

**THE SHADOW OF THE PAST:
WHY THE SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONSHIP RESEMBLES
THE PRE-1914 ANGLO-GERMAN ANTAGONISM**

by

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I.

The rise of China has thrust great power politics back to its traditional place center stage in both the practice, and the study, of international politics.¹ At the same time - big historical anniversaries always seem to have this effect - the approach of the Great War's centenary has produced a flood of commentary professing to see parallels between today's events in East Asia, and those that led to the outbreak of World War I in Europe one hundred years ago. Just as the ascent of Wilhelmine Germany unsettled pre-1914 Europe, now it is a rising China that is roiling East Asia. Noting "the parallel between China's rise and that of imperial Germany over a century ago," *The Economist* also pithily observed that "even if history never repeats itself, the past likes to have a try."² In this Chapter, I show that, like Britain and Germany before 1914, the United States and China are on a collision course.

Much has been written about China's "rise." But, from China's perspective, what is taking place is the *restoration* - not the rise - of Chinese power. In the 17th, 18th, and very early 19th centuries, China had the world's largest GDP. Indeed, even around 1800 its GDP exceeded the combined GDP's of all of Europe's great powers. As late as the end of the 18th century, China was still the "Middle Kingdom" that dominated East and Southeast Asia. The expansion of Western power - with Britain in the vanguard - began to challenge China's regional preeminence in the early 19th century.

The two Opium Wars with Britain, coupled with late Qing dynasty internal decay, opened the door for the Western powers to impose a series of "unequal" treaties upon China that gave

them ports for trade, economic concessions, extraterritorial legal rights and - eventually - supervision of China's finances. Much of China's history since the late 19th century - the Boxer Rebellion, the 1911 Revolution, the triumph of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1945-1949 Civil War, and the modernizing economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping - were driven by the imperative of pushing back against Western (and Japanese) dominance.³ Today, a rapidly ascending China is determined to reverse its "century of humiliation," and reclaim what it considers to be its rightful place at the apex of East and Southeast Asia's power hierarchy.

The question addressed by the essays in this volume - does the rise and decline of great powers lead to conflict and war - is not abstract. On the contrary, because of China's rise, and the ongoing relative decline of American power, this is the central geopolitical question of our time, and will remain so for decades to come. To be sure, there are analysts who are skeptical about China's future power trajectory, including Ruizhuang's Zhang's chapter in this volume. Those who are bearish about China's political and economic prospects, argue that China's rise will stall out - or even be derailed - by an allegedly unsustainable economic growth model, or by domestic political instability, social unrest, demographics, and/or environmental degradation.⁴ In this volume, however, there is broad agreement - including Realist IR scholars (Walt, Wohlforth), China experts (Shambaugh, Westad), and Liberal IR scholars (Ikenberry, Foot) that in coming decades China's power will increase.⁵

The real battle line in this volume is about the geopolitical implications of China's rise, not its reality. Are the U.S. and China headed for conflict, or can the Sino-American relationship be managed peacefully? Will China embed itself in the extant international order - the *Pax Americana* - or will it seek to revise, or even overturn it? Some of the contributors to this volume

(notably Geir Lundestad, Foot, and Ikenberry) are optimistic. While acknowledging that the Sino-American relationship doubtless will become more competitive in coming years, they believe that countervailing imperatives for cooperation -the institutions of the prevailing Liberal international order, economic interdependence, and domestic political and economic constraints - will enable Washington and Beijing to be able to avoid conflict. John Ikenberry argues that, even as American power declines in coming decades, China will seek to integrate itself into the U.S. designed international order. Wohlforth also offers a realist argument for why a Sino-American clash can be avoided: because it lags behind the U.S. in many power metrics - especially military capabilities - China will be dissuaded from mounting a head-on challenge to America's geopolitical dominance in East Asia.

Set against these (more or less) optimistic appraisals of where Sino-American relations are headed are the contributions of Stephen Walt and David Shambaugh. Invoking neorealist (Waltzian) international relations theory, Walt is pessimistic about the future of the Sino-American relationship. As the balance of power increasingly tilts in China's favour over the next several decades, he says, Beijing will move to reduce the U.S. security presence in East and Southeast Asia, and there will be a real risk of armed conflict. Shambaugh argues that, over time, aggrieved Chinese nationalism coupled with unresolved regional territorial disputes - over Taiwan, the Senkaku/Diaoyuti Islands, and conflicting claims in the South China Sea - could draw the United States and China into a shooting war.

III.

