a juxtaposition that only occasions the reader to wonder why either should be a proximate cause of war at all.³⁶ The analogy reminds us that both are empty political vessels into which either leader can pour his current agenda. While not nearly as mercurial as – and far more politically secure than – Trump, Xi’s articulation of the China Dream is not immutable, and it provides neither a fulsome accounting of nor indelible blueprint for China’s rise. Thucydides sympathizers are left wishing that Allison had used these pages to explore where U.S. and Chinese *interests* may be incompatible, as Wright’s treatment does nicely.³⁷ Allison’s case studies of previous power transitions are free of civilizational arguments; cultural reductions are not terribly compelling catalysts for global conflagration.

³⁵ Allison, 141.

³⁶ Allison, 133-153

³⁷ Thomas J. Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power* (Yale University Press, 2017), 206-212.

Allison's final chapters refresh. He rejects the standard structure of the Washington-facing policy tome, declining to present a ready-packaged new strategy to govern U.S.-China relations. Instead, he draws upon his case study work to derive 12 lessons that may help the bilateral relationship.³⁸ In "Twelve Clues for Peace," Allison tops his structural and cultural argument with dollops of institutionalism, as he notes the merits of mediation and the value of international organizations in mitigating friction. As Wright argues, however, Chinese leaders have tended to prefer bilateral diplomacy and deal-making to maximize their relative advantage, which may in turn mean that they are less inclined to leave their vital interests to institutions, but that does not obviate the assertion that multilateralism has proved useful in past power shifts.³⁹ Allison also acknowledges the important critique that the nuclear age has transformed major powers' incentives for war, potentially making power transitions less dangerous (if higher-stake). Rather than presenting us with a roadmap for the bilateral relationship, Allison calls for a years-long strategic review—a proposition that may be politically and bureaucratically fraught in practice, particularly in an administration whose foreign policy in general and China policy in particular have been matters of intense controversy.⁴⁰ Allison's call for a review hardly guarantees that U.S. policymakers will get the bilateral relationship "right," but it does acknowledge the enormity of the task at hand.

Allison lays out four broad lenses U.S. policymakers may adopt for the U.S.-China relationship: accommodation, undermining, a negotiated peace, or a relationship redefinition.⁴¹ Each approach has elements that are hyper-stylized and politically difficult,

³⁸ Allison, 188-216

³⁹ Wright, 86

⁴⁰ Alison, 214-221

⁴¹ Allison, 221-213

but the exercise is nonetheless useful. It leads Allison to observe that America's post-Cold War China strategy to "engage and hedge" admits everything and proscribes nothing (and that in so doing, the United States has avoided defining its strategic interests in Asia). Allison's survey also leads him to note that American strategy has always assumed that China will grow friendlier and more democratic as it rises. It is with this very premise that Thomas Wright begins.

All Measures Short of War commences with an idea gone awry. Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. policymakers believed in "convergence": as countries embraced globalization, they would become more responsible members of the international order and would liberalize domestically with time. Major powers would stop treating one another as rivals and the post-World War II order would become so universal as to survive the decline of the United States itself.⁴² The convergence logic was fatally flawed, according to Wright: Some states have not perceived the U.S.-led order as benign and Russia and China in particular believe it has deprived them of the ability to craft spheres of influence. In Wright's assessment, convergence has failed, and major powers will now compete with one another to transform world order and carve spheres of influence while avoiding serious conflict.⁴³

Wright seeks to diagnose the problems short of war that beset the liberal international order in three critical regions: Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Following his audit of regional events and U.S. responses, he concludes that the question facing American policymakers is whether the United States wants to remain a liberal superpower. Wright's answer is unequivocal: a U.S.-led liberal order is more conducive to American and global

⁴² Wright, 1-8

⁴³ Wright, 16-31

interests than any other organizing principle could be.⁴⁴ He advances an approach called Responsible Competition, which he describes as a liberal internationalism for a more competitive world. In this framework, the United States would seek to prevent rivals from impinging on its vital interests, while continuing to advance its own geopolitical aims.⁴⁵ As Allison notes, however, U.S. policymakers have generally avoided defining America's vital regional interests, and this is a necessary precursor to Responsible Competition. One need not self-identify as a liberal internationalist to judge Wright's counsel wise.

