

Avoiding a Sino-American confrontation

Why the US should accommodate a rising China

Christopher Layne

China claims, naturally, that its rise will be peaceful. But with tensions between China and its neighbors rising, and smaller Asian states looking at the US for their security, violent conflict in East Asia cannot be ruled out. This article argues that the US cannot maintain the status quo in East-Asia, and should therefore accommodate China as the dominant force in the region in order to avoid unnecessary conflict. Contrary to the beliefs of the foreign policy establishment, accommodating China's great power rise is a prudent, wise, and realistic policy.

Brushing aside the idea that the US is in decline, since the Cold War's end, American policymakers and scholars of international relations (IR) have time and again reiterated that the world is unipolar — with the US, of course, as the unipole. After all, as John Huntsman — former governor of Utah, and US ambassador to China — put it, “decline is un-American.” At the same time, the American foreign policy establishment is beset by strategic schizo-

phrenia. Even while reaffirming America's continuing global dominance, it worries about the rise of China. For example, the Obama administration announced a strategic “pivot” to Asia for the purpose of containing an increasingly assertive

the decisions of leading US allies — including Britain, Germany, France, South Korea and Australia — to join the new Beijing-sponsored Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

American unease about China's rise is a tacit admission that America's post-Cold War “unipolar moment” is over. Decline indeed may be un-American but that is not stopping it from happening. US decline is the product of the big, impersonal forces of history. China is the poster child for the ongoing shift of the world's geopolitical and economic center of gravity from the Euro-Atlantic world to Asia. 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, in September 2014 — measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) — China *already* had overtaken the United States as the world's largest economy.¹

Dismissing Sino-American conflict?

It is easy to dismiss the idea that the US and China are headed for conflict. After all, US international relations theorists assure us that Sino-American war is impossible for three reasons: the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons;

China. In selling the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact, the administration touted its *strategic* importance — as a geopolitical counterweight to Beijing — rather than its economic benefits. Washington's fear of China's regional sway also was evident in its heated reaction to

*“Decline is
un-American”*

— *John Huntsman*



the pacifying effects of economic interdependence (“globalization”); and the near certainty — so it is claimed — that China will embed itself in the institutions and structures of the current world order, and accept its rules, norms, and institutions.² None of these arguments is persuasive.

First, without delving too deeply into the arcane details of nuclear weapons strategy, we know that, because of the “stability/instability paradox,” although nuclear armed states are deterred from using nuclear weapons against each other, they are not stopped from fighting a conventional war. This isn’t speculation: in the 1999 Kargil conflict, India and Pakistan — both armed with nuclear weapons — fought each other with conventional forces.

Second, as for the notion that economic interdependence prevents war, that was exploded by the outbreak of World War I. In 1911 the British writer Norman Angell published a famous book, *The Great Illusion*, arguing that the tight economic interconnections between Europe’s great powers made war between, or among, them impossible.³ August 1914 proved otherwise. Third, it is delusional to think that a powerful China willingly will subordinate itself to the institutions, rules, and norms of the current world order —

the *Pax Americana*, which the US established after 1945. While the *Pax Americana* has benefitted other states, it foremostly privileges American interests. As China attains co-equal great power status with the US, it inevitably will demand a reshaping of the international order that diminishes US influence. Indeed, with its new AIIB, and memberships in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS, Beijing already is building a parallel institutional structure outside of the *Pax Americana’s* framework.

Great power politics

The basic take-away from the arguments of American liberal IR theorists — whose views resonate among US policymakers — is that great power war is a thing of the past. This is an appealing — but false — notion. International politics has not changed fundamentally since the time of Thucydides, the Greek historian of the Peloponnesian Wars, and one of the most astute thinkers ever to write about international politics. Many in the American foreign policy establishment believed that the Cold War represented both the “end of history”, and the end of great power politics (or at least the end of great power politics practiced by any state other than the US). China’s astonishingly rapid great power rise means,

One way to visualize the Sino-American rivalry in East-Asia, is the familiar scene in Western films: “This town ain't big enough for both of us.” (photo: Flickr/Kevin Zollman)

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however, that great power politics is back (not that it ever really went away). And it is back with a vengeance.

There is a regular pattern to great power politics. Great powers compete — hard — for power, security, status, prestige, and influence. Newly emerging great powers want to move up the league table to the top of the great power premier league. If they succeed, they want to leverage their new found wealth and power to remake the existing international order into a new one that privileges their interests. They also want to become dominant — hegemonic — in their own region. Of course, China says its rise will be peaceful. If history is any guide, however, it will be anything but peaceful. When new great powers enter the international system, the result is geopolitical turbulence and war. We don't have to look too far back in history to find supporting evidence. The near-simultaneous great power emergence of the United States, Germany, and Japan during the last third of the 19th century was the direct cause of the 20th century's two world wars.