In this Chapter, I argue that like Britain and Germany a century ago, the United States and China are on a path that, sooner or later, is likely to eventuate in war. My argument draws upon

neoclassical realist theory, and on diplomatic history. Neoclassical realism rests on the foundation of Waltzian neorealist International Relations theory.⁶ Hence, its analytical starting point the impact of international systemic constraints - the distribution of power (polarity) and the lack of a central authority to make and enforce rules (“anarchy”) - on great powers’ foreign policies. International politics is a “self-help” system in which great powers constantly fear - and must provide - for their own security. Consequently, they pay close attention to the distribution of relative power between themselves and actual, or potential rivals. At the same time, neoclassical realists understand that it is necessary to “open the black box” and look inside the state, because domestic political factors also play a big role in shaping the grand strategies of great powers. Diplomatic history provides the evidence that International Relations theorists use to test their theories.

In his contribution to this volume, Geir Lundestad disparages the utility of International Relations theory, and the manner in which IR theorists use history. According to him, IR theorists don’t understand the complexity of the real world. Nothing ever happens exactly the same way, he says, which makes generalizing about international politics difficult - maybe even impossible. For this reason, he *claims* that theory and history cannot be used to make informed predictions about the future, or to divine recurrent patterns of great power behaviour and international outcomes.. Of course, this does not prevent him from making his *own* prediction - based on “unspoken assumptions” about IR theory no less - about the future of Sino-American relations.

Lundestad notwithstanding, the history of international politics - especially that concerning the relations of great powers - has very definite patterns and regularities. Four of

these have special salience to analyzing the future of the Sino-American relationship. First, great power politics is shaped fundamentally by the cyclical rise and decline of great powers.

Invariably, the rise of new great powers is geopolitically destabilizing.⁷ Second, rising great powers seek to dominate their regions (that is, they seek hegemony).⁸ Third, rising challengers seek prestige equal to that of the incumbent hegemon, and they want their status acknowledged.⁹

Fourth, when a rising challenger narrows the power gap separating itself from the incumbent hegemon, it will want to revise the prevailing international order to reflect its own interests, values, and norms rather than those of the declining incumbent.¹⁰

Mark Twain was correct when he said that while history does not repeat itself, it rhymes. Understanding the past can help us to think clearly about the future. “The present does not replicate the past,” observe the diplomatic historians Michael Hunt and Steven I. Levine, “but historical parallels can provide fresh ways of understanding and dealing with current challenges.”¹¹ To be sure, international relations theorists need be meticulous in the use of sources, discriminating in their use of analogies, and careful in the comparisons and conclusions they draw between past and present.¹² Nevertheless, the gap between international relations theorists and historians is much narrower than Lundestad would have us believe. Historians are as no less interested than IR theorists in testing propositions analytically, and identifying chains of causality that connect explanatory variables.¹³ Leading diplomatic historians - John Lewis Gaddis and Melvyn Leffler are notable examples - use IR theory in their own work while others - Marc Trachtenberg and Walter McDougall, for example - are equally at home teaching both history and international relations. In thinking about the future of Sino-American relations, the choice of appropriate methodology is not history *versus* theory. Rather it is using *both* history

and theory to strike an appropriate balance between richness and rigour.

IV.

Since the Cold War's end, American policymakers, pundits, international relations scholars, and policy analysts have assured us that the Soviet Union's collapse meant both the end of history, and the end of *realpolitik* (power politics). According to them (see the chapters in this volume by Foot, Lundestad, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth), globalization, the spread of democracy and liberal ideology, the (allegedly) emollient effects of international institutions, and the existence of nuclear weapons have made great power war a thing of the past.¹⁴ Of course, this is pretty much what Europeans were told in the years before 1914.¹⁵ The centenary commemoration of the Great War's outbreak is a stark reminder that European elites' hopes for peace were an illusion.¹⁶ And, as Charles Emerson reminds us, the era leading up to the outbreak of World War I bears uncanny similarities to the present.¹⁷ Most Europeans alive at the time, of course, had little inkling of the catastrophe that lurked just around the corner. For them, Emerson notes, "1913 was a year of possibility not predestination."¹⁸ 1913, of course, turned out to be the prelude to the deluge that swept away Europe's old order. That should be a warning to those who argue great power politics, and great power war, are relics of a past epoch of international affairs.

In fact, it sure looks as if the past is "having a try" in East Asia. There are two important - and unsettling - parallels between Anglo-German relationship during the run-up to 1914 and the unfolding Sino-American relationship. First, both relationships involve power transitions dynamics.¹⁹ In itself, this is not news. But two dimensions of the Anglo-German power transition have not received the attention they deserve. One is that Britain and Germany were competing as much for status and prestige as for power and security. This made the

competition between them intractable. The other is that Germany's rise also posed a direct challenge to the then extant international order, the *Pax Britannica*. Second, in Britain, liberal ideology contributed to what might be called a "perception spiral," which fostered in British policymakers, and the broader political nation, an image of Germany as an implacably hostile, and dangerous, rival.

IV.

China's leaders talk of a "peaceful rise," and have spent considerable time pondering the "lessons of the past" so that an ascending China can avoid the alleged foreign policy blunders of Wilhelmine Germany, and Imperial Japan, during their respective great power emergences. History, however, provides scant reason to believe that China's rise will be peaceful. Since the beginning of the modern international state system, there have been many examples of an ascending power challenging the position of the dominant power in the international system. These challenges usually have culminated in war.

