

*Never before in history has a rising power ascended so far, so fast, on so many different dimensions.*

–GRAHAM ALLISON

# The U.S.-China Strategic Competition: Clues from History

Graham Allison

Churchill observed that the further back one can look, the farther ahead one can see. To help the Aspen Strategy Group look ahead to prescriptions for the U.S. in the current strategic competition with China, the organizers asked me to look back at previous great power rivalries. Specifically, they assigned me two Applied History questions:

- “What are the lessons from history we should be aware of when two great powers collide?”
- “What should the U.S. learn from these to shape its policies on China?”

Since these questions are discussed at length in my book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (2017), the organizers asked me to provide a succinct summary of key takeaways from the book that may be helpful in analyzing the strategic-military dimension of this relationship today. This paper begins with that overview, followed by a brief analysis of the current strategic-military competition, and concludes with provocative questions.

## Overview

In brief, consider five questions:

1. What is the Big Idea?
2. Tectonics: What has happened to the relative power of the U.S. and China since the unipolar moment at the end of the Cold War?
3. Are confrontation and competition inevitable?
4. Is war—real bloody war that could become World War III—inevitable?
5. While today’s Washington and Beijing are stumbling toward great power conflict, could statesmen find a way to escape Thucydides’s Trap?

Out of respect for the preferred form of communication in Washington today, I begin with a tweet-sized answer to each.

The big idea comes from Thucydides. Why has China’s aspiration for a “peaceful rise,” and previous American administrations’ hope that China would follow in the footsteps of Germany and Japan and take its place as a “responsible stakeholder” in an American-led international order, been upended? In a phrase, the answer is: Thucydides’s Trap. China is a meteoric rising power. The U.S. is a colossal ruling power. When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, alarm bells should sound: extreme danger ahead. In the last sixteen cases this has happened, twelve ended in war. As Henry Kissinger has argued, Thucydides’s Trap offers the best lens available for looking through the noise and news of the day to the underlying dynamic in the relationship between the U.S. and China.

What has happened to the relative power of the U.S. and China since the U.S. victory in the Cold War introduced what most of the American national security establishment thought would be a unipolar era? In two words: a tectonic shift. Never before in history has a rising power ascended so far, so fast, on so many different dimensions. Never before has a ruling power seen its relative position change so dramatically, so quickly.<sup>1</sup> To paraphrase former Czech President Václav Havel, things have happened so fast that we have not yet had time to be astonished.

Are confrontation and competition inevitable? Yes. As China realizes Xi Jinping's dream to "make China great again," it will inevitably encroach on positions and prerogatives Americans have come to believe are naturally our own. As Americans feel China growing into what we have come to think of as "our" space, they will become increasingly alarmed and push back. The hope that this is just a Trumpian detour is an illusion.

Is war—real bloody war—inevitable? No. To repeat: no. If American and Chinese leaders settle for statecraft as usual, they should expect history as usual—and that *could* mean war, even a Third World War. But if we recognize how catastrophic such a war could be, and understand how such rivalries have so often ended in war, strategists and statesmen can follow in the footsteps of predecessors who have risen above history as usual.

In the three years since my manuscript went to the publisher, I've been searching for a way to escape Thucydides's Trap. At this point, I've identified nine potential "avenues of escape"—none yet so compelling that I'm ready to fully embrace it. About one thing, however, I am certain. There is no monopoly of strategic wisdom on this issue in Washington or in Beijing—or in Cambridge!

Several more paragraphs of explanation and argument may be in order. Members of the Aspen Strategy Group hardly need to be reminded of Thucydides. As the founder of history and author of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides analyzed the causes of the war that destroyed the two great city-states of classical Greece. About that war, he wrote famously: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable."

Thucydides's Trap is a term I coined a decade ago to make vivid Thucydides's insight. Thucydides's Trap is the dangerous dynamic that occurs when a rising power (like Athens, Germany a century ago, or China today) threatens to displace a ruling power (like Sparta, Great Britain, or the U.S. today). In these conditions, both parties become especially vulnerable to third-party provocations or even accidents. Remember 1914, when the assassination of an archduke sparked a fire that ended up burning down the houses of all the great states of Europe. In the dangerous Thucydidean dynamic, misperceptions are magnified, miscalculations multiplied, and risks of escalation amplified. Extraneous events that would otherwise be manageable compel one or the other to react, triggering a vicious cycle of reactions that can drag them into a war that neither wanted.

As Thucydides explains, this dangerous dynamic is driven by three factors: material reality, psychology, and politics. At the material level, China really is rising and encroaching on positions and prerogatives Americans have come to believe are naturally ours. Many Americans see this as an assault on who we are—since for us, USA means number one. Others are still "China deniers"—refusing to acknowledge that China could be number one in any race that matters.

Psychology combines perceptions and misperceptions with emotions and identity—often producing what Thucydides called "fear" in the ruling power and "arrogance" in the rising power. (And as the Greeks taught us, beyond fear lies paranoia; beyond arrogance, hubris.) As my colleague Joe Nye has pointed out, as rivals come to see the other as an enemy, this can become a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies in which whatever either does is seen by the other as a hostile attempt to displace it or hold it down.<sup>2</sup>

Driver number three in this dynamic is politics. Within the struggle for leadership within each government, a fundamental axiom declares: never allow a significant political competitor to get to your right on a matter of national security. If he were looking for a poster child to illustrate this point, Thucydides could not find a better example than Washington today.