Wright's application of Responsible Competition to Asia is uncontroversial. He argues that the United States should not allow China to carve out a regional sphere of influence, for example, by taking control of the East or South China Sea. Wright correctly observes that China requires war avoidance to achieve its goals, and that the United States has room to push back on Beijing without triggering conflict.⁴⁶ Many strategists and Asia-watchers have shared this belief for some time, although Allison might disagree, worrying that any pushback could precipitate conflict. Wright's diagnosis is perfectly sensible, but Responsible Competition is a bit short on novelty. Wright's counsel to U.S. policymakers is that they use alliances and arms sales to counterbalance China while reinvesting in the American-backed regional order, such as a successor trade pact to the Trans Pacific Partnership.⁴⁷ Former Obama Administration officials will find little to disagree with on this menu. Yet precisely because the failure of convergence and threat of spheres of influence are such enormous strategic challenges, one worries that a more concerted

⁴⁴ Wright, 187-196

⁴⁵ Wright, 196-222

⁴⁶ Wright, 206-208

⁴⁷ Wright, 208-210

application of familiar tools cannot steady the rapidly shifting order in Asia. The task will be positively foreboding four years hence.

Wright's account is thoughtful and knits together some of the most important ideas of the day: the return of major power competition, the startling halt in liberalism's teleology, the risks that revisionism short of large-scale conflict may pose to international order. There is, however, a nagging tension in his conclusions. Wright asserts that the United States must remain a liberal superpower that upholds the international order with minimal dependence on illiberal actors like Russia and China—the costs of failure are simply too great. At the same time, he acknowledges that the United States can and must cooperate with China on global issues like climate change and nonproliferation, a contention with which few would disagree.⁴⁸ After all, the United States has cooperated with China in global institutions for decades, even as it has become a competitor in Asia. Yet to sanction global cooperation alongside regional competition is to admit that America's autocratic competitors are already very much inside the international order. Wright never defines "liberal international order," and his argument is primarily concerned with regional order, but liberal international principles will necessarily be challenged when the autocratic competitors in question are not really outsiders at all. Illiberal states like Russia and China will retain their leadership roles in global institutions, and while these may still be based on liberal principles, the institutions will not transform them. China's managed, nonmarket economy, for example, will continue to pose challenges to the international trade regimes to which it is a party. Doubling down on liberalism won't solve this problem.

⁴⁸ Wright, 218-222.

There is value in reading Allison and Wright's accounts as juxtaposed companions. Allison tends to overstate China's material triumph, measuring its economy in terms of GDP, for example, and declaring it will surpass the United States by 2023. In so doing, he underweights its demographic, economic, and social burdens, and may overpredict a global power transition, when in fact this is a major power shift short of full eclipse. Wright, for his part, is sunnier on the question of whether the United States can maintain its position in Asia, pointing to the fact that American primacy can be challenged without being surpassed. According to Wright, innovation, education, and soft power serve as ballasts to American influence. Allison's quasi-structural (but paradigmatically eclectic) account bears realism's pessimistic watermark; Wright betrays a certain optimism as he seeks to repurpose liberalism for a contested world. When it comes to an epochal strategic change like China's rise, one can afford to be sobered and stiffened in equal measure.

The question of whether the United States and China are headed for a full power transition is a profoundly important one, and has direct implications for U.S. strategy and the management of the bilateral relationship. China's rapid ascent decidedly poses structural challenges to U.S. primacy in Asia, yet Beijing will not replace Washington as a global hegemon any time soon. The essence of the problem may therefore lie somewhere in between Allison and Wright's distillations: how does the United States manage its role in Asia as it comes under increasing stress, knowing that it will remain globally preponderant for several decades? These are the conditions that policymakers must accept as they craft long-term strategy.

To be sure, there is a risk that miscalculation could lead to conflict over the East China Sea, South China Sea, Taiwan, or the Korean Peninsula, but cultural differences seem unlikely to bring these two great powers to blows. The risk of full-blown conflict is

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genuine, but both understand how truly grave an outcome this would be, and nuclear weapons only induce greater caution: sub-conventional competition seems the far more likely outcome, at least for the time being. Moreover, Wright touches on, but neither author adequately explores, the fact that there are plenty of issues where these structural changes *do not* bring these two countries' interests into diametric opposition. China's desire to build new regional economic and development institutions does not directly threaten the United States, and in some areas, may complement its objectives, so long as the projects are transparent and well-governed. And even on central regional security flashpoints, the contours of U.S.-China competition are not wholly immutable: Ironically, as North Korea completes its sprint for a mature and deliverable nuclear weapons capability, they increasingly share incentives to work to restrain it, even if their interests do not converge perfectly. If the problem is narrow and lofty—who will rule Asia?—the answer is singularly fractious. If some issues are amenable to a different query—where is managed, peaceful change possible and desirable, and where do national interests prevent it? —the result is less dire.