The dynamics of the relationships between dominant powers in decline and the challengers that seek to displace them are defined by competition and instability, because they pose one of the foundational questions of great power relations: when the distribution of power is in flux, how can the aims of the *status quo* power(s) be reconciled with those of a revisionist power seeking to change the international order to reflect a balance of power that is titling in its favour? Accommodation is difficult because the declining dominant power wants to preserve its leading place in the international system, while the rising challenger wants its growing power - and equal status - acknowledged. The historical example that offers the most insight into how the Sino-American relationship will be affected by power transition dynamics is the Anglo

German rivalry before World War I.

As the noted diplomatic historian Zara Steiner has observed, coupled with the existence of important factors that should have conduced to peace (dynastic ties, cultural and religious affinities, and economic interdependence), the absence of tangible territorial conflicts between Germany and Britain presents a puzzle for historians seeking to explain why Berlin and London found themselves at war in 1914. The Oxford historian Margaret Macmillan makes a similar point and asks “why did Germany and Britain become such antagonists?”²⁰ Answering her own question, she explains:

Political scientists might say the fact that Germany and Britain found themselves on opposite sides in the Great War was foreordained, the result of the clash between a major global power feeling its advantage slip away and a rising challenger. Such transitions are rarely managed peacefully. The established power is too often arrogant, lecturing the rest of the world about how to manage its affairs, and too often insensitive to the fears and concerns of lesser powers. Such a power, as Britain was then, and the United States is today, inevitably resists its own intimations of mortality and the rising one is impatient to get its fair share of whatever is on offer, whether colonies, trade, resources, or influence.”²¹

In other words, power transition dynamics pushed Britain and Germany down the road to war.

In a power transition, both great powers are concerned about the shifting balance of power, and what it means for their security. But what often tips the outcome to war is not the competition for power and security but rather the contest for status and prestige. The Anglo-

German rivalry is illustrative. Most historians point to Germany's bid for world power status (*weltpolitik*) - especially Berlin's decision to embark on a major program of naval expansion - as the primary driver of pre-1914 Anglo-German rivalry. But the naval race was at least as much a symptom as a cause of the Anglo-German antagonism. To be sure, as seen from London, the German naval buildup did pose a threat to core British interests. As an island nation completely dependent on overseas trade for its prosperity, Britain could not be indifferent to the rapid growth of German naval power just across the North Sea. Yet, it is also true that by 1912 the Anglo-German naval race was over, because Germany threw in the towel when it became clear that it could not afford to keep up its end of the battleship building competition. Measured by pure strategic logic then, Germany's battleship building policy was a double blunder because it provoked Britain's hostility and failed to provide Germany with a fleet large enough to offset British naval superiority.

Strategic logic, however, was not the primary driver of German naval policy.²² Great powers not only want security, they also want recognition of their role in the international system. That is, in addition to power and security they also seek status and prestige.²³ Along with the acquisition of colonies, the construction of Germany's "luxury fleet" (as First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill described it) was part of Berlin's strategy to gain equal status with London in the international system, and to match Britain in prestige. As Bard College political scientist Michelle Murray says, Germany built battleships because they "were understood at the time to be emblematic of great power status."²⁴ German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg asserted that to be a "really Great Power" Germany "*must* have a fleet, and a strong one...not merely for the purpose of defending her commerce but for the general purpose of her

greatness.”²⁵ It was Germany’s desire to be recognized as Britain’s equal that ramped-up the intensity of the Anglo-German rivalry. This is because status and prestige are “positional goods,” the competition for which tends to be zero-sum.²⁶ Status inconsistency - the disjuncture between the what Robert Gilpin calls the international system’s hierarchy of prestige and the underlying distribution of power - is a potent generator of conflict as rising powers strive to reshape the international system to reflect - and gain recognition of - their rising power.

V.

In addition to the external dimension of the Anglo-German antagonism, there also was, on the British side, an important domestic dimension. Viewed through the lens of British Liberalism, economic rivalry and ideological antipathy disposed British policymakers to regard Germany as a threat. Looking first at the economic aspect, although Britain and Germany were important trading partners, they also were economic competitors, and over time Britain came to regard Germany’s economic growth as a dangerous *geopolitical* menace. Guided by the doctrine of economic nationalism, Germany prospered mightily during the 1880s and 1890s, and narrowed the gap between itself and Britain in key metrics of national power.²⁷ This caused widespread apprehension among British elites, which blamed Britain’s relative decline on “unfair” German trade and industrial policies: tariffs, state-sanctioned cartels, and state subsidies of export industries. Although the commercial competition between the two nations did not *cause* the rising enmity between Britain and Germany in the years preceding 1914, it coloured British policymakers’ perceptions of Germany, and, as Paul Kennedy observes, thereby spilled-over into the geopolitical realm.²⁸