The dramatic shift in the tectonics of international power is a subject for a separate paper. Power is an elusive term, made even more so by the string of adjectives that have been attached to it. Yardsticks for measuring power invite debate. Nonetheless, for big picture purposes, three stubborn facts should suffice. National GDP creates the substructure of international power. America's share of global GDP has shrunk from half in 1950 to a quarter at the end of the Cold War in 1991; it is one-seventh today and is on a trajectory to be one-tenth by midcentury.<sup>3</sup> In 1991, China barely appeared on any international league table. Since then, it has soared to overtake the U.S. in gross domestic product at purchasing power parity, or GDP (PPP)—a measurement that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) both regard as the single best yardstick for comparing national economies.<sup>4</sup> The impact of this tectonic shift is felt in every dimension of every relationship—not just between the U.S. and China, but between each of them and their neighbors. Trade offers an instructive example. When China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the major trading partner of each major Asian nation was the United States. Today, the predominant trading partner of each is who? China.<sup>5</sup>

In 2015, thanks to Senator Jack Reed, I was asked to make a presentation to the Senate Armed Services Committee to provide a larger context for the committee's review of the Obama administration's major initiative toward Asia. Under the banner of the "pivot" or "rebalance," Obama called for the U.S. to put less weight on our left foot (in the Middle East fighting wars) in order to put more weight on our right foot in Asia, where the future lies. While applauding the objective, to illustrate the impact of the tectonic shift, I suggested we imagine the U.S. and China as two kids on a playground sitting on opposite ends of a seesaw, each represented by the size of its GDP (PPP). As we were debating aspirations, we barely noticed that both feet had lifted off the ground.

**Chart 1**

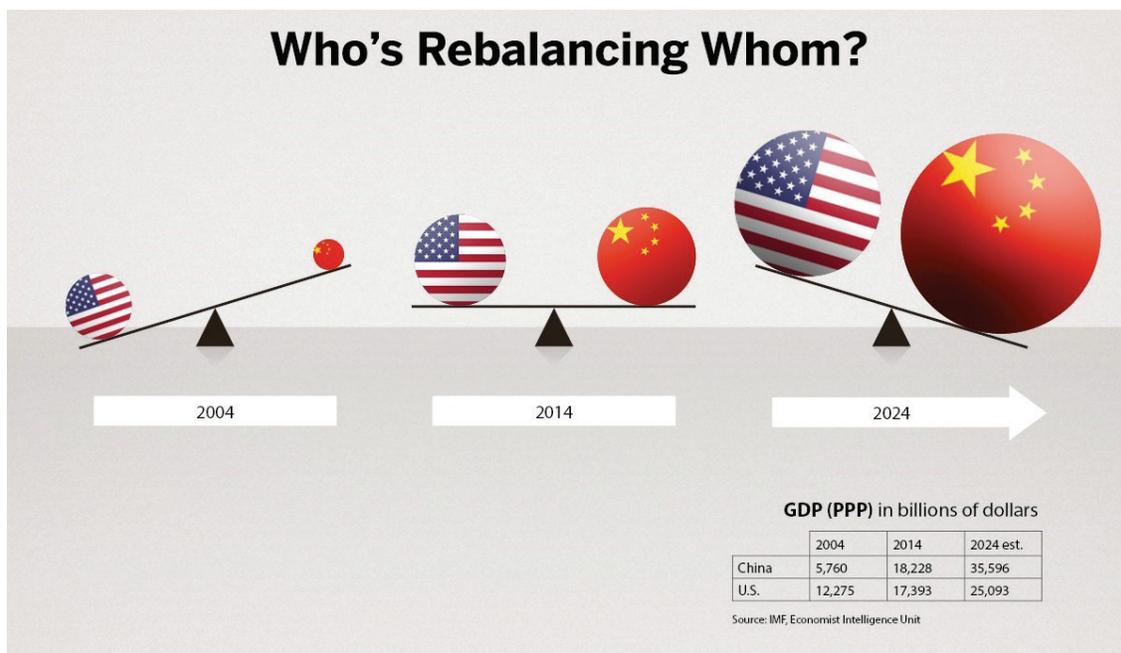


Chart 2 summarizes a quiz I give students in my course at Harvard (formerly with Joe Nye, now with David Sanger). It asks students: When could China become No. 1? The full quiz currently has eighty arenas; the short form asks about ten. Students write their best guesses in the righthand column—answering: 2025, 2040, or “not in my lifetime.”

**Chart 2**

<b>Quiz: When Will China Become the World’s #1?</b>	
Automaker	
Manufacturer	
Trading nation	
Largest middle class	
Most billionaires	
Solar power capacity	
Fastest supercomputer	
Artificial intelligence research	
Primary engine of global economic growth	
Economy (GDP)	

We then show them Chart 3—with its heading: ALREADY.

**Chart 3**

<b>Quiz: When Will China Become the World’s #1?</b>	
<b>ALREADY</b>	
Automaker	2009
Manufacturer	2011
Trading nation	2012
Largest middle class	2015
Most billionaires	2016
Solar power capacity	2016
Fastest supercomputer	2010
Artificial intelligence research	2016
Primary engine of global economic growth	2010
Economy (GDP)	2014

Because the publishers insisted on pushing the question mark to the end of the subtitle of *Destined for War*, the most frequent misinterpretation of the argument accuses me of predicting that war with China is inevitable. To the contrary, the book argues that war is not inevitable. As it says, its purpose is not to predict the future but to prevent it.

### Chart 4

No	Period	Ruling Power	Rising Power	Result
1	Late 15 <sup>th</sup> century	 Portugal	 Spain	No war
2	First half of 16 <sup>th</sup> century	 France	 Habsburgs	War
3	16 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> centuries	 Habsburgs	 Ottoman Empire	War
4	First half of 17 <sup>th</sup> century	 Habsburgs	 Sweden	War
5	Mid-to-late 17 <sup>th</sup> century	 Dutch Republic	 England	War
6	Late 17 <sup>th</sup> to mid-18 <sup>th</sup> centuries	 France	 Great Britain	War
7	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> and early 19 <sup>th</sup> centuries	 United Kingdom	 France	War
8	Mid-19 <sup>th</sup> century	 France and United Kingdom	 Russia	War
9	Mid-19 <sup>th</sup> century	 France	 Germany	War
10	Late 19 <sup>th</sup> and early 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries	 China and Russia	 Japan	War
11	Early-20 <sup>th</sup> century	 United Kingdom	 United States	No war
12	Early-20 <sup>th</sup> century	 United Kingdom <small>supported by France, Russia</small>	 Germany	War
13	Mid-20 <sup>th</sup> century	 Soviet Union, France, UK	 Germany	War
14	Mid-20 <sup>th</sup> century	 United States	 Japan	War
15	1940s–1980s	 United States	 Soviet Union	No war
16	1990s–present	 United Kingdom and France	 Germany	No war

Harvard's Thucydides's Trap Case File has reviewed the past 500 years for instances in which a rising power threatens to displace a major ruling power (Chart 4).<sup>6</sup> To date, it has identified sixteen cases that meet the criteria. The purpose of the case file is not to develop a database for statistical analysis. Rather, it is to analyze historical analogues in order to illuminate a phenomenon: the dynamics in the rivalry between rising and ruling powers. Nonetheless, the fact that in four of these cases there was no war lends support for the view that if war occurs

between the U.S. and China in the year or decade ahead, their leaders will not be able to blame Thucydides or some iron law of history.