The greatest payoff to reading Allison and Wright as a pair may be the realization that two accomplished strategists with distinct worldviews have, in the end, converged on the same question: In a world of contested American primacy, where potential U.S. adversaries are sphere-of-influence-seeking autocracies, how do we structure and organize international politics? Allison and Wright are skilled diagnosticians and provide us with early guidance. They also exhort us to get to work.

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5. To Deter China, U.S. Policy-Makers Need to Show that America is Willing to Go to War

Hugh White

The debate about China in and around Washington seems to be shifting. For a long time, American policy towards China has been based on the judgment that China's rise would not require any major shifts in U.S. aims and posture in Asia.⁴⁹ The assumption appears to have been that, despite occasional nationalist stirrings, China had neither the power nor the motive to undermine an order which has been so good for China for so long. President Obama's so-called "pivot" to Asia assumed that America could deter any Chinese bid for primacy in Asia simply by affirming that America was determined to maintain primacy itself. The pivot was supposed to send that message with a series of low cost, low risk gestures that were expected to convince Beijing of Washington's resolve, as well as increase China's stake in the *status quo* by offering deeper bilateral and multilateral engagement and closer economic connections. But it hasn't worked out that way. Beijing has gone its own way economically and diplomatically, and responded with a series of provocative actions which have turned the tables and tested Washington's resolve instead. America's weak responses have done nothing effective to stop China's

⁴⁹ See for example Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>. Although this strategy has been challenged by some, the view that China posed a systemic threat has never prevailed in policy debates. See, for example, Robert Kagan, "What China Knows That We Don't," *The Weekly Standard*, January 20, 1997 <http://carnegieendowment.org/1997/01/20/what-china-knows-that-we-don-t-case-for-new-strategy-of-containment-pub-266>; Andrew F. Krepinevich, "China's Finlandization Strategy in the Pacific," *Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 2010, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704164904575421753851404076>; and Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, *Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

provocations. This has weakened America's regional leadership credentials, and strengthened China's.

Thus, it has become clear that China's challenge is much more formidable than was assumed, and that consequently an effective response will entail much greater costs and risks than most in Washington had envisaged. The questions now are what are those costs, whether or not they are justified and sustainable, and what happens if they are not? Graham Allison and Thomas Wright⁵⁰ both make important contributions, in rather different ways, to answering these questions. There is a great deal to admire in both books, and much to learn from them. Both recognize that America faces a serious challenge from China and that that means U.S. grand strategy in Asia needs to be rethought. And both understand that the risk of war with China must take a central place in assessing how best to respond.

The way Thomas Wright confronts his question shows he is basically an optimist. Insofar as his book relates to Asia, Wright's core point is that America can preserve U.S. leadership in Asia without running a serious risk of conflict. That is not because he doesn't take China's challenge seriously. He understands that China is serious about building a "new model of great power relations" and he recognizes that it can apply formidable power to achieving that objective. But he is optimistic that this can be managed without serious risk of war because neither America nor China want to go to war. On the contrary, both sides understand that it would be disastrously counterproductive. Hence the title of his book, *All Measures Short of War*.

⁵⁰ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017); Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

It is true that neither America nor China *wants* a war, but does that mean a war cannot happen? History suggests not. Wars often occur when neither side wants to fight. That's not because they happen "by accident" – wars are always and necessarily the result of deliberate choices to fight on each side. It is because countries – or their leaders – often choose to go to war even when they don't want to, when going to war, bad as it is, looks better than the alternative. That means the risk of war depends less on whether countries *want* to fight than on the chances that leaders find themselves facing this kind of choice.

This is what many believe happened in the last week of July 1914.⁵¹ None of the key players really wanted war, but each hoped they could get what they wanted without one because they expected their rivals to back off. By the time they realized the truth, their national credibility was so invested that backing down would destroy their country's international standing, and each decided that they would go to war rather than accept that.