In addition to economic rivalry, in the decades before 1914 ideology - reflecting the

different political and social structures of Britain and Germany - became for the British an increasingly salient factor driving the Anglo-German antagonism. During the “long” 19th century (1815 to 1914) Britain was both the cradle and acme of Liberalism both as a political philosophy and an economic doctrine. As Paul Kennedy has pointed out, British elites viewed Wilhelmine Germany’s political culture - which privileged the military and its values, emphasized deference to authority, reserved for the state a large role in politics and economics, and the subordinated the individual to the overarching interests of the national community - as fundamentally antithetical to their own Liberal values.²⁹ The pre-war Anglo-German ideological gap affected London’s image of Germany, and thus helped to fuel a perception spiral that solidified a hardening belief among the British political establishment that Germany was irredeemably hostile. Once the war began, the intensity of the ideological distaste for Germany harbored by British elites became glaringly obvious. Britain’s wartime Liberal crusade against Germany was simply the continuation of the pre-war outlook of the British political class.

VI.

Like the Anglo-German antagonism, the deepening Sino-American rivalry is the product of both changes in the distribution power, and of economic and ideational factors. At the systemic level, just as their pre-1914 British counterparts worried about the dramatic shift in relative power between Germany and Britain, today’s American policy elites are apprehensive about the changing distribution of relative power between the U.S. and China. And, as was true for British policymakers contemplating Germany’s rise before 1914, American policymakers are unsettled not only by the fact of China’s economic growth but also by its velocity. In the last four years China has surpassed the United States as the world’s leading manufacturing state, the

leading trading state, and the leading exporter. According to the World Bank's International Comparison Program, measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) China *already* has overtaken the United States as the world's largest economy.³⁰ Although some economists question the validity of GDP calculations based on PPP, even using the market exchange rate metric China is forecast to surpass the U.S. in aggregate GDP by 2019.³¹

As with the Anglo-German antagonism, economic rivalry and ideological antipathy are causing the perception of the "China threat" to congeal within the U.S. foreign policy elite. In the U.S. - just as in pre-1914 Britain - many policymakers and political leaders believe that China's economic success is explained by the fact that it has adopted a range of neo-mercantilist - "unfair" and un-Liberal - policies. As reported by the *New York Times* a big reason for President Obama's changing views about China's economic policy was his anger "at what he sees as Beijing's refusal to play by the rules in trade" and his frustration over "the United States' lack of leverage to do anything about it."³² The belief that China does not play by the rules in trade - and that it a "currency manipulator" - is widespread across the U.S. political spectrum. American policymakers also fear that China's trade and economic policies are intended to weaken the U.S. geopolitically as well as economically - a concern similar to that held about Germany by many in the British elite before 1914. The Obama administration's decision to indict five alleged Chinese military hackers for industrial espionage underscores these concerns.³³

American apprehensions about rapid change in the balance of relative economic power with China reflects doubts - seldom acknowledged openly - about the relative decline of U.S.

power and, even more fundamentally, about whether America's economic and political development model remains superior to China's. As the Eurasia Group's Ian Bremmer and David Gordon have argued, "China's rise and state-capitalist model present the most significant commercial and geopolitical challenge that the U.S. has faced in two decades," and that "China's state capitalism challenges the future of democratic capitalism."³⁴ In this regard, it appears that the *real* "China threat" perceived by U.S. policy elites is to basic notions of American national identity. Indeed, "For Americans the success of a mainland [Chinese] regime that blends authoritarian rule with market-driven economics is an *affront*."³⁵ Here, in another echo of the Anglo-German antagonism, American self-doubt caused by China's economic rise blends into a deeper ideological antipathy toward China.

American leaders perceive China in the same way pre-1914 British policy makers thought of Germany: as a nation whose political system raises doubts about both the scope of its foreign policy ambitions, and its trustworthiness as a diplomatic partner. The very fact that China is a one (Communist) party state rather than a Western democracy "inherently creates misgivings among many Americans, including high level officials."³⁶ In contrast to America's self-perception of itself as a nation built on classical Liberal political and economic ideas, China is viewed as a nation that is: collectivist, mercantilist, statist, lacking in representative government and rule of law, and a human rights violator. As Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi observe, "U.S. leaders believe that democracies are inherently more trustworthy than are authoritarian systems."³⁷ Just as Liberal ideological antipathy colored British perceptions of Germany before

1914, America's Liberal world view is contributing powerfully to policymakers' "enemy" image of China.

VII.

As was true for Britain and Germany before World War I, powerful forces - both external and domestic - are pushing the United States and China down the road to confrontation. However, although the international system's structure constrains decision-makers and narrows the range of policy options from which they can choose, it does not foreclose the possibility of choice. Structure and agency always coexist uneasily side by side., which is why a Sino-American showdown in the years ahead, while probable, is not inevitable.