The penultimate chapter of the book is titled, “Twelve Clues for Peace.” Every one of the cases offers valuable clues for statesmen as they attempt to meet the current challenge. In particular, the peaceful rise of the U.S. at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century to challenge and then eclipse Great Britain (where the British learned to distinguish between “vital” and simply “vested” national interests), and the creation of a strategy for “Cold” War to defeat an Evil Empire (that found ways to constrain competition between two adversaries who aspired to bury each other) are instructive.

No presentation that fails to ask the “Marshall question” is complete. After listening to, or indeed making a compelling case for a proposition, George Marshall would often say, “Just one more question: How could I be wrong?” I can identify a dozen ways and am sure members of the group can think of more. Many forecast a significant slowdown in China’s extraordinary growth rate—and indeed, have been doing so annually for the past nineteen years. Of course, as Stein’s Law says: a trend that cannot continue indefinitely, won’t. But predicting that something will happen is much easier than saying when it will. Xi’s attempt to revitalize the Party as the Leninist Mandarin vanguard of 1.4 billion people may flounder. As Lee Kuan Yew told him directly, he’s trying to put twenty-first century apps on a twentieth century operating system. China’s military may behave recklessly and provoke a military confrontation that China loses—and that could lead to the overthrow of its new emperor. Xi could slip in his bathtub. And so forth. While U.S. planners must consider all reasonable contingencies, basing our strategy to meet the China challenge on the expectation that the Chinese economy or political system fails would be a mistake.

In most futures, avoiding a war both nations understand could erase each from the map will require extreme caution, cooperation in preventing crises, and preparation for managing crises that nonetheless occur. Leaders in both countries should reflect deeply on what happened in 1914. Minimum takeaways from the broader set of cases include adapting lessons cold warriors summarized under five Cs: caution, communication, constraints, compromise, and cooperation. Caution meant no surprises, especially in the others’ sphere of influence, like Khrushchev’s gamble in the Cuban missile crisis. To ensure timely, secure communication, they created the hotline. Constraints that JFK called the “precarious rules of the status quo” included no use of nuclear weapons, no bullets or bombs fired by uniformed combatants against the other, and arms control agreements that prevented or limited deployment of certain weapons. Compromise meant living for decades with otherwise unacceptable facts, like Soviet domination of captive nations. To address common threats like the spread of nuclear weapons, the U.S. and Soviet Union cooperated in creating the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. In addition, the cases underline the importance of preventing third-party actions that could be deadly triggers, for example, in North Korea (where the U.S. and China are working closely together) and Taiwan (where both have taken actions that increase risks) and preparing for accidents or crises that nonetheless occur.

## **Military Competition in the Pacific**

This is a big subject about which the details matter, making it difficult to avoid getting entangled in the weeds. The Defense Intelligence Agency’s 2019 *China Military Balance* offers a good 140-page summary of the details of China’s military program.<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of our discussion, I have tried to climb up to the top of one of the 13,000-foot peaks around Aspen to try to identify the larger contours. Recognizing the risks from oversimplification, nonetheless, to stimulate the debate, I hazard twelve key judgments—beginning with the bottom line up front.

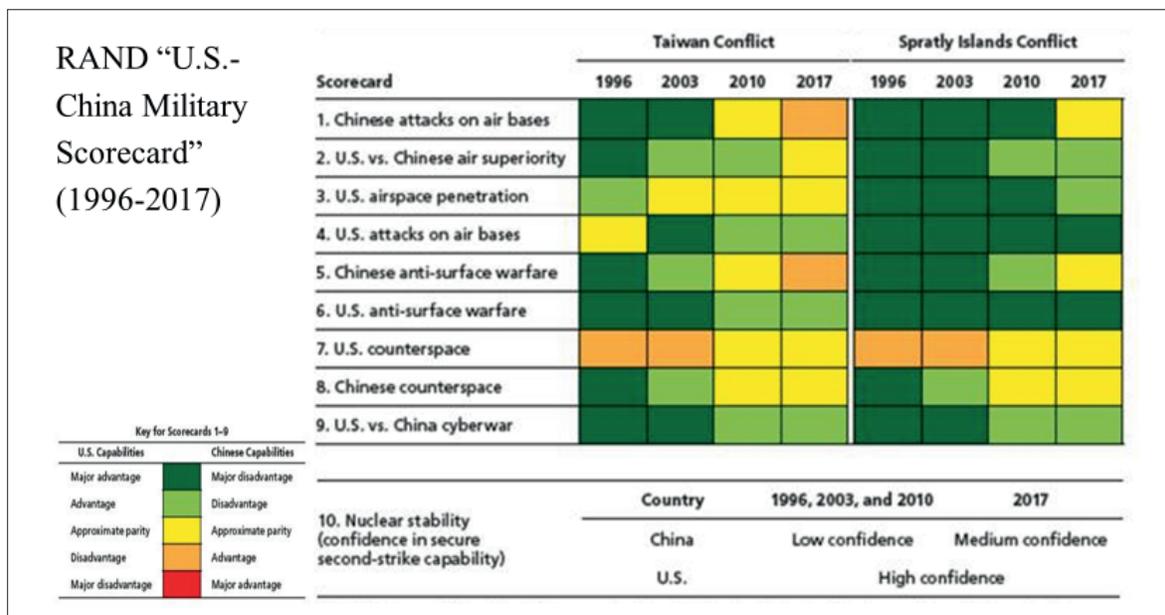
1. The acid test of military forces is how they perform in combat. Short of that, war games provide the next best indicator. Most of these war games are classified, and the most significant, the most highly so. Particularly when the results are not favorable for Blue, they are rarely publicized. Yet, one of the features of the American system is that former officials sometimes speak more candidly.