There are uncomfortable parallels here with America and China today. Neither side wants war, but each is inclined to believe that the other side wants it even less. That leads each to believe they can achieve their objectives without risking a conflict. Every American policy-maker who assumes China will always back off has a counterpart in Beijing who believes the same of America. And such Chinese beliefs will have been reinforced by many recent features of U.S. policy and politics, both at home and abroad. The scope for mutual misperception and disastrous error on both sides, July 1914-style, is thus rather high.

⁵¹ See for example T.G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War Summer 1914*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

This leads to an important conclusion for U.S. policy-makers. If they are serious about resisting China's challenge in Asia and preserving U.S. leadership, they will need to do a lot more to convince Beijing that America is willing to go to war to do so. The more clearly it can convince China of that, the more likely China is to be deterred from any serious challenge, and the less likely the United States will actually have to go to war to defend its role in Asia.

Moreover – and this is a particularly dark thought – America must convince China that it is willing to fight a war that crosses the nuclear threshold. That is because America can no longer be confident of swift and clear victory in a localized conventional conflict with China, so any conflict is likely to escalate as, once conflict had begun, both sides would face strong pressures not to accept a stalemate which looked like a defeat. No sane leader would risk escalating a conflict with a nuclear adversary without contemplating the possibility of crossing the nuclear threshold. If the Chinese do not believe America is willing to do that, it will be that much less likely to believe that America is willing to fight at all.

The situation America faces in Asia today is therefore not so different from the one it faced in the Cold War. America sustained its position on the key fronts of the Cold War in Europe and Asia against immense Soviet pressure because it convinced the Soviets, and its own allies, that it was willing to fight a nuclear war, and accept devastating nuclear strikes on the United States itself, to prevent even slight Soviet gains. It did that not just by building and deploying massive nuclear forces, but by making very clear that it had the resolve to use them. That resolve was made clear to the Soviets and to U.S. allies by generations of U.S. political leaders, who believed America's security and, indeed, its survival as a free society, depended on preventing the Soviets from taking over key power centers in Europe and Asia. Today we may speculate about whether that was really true,

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but we can hardly doubt that Americans at the time believed it to be true, and that the Soviets knew this and were deterred.

It seems to me that America would have to do the same kind of thing today to deter China from challenging the current U.S.-led order in Asia. Indeed, Wright himself seems to acknowledge this in an exceptionally clear passage where he sets out the “problem of revisionism” and concludes that America, facing a revisionist China, will face a series of choices between risking conflict with a nuclear power or accommodating them and undermining the order it seeks to preserve.⁵² Later, when he cautions against setting red lines to check Chinese revisionism, he makes clear what choice he thinks America would make, and that threatening war to deter China would be “disproportionate, unwise and not credible.”⁵³

How then is China to be deterred, and its challenge to the U.S.-led order resisted, if not by just this kind of threat? And how can such threats be made credible? Is America willing and able to do what is necessary to convince China of its resolve in Asia? It is tempting to think that this can be done on the cheap, by bluffing. But that is not a sustainable long-term posture, because it is too easy for China to detect the bluff by testing American resolve – indeed that is what it is doing in the South China Sea right now. In the long run, China will only be deterred if America is genuinely willing to fight a nuclear war to preserve the *status quo* in Asia.

There is no consensus on this in America today. Indeed, the question has scarcely been discussed in these terms, even by the experts. Beginning this discussion is the essential

⁵²Wright, 158-161

⁵³ Wright, 209

starting point for deciding how to respond to China's challenge. The outcome of such a debate is not to be taken for granted, but the fact that it has been evaded for so long suggests what the answer will be. It seems to me very unlikely that Americans will decide they are willing to shoulder again the appalling risks of nuclear rivalry unless they can convince themselves, as they did in the Cold War, that doing so is vital to their own security at home.

If it is not – if, as Wright suggests, America's stake in Asia today relates to its vision of global order rather than its own security⁵⁴ – then it seems unlikely that it would be willing to fight a nuclear war to sustain the *status quo*, and thus America's chances of deterring China's challenge in Asia are low. Here then is the real difference between today's predicament and the Cold War. It is not, as Wright argues, that the costs of upholding the *status quo* are lower⁵⁵ but that the imperative to do so is lower. That is because China today, for all its strength, does not pose the kind of threat to America's own security that the Soviets did in their heyday. This is not just a question of whether China's ambitions spread so far. It is also a question of power. Unlike the Soviets, or the Axis of World War II before them, China has no chance of imposing the kind of outright domination over Eurasia, which American strategists have traditionally and correctly identified as necessary to pose that kind of threat. That is because, unlike them, it faces such formidable powers as Russia, India and Europe that would resist Chinese hegemony.