There are two big reasons why China's great power emergence could trigger a Sino-American conflict sometime during the next couple of decades. First is the Sino-American competition for geopolitical supremacy in East Asia. Since 1945, the US has been the dominant power in East Asia but now a rapidly ascending China is aiming to unseat the United States, and establish its own regional preponderance. There are two ways to visualize why the Sino-American relationship is a geopolitical powder keg. One is the "Dodge City Syndrome." Cinephiles who like American Westerns know that in many such films there is a scene where two gunslingers encounter each other in the town saloon. When their eyes meet, one says "This town ain't big enough for both of us." We all know how that turns out. Another way to think of the evolving Sino-American relationship is what I call the Newtonian Theory of Geopolitics: two great powers cannot dominate the same region at the same time.

The second generator of Sino-American conflict is power transition dynamics, which kick-in when a declining hegemon is challenged by a fast-rising upstart great power.⁴ 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 the aims of a revisionist power that seeks to change the international order to reflect the ongoing shift in the

balance of power in its favor? Power transitions force great powers to come to grips with the "E.H. Carr Moment."

In his classic study of international relations between the World Wars, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, the British scholar Edward Hallett Carr explored the dilemmas that arise when the existing balance of power is challenged by a rising great power.⁵ The Carr Moment is where the geopolitical rubber meets the road. Rather than acceding to the rising challenger's demands for revision, an incumbent hegemon is tempted to dig in its heels and to preserve the prevailing order — and its privileged position therein. The dilemma for the incumbent hegemon is that standing firm risks war with the dissatisfied challenger. But choosing accommodation with the challenger means coming to terms with the reality of its decline, and loss of its hegemonic position.

Steps for accommodation

It is the United States that controls the exit ramp to the brewing Sino-American confrontation in East Asia. To avoid conflict with Beijing, the US must accommodate China's great power rise. Here are some important steps the US can take to do so:

End US military cooperation with, and arms sales to, Taiwan.

Declare that the US-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty excludes the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, and that the US will not intervene in any Sino-Japanese military conflict arising from sovereignty disputes over the islands.

Handover to China and South Korea the diplomatic task of managing North Korea; and pledge that in the event of Korean unification, no US military forces will be deployed on the Korean Peninsula.

Instead of opposing Chinese initiatives like the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the US should welcome Beijing's positive contribution to economic development and political stability in Asia.

The US should work to ensure that China's voting rights in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank are commensurate with its economic power.

The US should cease provocative aerial reconnaissance patrols in proximity to China, its territorial waters, or areas over which it claims sovereignty (even if disputed).

As long as the right of free passage for merchant vessels of all nations is unaffected, the US should not take sides

between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors with respect to territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Adopt a policy of strict non-interference in China's internal affairs (Tibet, human rights, system of governance).

Abandon the dangerously escalatory Air-Sea Battle military doctrine for possible conflict with China.

Accommodating China's great power rise is a prudent, wise, and realistic policy. But that is not the way much of the American foreign policy establishment sees it. Their opposition to accommodation reveals starkly the driving — and detrimental — role of ideational factors in US foreign policy. The US wants to maintain its East Asian primacy 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 policymakers fear is the threat of closure, because that would undermine the *Pax Americana*, which is based on America's Liberal beliefs about the virtues of economic openness and democracy.

As the American foreign policy establishment sees it, China's very existence challenges the idea of an "Open Door World" upon which they believe — mistakenly — US prosperity and security rests.⁶ Princeton University professor 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."⁷ US foreign policy elites also fear that China's rise calls into question whether America's model of economic and political development remains superior to China's. As Friedberg puts it, "For Americans the success of a mainland [Chinese] regime that blends authoritarian rule with market-driven economics is an *affront*."⁸ The *real* "China threat" perceived by US policy elites is to basic notions of American "Exceptionalism," and national identity, which are defined by Liberal ideology.⁹

The arguments against accommodating China are weak. As long as it keeps its fiscal and economic house in order, the US will be too important and dynamic to be shut out of Asian markets. Similarly, conciliating China will not harm US security. Indeed, far from contributing to America's security (defined by the traditional geopolitical metrics of military power and geography), its East Asian commitments make it *less* secure. 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, overwhelming military capabilities, and nuclear deterrence. It is America's extra-regional hegemony in East Asia, and the potential

"entrapment" dynamics of US alliances in the region (especially with Japan) — which are transmission belts for war — that threaten to embroil the US in conflict with China.