The March 2019 CNAS event on the military balance in the Pacific featured the recently retired Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work and one of DoD’s key defense planners, David Ochmanek. Summarizing a series of war games, their bottom line (in Ochmanek’s words): “When we fight China, Blue gets its ass handed to it.” Why? As he explains, “all five domains of warfare are contested from the outset of hostilities” (*emphasis added*). And it gets worse from there. In Work’s words: “In the first five days of the campaign, we are looking good. After the second five days, it’s not looking so hot. That is what the war games show over and over again.”<sup>8</sup>

And according to *The New York Times*, “in eighteen of the last eighteen Pentagon war games involving China in the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. lost.”<sup>9</sup> These results raise questions about the utility of America’s recent combat experience, which has never been against a near-peer competitor or in a contested battlespace since WWII. As Work explained, in the past, “it didn’t really matter...We would’ve crushed them like cockroaches once we assembled the might of America.” But a conflict with China today would be different because “we have never gone up against an adversary with the same capabilities and scale.”<sup>10</sup>

2. The most authoritative public assessment of the operational balance is still the RAND “U.S.-China Military Scorecard.” As depicted in Chart 5, the report finds that by 2017, China will have an “advantage” or “approximate parity” in six of the nine areas of conventional capabilities in a conflict over Taiwan or the South China Sea. The report concludes that “Asia will witness a progressively receding frontier of U.S. dominance.”<sup>11</sup>

**Chart 5**



RAND’s publications since have confirmed that the balance continues to tilt in China’s favor, especially in the Taiwan scenario. As one of RAND’s lead analysts, Jim Dobbins, explained in 2017, “the range and capabilities of Chinese air and sea defenses have continued to grow, making U.S. forward-basing more vulnerable and the direct defense of U.S. interest in the region potentially more costly.”<sup>12</sup>

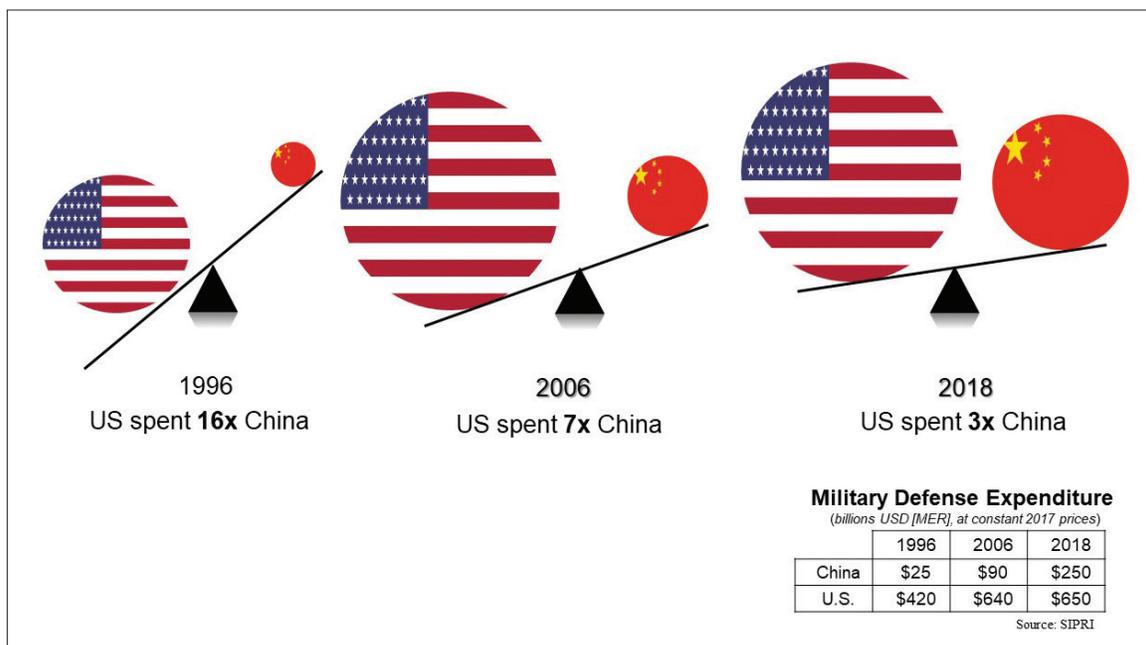
3. One major reason why is that for the U.S., a military conflict over Taiwan or in the South China Sea is a distant, regional contingency. As military planners say, Blue faces the “tyranny of distance.”<sup>13</sup> For China, this would be war on its border or adjacent sea.

4. Even more significant are the stakes in Taiwan. For China, Taiwan is seen as an existential challenge. China’s constitution declares that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China. In Xi’s words: “We will never allow anyone, any organization, or any political party, at any time or in any form, to separate any part of Chinese territory from China.” China has done everything it can to communicate unambiguously that to prevent the loss of Taiwan, it is prepared to go to war—even though war with the U.S. risks escalation to nuclear war.

5. In preparing for contingencies in East Asia, the commander of the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM)—now the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM)—wrestles for resources, troops, and ships with four other combatant commanders, which includes an area of responsibility (AOR) in which the U.S. has been actively fighting for almost two decades and a second AOR in which Russia is waging a low-level war with Ukraine. The U.S. defense budget is global, divided among commitments in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) defense budget is local and concentrated in North East Asia.

6. But doesn’t U.S. defense spending dwarf that of China? While the answer is yes, the difference is less than many think: the gap has shrunk from 16-1 in 1996 to 3-1 today (Chart 6). Moreover, this is the difference when measured by the yardstick most favorable for the United States. If Chinese soldiers are priced at the rate they are paid in RMB, China’s defense budget is roughly equal to that of the U.S. Furthermore, China’s budget for domestic security is greater than its budget for external defense. When combined, even measured in MER (market exchange rate), China may be outspending the U.S.