Whether a clash between the U.S. and China is avoidable hinges on what is at stake for both nations. For China, the answer is straightforward. China seeks to become the regional hegemon in East (and Southeast) Asia. This is what rising great powers *do*: they seek to establish geopolitical dominance in their own backyards. China seeks to dominate East Asia for both security reasons, and to affirm its status and prestige as America's geopolitical equal. China's rise, however, poses the risk of conflict with the U.S. because China is rubbing up against entrenched American power in East Asia. Indeed, since 1945, the United States has been the incumbent hegemon in East Asia.³⁸ There are two metaphors that explain why trouble is brewing between the U.S. and China. One is the "Dodge City" syndrome. Afficionados of American Westerns have all seen the movie where the two gunslingers confront each other in the town saloon and one says to the other: "This town ain't big enough for both of us." And we all

know what happens next. A more intellectual perspective is the Newtonian Theory of Geopolitics: two hegemons can't dominate the same region at the same time.

The U.S. will determine whether a Sino-American train wreck can be avoided. Today, America's predominance in East Asia contributes little, if anything, to U.S. security (defined by the traditional geopolitical metrics of military power and geography). After all, in traditional geopolitical terms, the United States is the most secure great power in history. Its homeland is shielded from any kind of serious great power threat by geography and its overwhelming military capabilities - and nuclear deterrence.. It is America's extraregional hegemony in East Asia, and the potential "entrapment" dynamics of U.S. alliances in the region, that are the main cause of U.S. *insecurity*. America's alliances and security guarantees in East Asia - especially with Japan - are potential transmission belts for war. This is a point underscored by the increasingly fraught Sino-Japanese conflict over the Diaoyuti/Senkaku islands into which the U.S. has been injected because of its alliance with Tokyo.

So why does Washington remain committed to preserving its dominance in East Asia? The fundamental reason is ideational. The U.S. wants to dominate that region to ensure that its markets remain open to American economic penetration, and that it also remains open to penetration by America's Liberal ideology. What American policy makers fear is the threat of *closure*, because that would undermine the extant international order - the *Pax Americana* - based on America's Liberal beliefs about the virtues of economic openness and democracy. China is seen as a threat because its very existence challenges the idea of an "Open Door World" on

which America's security is - wrongly - believed to depend. Aaron Friedberg concedes this point: "Ideology inclines the United States to be more suspicious and hostile toward China than it would be for strategic reasons alone."³⁹

China's non-democratic political system is also viewed as an ideational menace to the United States, because "if Asia comes to be dominated by an authoritarian China, the prospects for liberal reform in any of its non-democratic neighbors will be greatly diminished. Even the region's established democracies could find themselves inhibited from pursuing policies, foreign and perhaps domestic as well, that might incur Beijing's wrath."⁴⁰ It's not stretching the point to suggest that the biggest threat to the U.S. in East Asia is not China but the Liberal assumptions imbedded in American foreign policy. America's ideological preferences have real world consequences because they are powerful drivers of U.S. grand strategy toward China. That grand strategy, however, not only puts the U.S. at odds with China, but also reinforces Beijing's insecurities and its deep-rooted fears of Washington's intentions and ambitions. It is *American* policy that generates the negative perception spiral that is pushing the U.S. and China down the road to confrontation.

Even before the Obama administration's strategic "pivot" to East Asia, Chinese policymakers perceived that the U.S. was engaged in a policy of encircling China strategically and thwarting its rise. At least as worrisome for Chinese leaders is the concern that the U.S. is trying to promote "regime change" by pressuring China to transform its political system into a liberal democracy. As seen in Beijing, the U.S. "uses ideas of democracy and human rights to

de-legitimize and destabilize regimes that espouse alternative values” to American-style democratic free market capitalism.⁴¹ Many in the U.S. foreign policy establishment advocate policies that inevitably serve to heat-up Sino-American tensions by reinforcing Beijing’s pre-existing fears of American intentions. A good example is Aaron Friedberg’s recent book, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, which calls for the U.S. to: maintain its military superiority over China in East Asia; defend Taiwan’s independence; create a powerful anti-Chinese alliance in East Asia and Southeast Asia; and work for regime change in China.

Another example is the very similar policy advocated by Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, in which there is a mind boggling disconnect between the authors’ analysis of Sino-American relations and their policy recommendations. The answer given by Nathan and Scobell to the question they raise - “how does China see the U.S.?” - is that Beijing is uncertain of U.S. intentions, concerned about its security, resentful of American meddling in its domestic affairs, and determined to gain acknowledgment of its claims for status parity with the United States. All true. Instead of advocating policies that could ameliorate China’s fears, however, they offer hard-line policy prescriptions that only can serve to Beijing’s distrust of U.S. intentions. Two stand-out. First, they flatly dismiss Beijing’s claim to equal status and prestige with the U.S.. Second, they argue that the U.S. should stand its ground, and rigidly uphold the geopolitical status quo in East Asia. Nathan and Scobell reflect a tendency among U.S. foreign policymakers and analysts to act as if China is only entitled to assert interests

that have been pre-approved by the United States. That is not how great power politics works, however. By ignoring China's perception of its own interests, the United States is deliberately constructing a self-fulfilling prophecy of mistrust and rising hostility in Sino-American relations. If the U.S. really wants to avoid a train wreck with China, it will have to make difficult - even painful - adjustments and adopt a policy that accommodates China's rise. In this sense, the United States and China are rapidly approaching an "E. H. Carr Moment."