It won't be enough for America to show that it is willing to use "all measures short of war" to maintain its leadership in Asia. Wright's argument that it will presupposes the Chinese will show the same restraint. But the more confident the Chinese are of

⁵⁴ Wright, 154

⁵⁵ Wright, 157

America's restraint, the less restrained they will be. After all, the stakes for them are very high – as high as the stakes America has traditionally had in preserving the Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere. Those are stakes for which they would risk a great deal. For this reason, it would be unwise for U.S. strategists to expect China to limit itself to the kind of limited confrontations that arguably characterized its border confrontations with India, the Soviets, and Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. The contest between the U.S. and China is not a border dispute, but a contest for primacy over an entire strategic system. Much more is at stake for both sides.

Graham Allison understands this perfectly. His book extends and amplifies the warning he has been sounding for some years now about the nature of the rivalry emerging in Asia between America and China, and the dangers that it poses. The key lesson he draws from his extended analysis of analogous events throughout history is that contests between rising and declining major powers over their respective places in the international system are precisely why they have most often gone to war with one another, with disastrous consequences.

Allison does not believe that the escalating rivalry between America and China makes war “inevitable.”⁵⁶ Rather, he perceives a serious risk of war when such contests arise because great powers see their deepest national interests at stake. He argues quite convincingly that this is exactly the kind of contest we now see between America and China. He rebuts the argument that China lacks the power or resolve to challenge the United States in Asia, and he sees no reason to assume that in the contest that is consequently unfolding either side will limit itself to “measures short of war.” Therefore, the danger of escalating rivalry and conflict with China is real, and the consequences of a

⁵⁶ Allison, x

conflict when both powers have nuclear forces is incalculable. That means our first concern must be to find ways to avoid conflict with China. All this, I think, is right.

To address this question, Allison extends his work on previous episodes of great power rivalry to focus not just on those that did result in war, but also on those that did not. His aim is to help us see how competing great powers avoided war in the past, looking for lessons that apply today. Although he doesn't put it quite this way, the key conclusion to be drawn from his study is very simple: war can be avoided when a rising power confronts an established one, but only by real compromise and accommodation on both sides. Hence while war is not inevitable when a new great power arises, major changes in the international order are. The mistake of current U.S. policy is not to see this, but instead to assume – as Wright does – that the current *status quo* of American leadership can be preserved without risking a major war.

Americans must therefore ask themselves whether, as Allison puts it, “maintaining U.S. primacy in the western Pacific [is] truly a vital national interest?”⁵⁷ He concludes that it isn't. He argues that America should therefore abandon its ambition to preserve the *status quo*, and instead accept a significant change in its role in Asia through some kind of understanding with China. In his book's penultimate chapter, he offers several suggestions about how this might be done. He mentions accommodating China, negotiating a long peace, or redefining the relationship to focus on common threats. All of these seem to me to be versions of the same idea – to accept China as at least a co-equal leading power in Asia. That means preserving a strong U.S. role in Asia while being willing to adjust American aims and purposes to respect what China sees as its core interests and objectives in the region.

⁵⁷ Allison, 235

But is this credible? Could America really reach that kind of understanding with China, one that would involve maintaining a major U.S. strategic role in Asia while reducing the risk of conflict? I have argued in the past that it could, and I still believe it would be very much in Asia's interests if it did.⁵⁸ But America's bargaining position would be rather weak on any issue over which it could not convince China it was willing to go to war. Unless there is *something* in Asia that Americans can convince China they are willing to fight a nuclear war over, negotiations would be rather one-sided. America would find itself edging towards withdrawal from any substantial strategic role in Asia altogether.

Allison does not really address this issue. He thus does not really confront just how stark the choices facing America in Asia today actually are. The harsh fact is that China's rise poses a question that is more challenging even than Allison acknowledges: not whether the United States can preserve its long-accustomed primacy in Asia, but whether it can preserve any significant strategic role there at all at a cost it is willing to sustain. So, the debate in and around Washington about how to respond to China still has a long way to go. Many of us who live on the Western side of the Pacific deeply hope that, if and as that debate unfolds, America will find a way to remain a major strategic actor in Asia. But we can no longer afford to take that for granted.

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⁵⁸ Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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