**Chart 6**



7. Others having difficulty acknowledging these new realities emphasize that as a result of expenditures more than ten times those of China in the past two decades, the U.S. has acquired a military capital stock much larger than China’s. While correct, it is also true that this arsenal is heavily weighted toward legacy platforms (carriers, manned aircraft, heavy fighting vehicles) that are priorities for U.S. military services. These consist mostly of items that are as exquisitely expensive as Augustine’s law (the cost of weapons doubles every five years) predicted, most optimized for fighting in areas in which the U.S. enjoys uncontested dominance of air, space, surveillance, and cyber.<sup>14</sup> This includes America’s remarkable surveillance networks and drones—but as we saw recently, when Iran

shot down a U.S. Global Hawk (that cost \$130 million) with an indigenous air defense missile (that cost \$100,000), these assets are more vulnerable than many recognize.

8. In contrast, China's investments in defense modernization have emphasized new technologies, asymmetric strategies, and "leapfrogging." More importantly, its investments have been designed to exploit U.S. vulnerabilities. China's conventional missile strategy provides an instructive example. China has deployed hundreds of short- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles to threaten U.S. and allied air bases in the region. They are also deploying "carrier-killer" shore-to-ship missiles that pose a credible threat to sink U.S. carriers or destroyers operating within 1,250 miles of its shore. And the new DF-26 missiles are estimated to have a 2,500-mile range that could push carriers further back. Although debate continues about the ability of China's surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities to target moving objects at such ranges, they have dramatically increased the cost of U.S. operations within the first island chain and made the U.S. think twice about operating aircraft out of Guam or Japan during a conflict. This has been achieved at a cost exchange ratio of approximately 1:10,000. China's developments in ballistic missiles, swarming drones, hypersonics, anti-satellite weapons, and AI tell a similar tale.

9. The view from INDOPACOM begins with a map.<sup>15</sup> Its AOR has the largest swath of geography, the largest population, and the largest GDP of any American command. It operates from more than 250 regional bases. And most importantly, it has militarily significant allies, in particular Japan, Australia, and South Korea, as well as treaty relationships with a number of additional countries. (The difference between Chinese activity in the South China Sea and its caution in the East China Sea reflects its recognition of Japan's military capabilities.)

In contrast, China has only one militarily significant relationship: the entente with Putin's Russia that has emerged so rapidly since Xi came to power that many Western observers have missed it.<sup>16</sup> The quality of cooperation between China and Russia has surpassed that of the U.S. and India. China's defense pact with North Korea is as much a liability as an asset. Moreover, the picture is clouded further by the fact that, if the U.S. found itself at war with China over Taiwan or in the South China Sea, it is unclear whether the U.S. will be joined by combatants from any of its Asian allies.

10. While Americans are rightly proud of what we declare the "finest fighting force the world has ever seen," more than one Chinese PLA interlocutor has asked me about Henry Kissinger's question: How many wars has the U.S. won since World War II?<sup>17</sup>

Americans score the Korean War as a "draw," since it ended in an armistice at the line that had divided the North from the South before the conflict began. Chinese put the Korean War in their "win" column—since from the point at which they entered the war in November 1950 as U.S. forces approached their border, they beat the Americans back to the divide that existed at the outset of hostilities. They point out that this was a China whose government had just barely consolidated control of the country after a long civil war, with a GDP less than one-fiftieth of the U.S. Moreover, they note that at the time, the U.S. was the unchallenged ruling superpower with a monopoly of nuclear weapons that had just five years earlier dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II.<sup>18</sup>

11. The view from Beijing is another matter—and requires another paper authored by an expert on China's military who is fluent in Mandarin. Fortunately, this year's Aspen Strategy Group featured Mike Pillsbury, the Trump administration's favorite outside China expert, whose provocative and informative book *The Hundred-Year Marathon* addresses this topic.<sup>19</sup> (For those interested in my perspective on the issue, Appendix 2 lists the first thirteen points from *Destined for War*.)

12. Finally, to address the organizers' question about strategic-military competition among great powers in the twenty-first century, we must grapple with a new reality that emerged in the nuclear era. If Ronald Reagan was right when he declared that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must therefore never be fought," then between nuclear superpowers (i.e., nations with robust reliable second-strike capabilities), the menu of viable strategic options cannot include nuclear attack.

In rivalries between nuclear superpowers in which neither has dominance on every rung up the escalation ladder from conventional war, the use of conventional military forces to attack the adversary also becomes almost unthinkable—for anything short of a threat to national survival. History saw these constraints emerge in the Cold War—beginning with the Berlin blockade of 1948; the U.S. government’s refusal to come to the rescue of Hungarian freedom fighters when they rose up in 1956 or Czech freedom fighters trying to escape Soviet domination in 1968; and analogous choices by successive presidents, including Bush 43 in Russia’s war with Georgia and Obama when Russia annexed Crimea.

Under conditions that create a robust nuclear stalemate in rivalries between nuclear superpowers: What then are military forces for? Of course, force can be used to coerce third parties and to assist third parties in fighting nuclear opponents in proxy wars like Vietnam. They can create facts on the ground that deter an opponent by requiring it to fire the first shot. But defense analysts have still not adequately engaged Bernard Brodie’s insight, stated bluntly just one year after Hiroshima in his book, *The Absolute Weapon*. In his words: “thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them.”<sup>20</sup>

## Concluding Questions

In conclusion, if the balance of military power in a conventional war over Taiwan has shifted decisively in China’s favor, are current understandings of U.S. commitments to Taiwan sustainable? Or is the gap between capability and the policy community’s understanding of commitments a classic case of “overstretch” and strategic “mismatch” that properly understood poses an unacceptable risk to Americans? Is this a prime candidate to become the Sarajevo of the twenty-first century: the third party incident that provides the spark that drags Thucydidean rivals into catastrophic war?

Second, if the proverbial Martian strategist makes a list of developments that impact the vital national interest of each nation and presents them under two headings—one in which the two nations’ interest conflict, the second where they converge—what would this grand master put under each heading?