IX.

In his classic study of international relations, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, the British scholar E. H. Carr analyzed the political crisis of 1930s caused by the break-down of the post-World War I order symbolized by the Versailles Treaty.⁴² The Versailles system cracked, Carr argued, because of the growing gap between the order it represented and the actual distribution of power in Europe. Carr used the events of the 1930s to make a larger geopolitical point: international orders reflect the balance of power that existed at their creation. Over time, however, the relative power of states changes and eventually the international order no longer reflects that actual distribution of power between (or among) the great powers. When that happens, the legitimacy of the prevailing order is put in question. As its power increases, the rising power becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the international order, and seeks to revise it. The challenger wants to change the rules embodied in the existing international order - rules written, of course by the once-dominant but now declining great power that created the existing order. The incumbent hegemon, of course, wants to preserve the existing international order as

is - an order that it created to advance its interests. The Carr Moment presents the incumbent hegemon with a choice. It can dig in its heels and try to preserve the prevailing order - and its privileged position therein - or it can accede to the rising challenger's demands for revision. If it chooses the former course of action, it runs the risk of war with the dissatisfied challenger. If it chooses the latter, it must come to terms with the reality of its decline, and the end of its hegemonic position.

The Carr Moment is where the geopolitical rubber meets the road: the *status quo* power(s) must choose between accommodating or opposing the revisionist demands of the rising power(s). In his contribution to this volume (and elsewhere), John Ikenberry argues that China will not challenge the current international order, even as the distribution of power shifts in its favor over the next decade or two. This is a doubtful proposition, however. The geopolitical question - the Carr Moment - of our time is whether the declining hegemon in East Asia, the United States, will try to preserve a *status quo* that, over the next decade or two, increasingly no longer will reflect the prevailing distribution of power, or whether it can reconcile itself to the revisionist demands of a rising China that the international order in East Asia be aligned with the emerging power realities. Britain faced the same choice in the years leading up to World War I.

It is tempting to conclude that war between Britain and Germany a century ago was inevitable. Yet, there was serious debate in London about whether to contain or conciliate Germany. In a January 1907 memorandum, Sir Eyre Crow, a senior Foreign Office official, made the case for containment.⁴³ While allowing Germany its *present* place in the hierarchy of

status and prestige, he argued, Britain should oppose Berlin if it sought more. Crowe argued that London should not accommodate Germany; doing so would only increase Berlin's expansionist appetite. Germany, he said, intended "ultimately to break up and supplant the British Empire." Crowe concluded that the Anglo-German rivalry resulted from a fundamental conflict of interests that could not be papered over by diplomatic fudging, the effect of which would be the sacrifice of British interests. War with Germany, Crowe argued could be avoided only by submitting to Berlin's demands - which he believed would mean forfeiture of Britain's own great power status - or, as he counseled, by amassing enough power to deter Berlin.

Lord Thomas Sanderson - the recently retired Permanent Undersecretary of State in the Foreign Office - rebutted Crowe.⁴⁴ The key to understanding German diplomacy was the fact that a unified Germany was latecomer on the world stage. "It was inevitable," he observed, that a rising power like Germany was "impatient to realize various long-suppressed aspirations, and to claim full recognition of its new position."⁴⁵ Sanderson understood that refusing to acknowledge Berlin's claims for status and prestige on a par with Britain's was risky, because "a great and growing nation cannot be repressed." He understood the Carr Moment's logic: Britain's choice was either to accommodate or resist German aspirations - and resistance meant a high chance of war. For Sanderson, the choice was clear: "It would be a misfortune that [Germany] should be led to believe that in whatever direction she seeks to expand she will find the British lion in her path."⁴⁶ Rejecting Crowe's argument that Britain should uphold the status, quo, Sanderson famously remarked that from Berlin's perspective "the British Empire must appear in the light of

some huge giant sprawling over the globe, with gouty fingers and toes stretching in every direction, which cannot be approached without eliciting a scream.”⁴⁷ As we know, Crowe’s views prevailed over Sanderson’s. In August 1914 Britain and Germany found themselves at war.

X.