Breaking the negative perception spiral

The case for accommodating China's rise is powerful. Washington's current policy reinforces Beijing's insecurities and deep-rooted fears of Washington's intentions and ambitions. It is *American* policy that generates the negative perception spiral that is pushing the US and China down the road to confrontation. History offers a cautionary lesson. During the run-up to 1914, there was a debate inside the British Foreign Office about whether London should accommodate a rising Germany, or take a hardline stance with Berlin. Sir Eyre Crowe, a senior Foreign Office official, argued that making any concessions to Germany would only whet Berlin's expansionist appetite. Moreover, he said, unless it contained German ambitions, Britain would lose its status as a world power.

Lord Thomas Sanderson, who had just retired as the Foreign Office's Permanent Undersecretary of State, rejected Crowe's analysis. The key to understanding German diplomacy, he said, was that a unified Germany was late-comer on the world stage. "It was inevitable," Sanderson observed, that a rising power like Germany was "impatient to realize various long-suppressed aspirations, and to claim full recognition of its new position." Refusing to acknowledge the realities of German power, and Berlin's claims for status and prestige, 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 almost certainly meant war. For Sanderson, the choice was clear: he urged accommodation with Germany. "It would be a misfortune that [Germany] should be led to believe," he said, "that in whatever direction she seeks to expand she will find the British lion in her path."¹⁰ As we know, Crowe's views prevailed over Sanderson's, and in August 1914 Britain and Germany found themselves at war.

As was true for Britain and Germany before World War I, over the next couple of decades powerful forces — both external and domestic — are pushing the United States and China toward a geopolitical train wreck. The Carr Moment of our time is this: will the US seek to preserve a *status quo* that increasingly will be out of sync with East Asia's balance of power, or can it reconcile itself to Beijing's revisionist demands that the international order in East Asia be realigned to reflect the region's shifting



power realities? Whether Beijing and Washington will be able to bridge their differences through diplomacy in coming years remains to be seen. However, as long as the United States and China remain committed to their current strategies — and the respective ambitions that underlie them — the potential for a smashup is high.

The Crowe/Sanderson debate serves as an object lesson. Today, when it comes to China, Crowe's spirit pervades the American foreign policy elite. Although the US professes the benevolence of its intentions toward China, it refuses significant concessions to what China views as its vital interests. Like Crowe, the US 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. Although correctly discerning that Chinese leaders believe that the US is determined to thwart China's rise, the US foreign policy elite nevertheless advocates hard line policies that confirm Beijing's perceptions and reinforce its insecurity. The United States is treading a dangerous path.

America's political culture and sense of national identity inhibit Washington from coming to terms with China's

rise. So does the fact that when US policymakers look to history as a guide, the default option is to invoke the "lessons" of the 1930s, rather than pondering the events that caused the Great War. This is a mistake. "The proper lesson" to 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."¹¹ The American foreign policy establishment needs more Lord Sandersons and fewer Eyre Crowes. Like Britain before 1914, the US must choose between two options: either accommodate the rising challenger, acknowledge its interests, and accord it status and prestige commensurate with its power, or rigidly uphold a fraying status quo, and risk an all but certain showdown a decade or two down the road.

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1. Chris Giles, 'China Poised to Overtake US as World's Leading Economic Power This Year', *Financial Times*, April 30, 2014.
2. For example, see G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Ikenberry advances all three of these claims to buttress his claim that a Sino-American war is impossible.
3. Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010).
4. On power transitions, see Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); and A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
5. E.H. Carr, introduction by Michael E. Cox, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).
6. On the central role of Open Door thinking in post-World War II American foreign policy, see Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). The seminal work on the role of the Open Door in American foreign policy is William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).
7. Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), pp. 43-44.
8. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, p. 44 (emphasis added).
9. The classic work on America's Liberal ideology is Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).
10. The quotes in this paragraph are from 'Memorandum by Lord Sanderson', in G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperly, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914*, Volume III (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office [HMSO], 1928), pp. 420-431. For Crowe's views, see Eyre Crowe, 'Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany', in *ibid*, pp. 397-420.
11. David Calleo, *The German Problem Reconsidered: Germany and the World Order, 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 6.

The Port of Miami. According to the author, the American foreign policy establishment believes China challenges the idea of an "Open Door World" (photo: Wikimedia/James R. Tourtellotte)