Must U.S. and Chinese leaders recognize that technologies on a shrinking globe have made our two nations inseparable, if sometimes insufferable, Siamese twins? Have the nuclear arsenals of each created a condition of MAD (mutual assured destruction) that we cannot escape? Are the greenhouse gas emissions of each nation impacting the biosphere in which the other also lives in ways that could make it uninhabitable for citizens of either before the end of the twenty-first century? In a global economy where financial crises like 2008 happen periodically, are the two largest economies in the world dependent on each other to prevent recessions from becoming great depressions?<sup>21</sup>

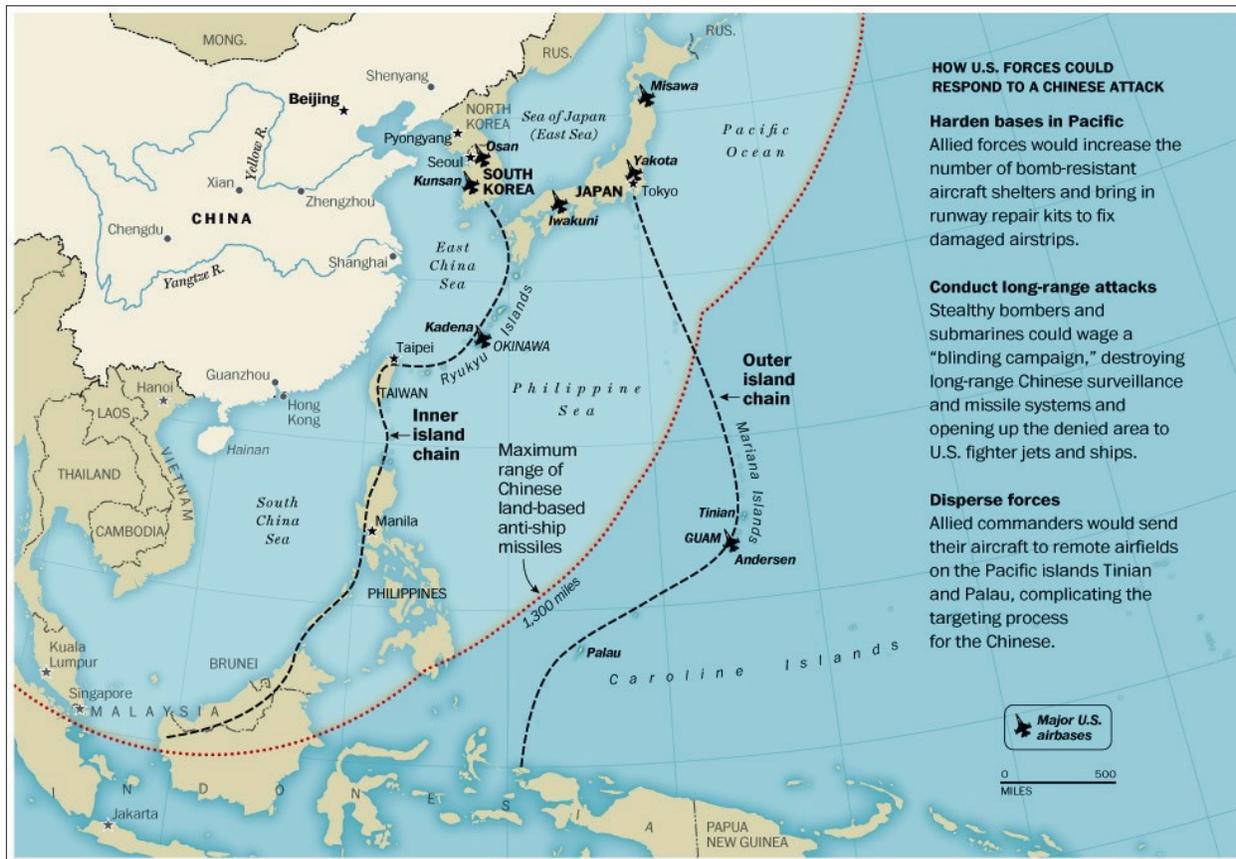
Has the time come to expand the lexicon of diplomacy beyond friend and foe by reaching back to a concept the Song Dynasty invented to stabilize its relationship with a northern Mongolian tribe, the Liao? The Treaty of Chanyuan in 1005 established a “rivalry partnership” in which the two parties competed ruthlessly in some arenas and cooperated intensely in others. Could this be combined with an insight President John F. Kennedy came to after having survived the Cuban missile crisis? Just months before being assassinated, he proposed a major revision of America’s strategy in the Cold War that required serious restraint by both nations in their competition to ensure their survival and to build what he called a “world safe for diversity.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, was Lee Kuan Yew right when he forecast that China was destined “to become the biggest player in the history of the world,” requiring the U.S. and others to construct an entirely new global balance of power?<sup>23</sup> Could the U.S. organize and lead a coalition of allied and aligned partners who together would create a correlation of forces to which this great China would have to adapt? Could the U.S. and China find a way, in Lee’s words, to “share the twenty-first century in Asia?”

## Appendix I: Maps of Asia



Source: Heritage Foundation, 2018.



Source: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2012.

## Appendix II: The View from Beijing

The most confident, competent, and consequential leader on the international stage today is China's president, Xi Jinping. *Destined for War* sketches a profile of the new emperor and his thinking based on my conversations with Lee Kuan Yew (whom like every Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping, he called "mentor"), Henry Kissinger, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and others who collectively have spent hundreds of hours with Xi, supplemented by analyses from Western experts. A chapter entitled "What Xi's China Wants" summarizes Xi's ambition in one line: to make China great again—or in his words, "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

To that end, Xi has initiated four ambitious transformations of China's system: (1) revitalizing the Party to cleanse it of corruption, restore its sense of mission, and reestablish its authority in the eyes of the Chinese people; (2) reviving Chinese nationalism and patriotism to instill pride in being Chinese; (3) engineering a third economic revolution—recognizing that this requires politically painful structural reforms to sustain China's historically unsustainable rates of growth; and (4) reorganizing and rebuilding China's military. Any one of these initiatives would be more than enough for most heads of state to attempt in a decade. But Xi and his team have chosen to address all four at once, seeing them as critically interdependent.