The international system is in the midst of a transition away from unipolarity, and, as U.S. dominance wanes, *Pax Americana* will give way to new but as yet undefined international order. Historically, transitional periods marked by hegemonic decline and the simultaneous emergence of new great powers have been unstable and war-prone. It is hardly alarmist to say that today China and the United States are on a collision course. As was true for Britain and Germany before World War I, powerful forces - both external and domestic - are pushing the United States and China down the road to confrontation.

Whether Beijing and Washington will be able to bridge their differences through diplomacy in coming years remains to be seen.. However, avoiding Sino-American conflict will depend more - *much* more - on U.S. policy than on China’s. Here, the Crowe/Sanderson debate serves as an object lesson. Today, when it comes to China, the spirit of Sir Eyre Crowe pervades the American foreign policy community. The U.S. professes the benevolence of its intentions toward China, even as it refuses to make any significant concessions to what China views as its vital interests. Like Crowe, the U.S. foreign policy establishment believes that Beijing should be

satisfied with what it has - or more correctly, what Washington is willing to let China have - and not ask for more. American foreign policy analysts correctly discern that Chinese leaders believe that the U.S. is determined to thwart China's rise. Nevertheless, they advocate the kind of hard line policies that can only confirm Beijing's perceptions and reinforce its sense of insecurity.

It is Washington that has the "last clear chance" to avoid the looming Sino-American conflict by undertaking a policy of strategic adjustment in East Asia. Such a policy would have to make real concessions to Beijing on issues that the Chinese consider to be of vital importance to them by:

- Halting arms sales to Taiwan, and making clear that the U.S. will not intervene in a conflict between Taiwan and China.
- Retracting the pledges made by President Obama, Defense Secretaries Robert Gates and Chuck Hegel, and (then-) Secretary of State Hilary Clinton that the Senkaku (Diayouti) Islands are covered by the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty.
- Showing flexibility with respect to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea
- Withdrawing U.S. forces from South Korea.
- Renouncing any U.S. policy of regime change toward China, and adopting a policy of strict non-interference in China's internal affairs (including Tibet and Xinjiang).

America's political culture with its emphasis on exceptionalism, Liberal ideology, and "openness" will make it difficult for the U.S. to adopt such policies.⁴⁸ So will American national identity, because, as William Wohlforth has commented, since the Cold War's end there is plenty of

evidence that “U.S. decision-makers value their country’s status of primacy.”⁴⁹ Finally, history - or, more correctly, U.S. policymakers naive notions about it - will also get in the way of conciliating a rising China. When U.S. policymakers look to history as a guide, the default option is to invoke the “lessons” of the 1930s, and to overlook the Great War’s causes.⁵⁰ This misuse of history could have tragic consequences for the Sino-American relationship in the future. “The proper lesson” of be drawn from the Great War’s outbreak, Johns Hopkins scholar David Calleo observed, “is not so much the need for vigilance against aggressors, but the ruinous consequences of refusing reasonable accommodation to upstarts.”⁵¹ If the U.S. really wants to avoid a future head-on collision with China, it must eschew Crowe’s counsel and embrace Sanderson’s. For the evolving Sino-American relationship, that is the real lesson of 1914.

NOTES

1. For a counter-argument, see G. John Ikenberry. “The Illusion of Geopolitics,” *Foreign Affairs* (May-June 2014), pp. 80-90.
2. “Could Asia Really Go to War Over These?” *The Economist*, September 22, 2012, p. 13; Banyan, “Chasing Ghosts,” *The Economist*, June 11, 2009.
3. See Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832-1914* (New York: Penguin, 2011).
4. For analysis of how China’s rise could side-tracked, see Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower: How China’s Internal Politics Could Derail Its Peaceful Rise* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2007).

5. Here, the chapter in this volume by William Wohlforth - the leading academic proponent of the view that the international system remains unipolar - is especially noteworthy. While affirming his conviction that the international system still is unipolar, he concedes that China is about to pass the United States in one very important metric of power: aggregate GDP.

6. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1979). On neoclassical realism, see Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

7. See Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17:3 (Spring 1993), pp. 5-51.

8. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2014, Updated Ed.); Christopher Layne, "China's Challenge to U.S. Hegemony," *Current History*, 107 (January 2008) pp. 13-18

9. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

10. See E. H. Carr (ed. Michael Cox), *The Twenty Years's Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Gilpin, *War and Change*; Christopher Layne, *After the Fall: International Politics, U.S. Grand Strategy, and the End of the Pax Americana* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

11. Michael H. Hunt and Steve I. Levine, *Arc of Empire: America's Wars of Empire in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), p. 8.

12. See Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

13. On this point, see Gordon Craig, "The Historian and the Study of International Relations," *American Historical Review*, 88:1 (February 1988), p. 9; Edward Ingram, "The Wonderland of the Political Scientist," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Fall 1997), p. 52; Melvyn P. Leffler, "Presidential Address: New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Spring 1995), p. 179.

14. For elaboration, see G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
15. Obviously, nuclear weapons were not a factor in pre-1914 international politics. But in the years before the Great War, perceptive military observers argued that changes in military technology meant that any future great power war would be prolonged, costly, and ruinous to the states that fought it. Hence, they deduced that the great powers would not run the risk of a major war between (or among) them.
16. For a well-known articulation of the hopes for peace held by the European elite, see Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1913).
17. Charles Emerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), p. xiv (emphasis in original).
18. Emerson, *1913*, p. xiii.
19. In addition to Gilpin, *War and Change*, on power transitions, see A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of the War Ledger* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1996); William R. Thompson, ed., *Systemic Transitions: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Jack Levy, "Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China," in Robert Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 11-33. For the argument that, power transition dynamics notwithstanding, China will seek to avoid conflict with the United States, see Steve Chan, *China, the U.S. and Power Transition Theory: A Critique* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
20. Margaret Macmillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House, 1914), pp. 63.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 58
22. A strong case can be made that Tirpitz's battleship building was driven wholly by bureaucratic politics, and not a bit by strategy. On this see, Patrick J. Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). On bureaucratic politics, see Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Longman, 1999, 2nd ed.). For a recent discussion about the strategic illogic of Tirpitz's "risk fleet" strategy, see Dirk Bonker, *Militarism in a Global Age: Naval Ambitions in*

Germany and the United States Before World War I (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

23. On the importance of status in international politics, see T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

24. Michelle Murray, "Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition Before the First World War," *Security Studies*, 19:4 (Fall 2010), p. 665. Also see, Jan Ruger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

25. Quoted in James Joll and Gordon Martell, *The Origins of the First World War* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007, 3rd ed.), p. 148.

26. Randall L. Schweller, "Realism and the Present Great Power System: Growth and Positional Conflict Over Scarce Resources," in Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp . 28-68.

27. Friederich List was the founding father of the German school of economic nationalism. In the latter half of the 19th century this doctrine was advocated by the leading economists Gustav Schmoller and Adolph Wagner. On List's views, see E. M. Earle, "Adam Smith, Alexander Hamilton, and Friederich List," in Edward Meade Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943).

28. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p.305.

29. Paul Kennedy, *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, p.6.

30. Chris Giles "China Poised to Overtake US as World's Leading Economic Power This Year," *Financial Times*, April 30, 2014.

31. "The Dating Game," *Economist*, December 27, 2011.

32. Mark Landler, "Obama's Journey to Tougher Tack on a Rising China," *New York Times*, September 20, 2012.

33. Explaining the rationale behind the indictments, Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr. said, "when a foreign nation uses military or intelligence resources as tools against an American executive or corporations to obtain trade secrets or sensitive business information for the benefit

of its state-owned companies, we must say ‘Enough is enough’.” Quoted in Michael S. Schmidt and David E. Sanger, “5 in China Army Face U.S. Charges of Cyberattacks,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2004.

34. Ian Bremmer and David Gordon, “U.S. Needs Japan As its Best Ally in Asia,” *Financial Times*, September 9, 2012.

35. Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2011), p. 44 (emphasis added).

36. Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, John L. Thornton China Center Monograph Series, No. 4 (March 2012), p. 26.

37. Lieberthal and Jisi, *U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, p. 24

38. John Mearsheimer argues that the “stopping power of water” prevents a great power from gaining hegemony outside its own region. This is not correct, however. Since the end of World War II, the United States has been an extraregional hegemon in the three areas of the world most important to it strategically: Western Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf. See, Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy From 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). For a critique of Mearsheimer, see; Christopher Layne, “The ‘Poster Child’ for Offensive Realism: The United States as a Global Hegemon,” *Security Studies*, 12:2 (Winter 2002-2003), pp. 120-164.

39. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, pp. 43-44.

40. *Ibid.*, p.8

41. Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America,” *Foreign Affairs*, 91:5 (September/October 2012), p. 39.

42. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis*.

43. Eyre Crowe, “Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany,” in G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperly, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office [HMSO], 1928), pp. 397-420.

44. Memorandum by Lord Sanderson, in Gooch and Temperly, pp. .

45. *Ibid.*, p. .

46. Ibid., pp.

47. Ibid., p. 430.

48. See, Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1955); Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Layne; *Peace of Illusions*; William Appleman Williams *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Delta, 1962); Michael C. Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: "The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security*, 32:3 (Winter 2007/2008), pp. 7-43.

49. William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," *World Politics*, 61:1 (January 2009), p. 52.

50. The opening of the British archives in the 1970s produced a torrent of scholarship on London's diplomacy and grand strategy during the 1930s. The historical evidence refutes Winston Churchill's caricature of British policymakers in the 1930s as naive appeasers. See David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (New York: Random House, 2005); Christopher Layne, "Security Studies and the Use of History: Neville Chamberlain's Grand Strategy Revisited," *Security Studies*, 17:3 (Fall 2008), pp. 397-437.

51. David Calleo, *The German Problem Reconsidered: Germany and the World Order, 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 6.