While Michael Pillsbury's assertion that the Chinese military has long had a secret hundred-year marathon plan for global dominance has been disputed by other China scholars, a plain text reading of Xi's major speeches finds many points of resonance about China's ambitions. If we simply read Xi's 19th Party Congress speech, and the associated discussion with the key working groups (which are reported quite accurately by *Xinhua*, the official news agency of the Chinese government), it is possible to get the big picture. My thirteen takeaways are below.

1. China's military modernization is motivated by its desire to be able "to fight and win." In Xi's words, achieving the "great revival of the Chinese nation" requires a "unison between a prosperous country and strong military." The "Strong Army Dream" is essential to the "China Dream," and Xi has vowed that by the mid-twenty-first century, China's army will be "fully transformed into world-class forces."
2. While the unambiguous objective of Xi's reorganization and modernization of the military is to "fight and win," the goal is to win without fighting. In Chinese strategic lore, this doctrine can be traced to Sun Tzu, who first recognized "the highest victory is to defeat the enemy without ever fighting." Chinese strategists often seek victory not in a single decisive battle but through incremental moves designed to gradually improve their position; just like in the game of Go, where winning consists of surrounding one's opponent by creating a correlation of forces in which his only rational choice is to yield without a military fight.<sup>24</sup>
3. Chinese leaders agree with Lee Kuan Yew's assessment that in the twenty-first century, "the economic balance of power will be more important than the military balance of power."<sup>25</sup> The evolution of relations between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members and the two economic superpowers offers an instructive example. While some Americans are now urging "game on," the most astute leaders in the region have concluded "game over." As Lee Kuan Yew put it, "China is sucking the Southeast Asian countries into its economic system because of its vast market and growing purchasing power. Japan and South Korea will inevitably be sucked in as well. It just absorbs countries without having to use force... China's growing economic sway will be very difficult to fight."
4. The implications of these developments for the relative position of China and the United States were captured memorably in a comment by one of America's wisest Asia hands—Stephen Bosworth, who had served as ambassador to both the Philippines and South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2009, when President Obama asked him to become his special envoy for North Korea, he returned from his first trip

across the region and reported that he could scarcely believe what he had seen. It was, he recalled, a “Rip Van Winkle experience.” In “olden days,” when a crisis or issue arose, the first question Asian leaders always asked was: What does Washington think? Today, when something happens, they ask first: What does Beijing think?<sup>26</sup>

5. The priorities for which military force is relevant for as far as Xi can see are local and regional—not global. They begin with the security of the nation within its own borders—which in China’s thinking includes its renegade province of Taiwan. The principal threat to China’s reintegration of Taiwan is the U.S. The experience of 1996 seared into Chinese consciousness the cost of military inferiority. As the former co-chair of the Aspen Strategy Group, Brent Scowcroft, said at the time, after this humiliating experience of backing down, the Chinese military from that day forward would deploy weapons that assured this could never happen again. The buildup of DF-21 and DF-26 “carrier killer” missiles has in fact pushed the U.S. Navy back behind the first island chain and fundamentally altered planning for Taiwan contingencies.
6. Chinese leaders do not think “just like us.” Consider China’s nuclear arsenal. For decades after acquiring nuclear weapons, the Chinese lived with a nuclear deterrent that was vulnerable to an American disarming strike. Since they’ve deployed a reliable second-strike capability against the U.S., they have been satisfied with a “minimum deterrent.” In contrast to the American and Russian arsenals of many thousands of nuclear warheads, the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that China’s strategic force is at approximately 400 today. Somehow, their comparatively smaller arsenal has, in their view, been enough to achieve their objective (that is, to deter a nuclear attack upon them).
7. Chinese leaders’ thinking reflects China’s strategic culture and history (as they interpret it). They think long term rather than short term (can one imagine an American leader proposing to shelve an issue for a decade as Deng Xiaoping did with the islands in the East China Sea?); see challenges not in American terms as “problems to be solved,” but rather as evolving processes that began decades or a century ago; and give high priority to what they call *Shi*, the essence of which Pillsbury captures when he discusses it as the equivalent of the “force” in *Star Wars*. Or as I’ve suggested, Obama’s “arc of history,” or Bismarck’s “footsteps of God.”
8. Chinese believe that their government is as capable of setting long-term goals, developing coherent plans, establishing targets, and holding managers accountable for results as Jack Welch was for GE or Jeff Bezos is for Amazon today. Thus, Xi has laid out an ambitious plan with specific targets for 2020, 2025, 2030, and 2049.
9. The Chinese leadership believes that China’s time has arrived. When Teddy Roosevelt became president in 1901, he was supremely confident that he was leading the U.S. into what would be an American Century. One hears echoes of TR in Xi Jinping’s 19th Party Congress speech, where he claimed that “the Chinese nation, with an entirely new posture, now stands tall and firm in the East.”
10. China’s leaders see their rise as a restoration to their natural position of predominance in Asia. They see U.S. dominance of the Western Pacific as an accident of history—an anomaly that came with the tide of World War II but is now receding. They liken this to Britain, whose navy had dominated the Atlantic Ocean during the nineteenth century. With the rise of the United States, it withdrew, and China expects the U.S. to do likewise. As Lee Kuan Yew said when asked whether China is serious about displacing the U.S. in Asia in the foreseeable future: “Of course. Why not? How could they not aspire to be number one in Asia, and in time the world?”
11. Chinese leadership see the U.S. as the principal obstacle to their ambitions. As Kissinger has noted, every Chinese leader he has ever met with believes that America’s strategy is to “contain” China. In 2014, after

the Obama administration’s announcement of the “rebalance” to Asia, Kevin Rudd and Brent Scowcroft each came back from extensive conversations with Chinese leaders with a common assessment. According to both statesmen, China’s leaders believe that America’s grand strategy for dealing with China involves five “to’s”: to isolate China, to contain China, to diminish China, to internally divide China, and to sabotage China’s leadership.

12. Chinese leadership sees technology, and especially advanced technologies, as the driver of economic growth in the twenty-first century. Their Made in China 2025 program—which triggered severe criticism from the West and has thus been airbrushed out of official pronouncements—strives to take the lead in next-generation technology sectors, including information technology (such as AI and big data), high-end robotics, aerospace, maritime engineering, advanced rail, and biomedicine.
13. Analyzing U.S. behavior in the twenty-first century, China’s leaders have concluded that the world has entered what Xi calls a “new era.” They agree with former President Jimmy Carter’s observation that while the U.S. has wasted almost \$10 trillion in pointless wars in the Middle East, China has invested an equivalent in modern high-speed rail, airports, subways, and highways. While they heard Obama’s rhetoric about a “pivot” to Asia, they remain hopeful that the U.S. will be sucked deeper into the sands of the Middle East, even possible war with Iran.

The financial crisis and Great Recession that followed shattered Chinese belief that the financial “masters of the universe” knew what they were doing. President Trump’s assault on American alliances and treatment of long-standing allies has, as one Chinese colleague noted, done more to advance China’s objectives than China could have imagined.

During my October 2019 visit to Beijing, a Chinese intellectual (who is no longer in government) asked me, “Don’t American policy makers have a saying: ‘If your opponent is committing suicide, just don’t get in the way’?”

---

**Graham Allison** is the Douglas Dillon Professor of Government at Harvard University and a leading analyst of national security with special interests in nuclear weapons, Russia, China, and decision-making. He was the “Founding Dean” of Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, and until 2017, served as Director of its Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, which is ranked the “#1 University Affiliated Think Tank” in the world. As Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Clinton and Special Advisor to the Secretary of Defense under President Reagan, he has been a member of the Secretary of Defense’s Advisory Board for every Secretary from Weinberger to Mattis. He has the sole distinction of having twice been awarded the Department of Defense’s highest civilian award, the Distinguished Public Service Medal, first by Secretary Cap Weinberger and second by Secretary Bill Perry. His first book, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1971), ranks among the all-time bestsellers with more than 500,000 copies in print. Dr. Allison’s latest book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (2017), is a national and international bestseller. He is a member of the Aspen Strategy Group.

- <sup>1</sup> Except after a decisive defeat in war.
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “The Cooperative Rivalry of U.S.-China Relations,” *Project Syndicate*, November 6, 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-america-relationship-cooperative-rivalry-by-joseph-s-nye-2018-11>.
- <sup>3</sup> “World Economic Outlook Data Mapper,” International Monetary Fund, October 2019; and “World Development Indicators Data Bank,” The World Bank, October 28, 2019, <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/world-development-indicators>.
- <sup>4</sup> “References: Definition and Notes: GDP methodology,” CIA World Factbook, undated, accessed July 15, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/docs/notesanddefs.html>; and Tim Callen, “Purchasing Power Parity: Weights Matter,” International Monetary Fund, December 18, 2018, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/basics/ppp.htm>. For the judgment of the world’s leading central banker, see Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can American and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), pp. 11-12.
- <sup>5</sup> “Direction of Trade Statistics,” International Monetary Fund, accessed July 15, 2019, <https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85>.
- <sup>6</sup> Harvard Thucydides’s Trap Project, “Thucydides’s Trap Case File” (Cambridge, Mass: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs: Harvard Kennedy School, 2017), <https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/case-file>.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, DIA-02-1706-085, 2019), [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_FINAL\\_5MB\\_20190103.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf).
- <sup>8</sup> In Ochmanek’s assessment: “We lose a lot of people, we lose a lot of equipment, and we usually fail to achieve our objective of preventing aggression by the adversary.” Center for a New American Security, “How the U.S. Military Fights Wars Today and in the Future,” event transcript (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, March 7, 2019), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/ANAWOW-Transcript-07MAR19.pdf?mtime=20190408162617>.
- <sup>9</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “This is How War with China Could Begin,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/opinion/china-taiwan-war.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> See “How the U.S. Military Fights Wars Today and in the Future.”
- <sup>11</sup> Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2015), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND\\_RR392.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND_RR392.pdf).
- <sup>12</sup> James Dobbins et al., *Conflict with China Revisited: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence* (Santa Monica, Calif., RAND Corporation, 2017), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE248/RAND\\_PE248.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE248/RAND_PE248.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> The first map in Appendix I is instructive on this point.
- <sup>14</sup> “Defense Spending in a Time of Austerity,” *The Economist*, August 26, 2010, <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=Defense+Spending+in+a+Time+of+Austerity>.
- <sup>15</sup> See the second map in Appendix I.
- <sup>16</sup> Graham Allison, “China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making,” *The National Interest*, December 14, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-and-russia-strategic-alliance-making-38727>.
- <sup>17</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War*.
- <sup>18</sup> In this debate, I always remind Chinese interlocutors that as a result of the Korean War, China lost Taiwan for at least a generation.
- <sup>19</sup> For Pillsbury’s account, see Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2016). For a rebuttal, see, e.g., Alastair Ian Johnston, “Shaky Foundations: The ‘Intellectual Architecture’ of Trump’s China Policy,” *Survival* Vol. 61, No. 2 (April-May 2019), pp. 189-202.
- <sup>20</sup> Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1946).
- <sup>21</sup> Henry Paulson, “The U.S. and China at a Crossroads” (Chicago: Paulson Institute, November, 6, 2018), [https://www.paulsoninstitute.org/press\\_release/remarks-by-henry-m-paulson-jr-on-the-united-states-and-china-at-a-crossroads/](https://www.paulsoninstitute.org/press_release/remarks-by-henry-m-paulson-jr-on-the-united-states-and-china-at-a-crossroads/).
- <sup>22</sup> Graham Allison, “Could the United States and China Be Rivalry Partners?” *The National Interest*, July 7, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/could-united-states-and-china-be-rivalry-partners-65661>.
- <sup>23</sup> Graham Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master’s Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013).
- <sup>24</sup> On this point, the Army War College’s David Lai instructively compares chess with its Chinese equivalent of Go. In chess, players seek to dominate the center and conquer the opponent. In Go, players seek to surround the opponent and compete for relative gain. Lai wisely concludes that “it is dangerous to play Go with a chess mindset.” David Lai, “Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China’s Strategic Concept, *Shi*” (Carlisle Barracks, Penn.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, May 2004), pp. 5, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War*.

<sup>26</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War*.