A CENTURY after World War I began, the scholarly debate over its origins continues unabated. One of its leading historians, Margaret MacMillan, notes that observers dwell on it not only due to “the sheer scale of the carnage,” but also because it “still cannot agree on why it happened.” Richard Rosecrance, co-editor of The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of US-China Conflict, explains that “[little things] — contingent features of the situation prevailing in Europe on the eve of the First World War — were more responsible for [war’s outbreak] than enduring structural characteristics of the European or international system … The Great War was by no means inevitable, because there were so many contingencies that might have gone another way.”

Scholars may never reach a consensus on the war’s origins, nor do they need to in order to examine its relevance for contemporary great-power tensions. The Next Great War? asks whether the United States, the world’s pre-eminent power, and its putative challenger, China, will embark on the same fateful path that the United Kingdom and Germany took a century ago. While much of the commentary on that question substitutes simplistic analogies for careful analysis, the essays that Rosecrance and Steven Miller have assembled in this volume are judicious and nuanced, brimming with insights for theorists, historians, and policy-makers alike.

THE SPECTER OF WAR

There are many reasons to conclude that war between the US and China is unlikely: among them, economic interdependence (Richard Cooper notes in one of the essays in this volume that “for most countries, including China and the United States, economic interdependence is much greater in 2014 than it was in 1914”), geographical separation and the damage each country would suffer in a nuclear exchange. Three other reasons come to mind. First, as students of 20th century history, the leaders of the US and China appreciate the devastation that can result when misbegotten ambition is harnessed to advanced weaponry. Second, these leaders communicate with each other regularly through a wide array of channels. While the current conversations between the US and China are neither as candid nor as substantive as they need to be, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd reminds us that even their limited dialogue improves significantly on that which existed in Europe a century ago. “The various governments of Europe,” Rudd explains, “had no way of knowing that if one deep distrust of one another could be kept below the surface, masked by secret undertakings, and somehow papered over by the blood lines linking them, a prelude to war could be laid in Hanover … and the occasional shooting parties on one another’s estates.” Third, notwithstanding incessant speculation about the possibility of a US-China war at some point in the future, it is difficult to imagine such an event — at least if one’s definition of “war” involves mass casualties. It is doubtful that either country would countenance — or would even be able to undertake — a ground incursion into the other’s mainland. Even if each assumes its economy and society could survive a nuclear exchange, neither has a compelling incentive to test the possibility. True, one can imagine a protracted standoff between US and Chinese vessels in the western Pacific: China is trying to make it harder for the US to operate within the first two island chains off its coast, while the US is attempting to counter China’s “anti-access/area-denial capabilities.” Still, such an encounter would be a far cry from war.

The trouble, of course, is that human folly is both unavoidable and capable of infinite expressions. While leaders of the US and China may be more enlightened than their European predecessors, Stephen Van Evera warns in his essay that neither has overcome the longstanding “danger of seeking military solutions for political problems.” Two scholars follow the RAND Corporation explained last August how current military plans could culminate in an armed confrontation:

“The Chinese military is deploying vast numbers of missiles [including carrier killers], hard-to-find submarines, long-range sensors to track and target US forces, anti-satellite weapons, digital networks to coordinate attacks and cyberwar weapons to crash US networks … Pentagon strategists have come up with the idea [known as air-sea battle] of crippling such forces … before they can be unleashed. Most of these targets are in China. As with the Chinese war plan, the idea is to strike with speed, fury and little warning … if in a crisis China’s military leaders advised its political leaders that US forces were getting ready for war and China’s only chance to avoid defeat was to strike early … would Beijing say no? US leaders are steeped in principles and procedures of civilian control, less so their Chinese counterparts. And if at the same moment the US Joint Chiefs of Staff and Pacific commander advised the president that the Chinese were gearing up for a preemptive strike unless US forces acted quickly … would Washington risk the loss of carriers, air bases, personnel and credibility by waiting?”

THUCYDIDES AND TRAPS

However limited the analogy may be between the Hobbesian environment of the Peloponnesian War and the risk of a 21st century US-China conflict, Thucydides provides insights that remain relevant. His term the “Thucydides trap,” is that tensions between leading powers and rising ones are unavoidable. In his seminal history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides observed that “the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon [Sparta], made war inevitable.” Allison’s neologism has captured the attention of scholars and policy-makers around the world since David Sanger invoked it in an article in early 2011. Even Chinese President Xi Jinping has used it: in an address in January to the Berggruen Institute’s 21st Century Council, he urged the US and China “to work together to avoid the ‘Thucydides trap.’

To be clear, the “trap” refers to the ineluctability of tensions, not the inevitability of war. While the record of transitions between leading powers and rising ones is sobering, not all of them have ended badly (consider the one between the US and the UK). Allison himself bets that a scenario in which the US and China “sleepwalk into war” “will almost certainly not materialize.” The second basic lesson we can glean from comparing 2014 with 1914, then, concerns ineradicability. Joseph Nye reminds us that World War I “was not inevitable until it actually broke out in August 1914. Even then, it was not inevitable that four years of carnage had to follow.” Nor, he argues, was the Peloponnesian War inevitable, contrary to Thucydides’ narrative: “Donald Kagan has shown … that Athenian power was not growing. Before the war broke out … the balance of power had begun to stabilize.” And though the Spartans worried about the rise of Athenian power, Kagan contends they had an even greater fear of a slave revolt.”

Under what conditions would the US and China go to war? Steven Miller concludes that “the most likely route … is via a dispute involving the Republic of China’s claims in the East China Sea.” This realization poses a frustrating paradox for the US, because its network of alliances, arguably more than any other factor, enables it to retain a robust military and diplomatic presence in the Asia-Pacific region. The US has bilateral security treaties with Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, and a collective defense arrangement with Australia and New Zealand. It is also leveraging regional concern about China’s rise to strengthen its relationships with India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia. Absent this web of relationships, the US would find it much harder to counter China’s advantages as the fastest-growing economy of all major powers (soon the world’s largest economy) and the world’s largest exporter. Its trade and investment are integral to the economies of its neighbors, even those that harbor strong reservations about its regional pretensions.

The very alliances that enable the US to project influence in the Asia-Pacific, however, present two challenges: they diminish the incentives for China’s neighbors to make greater investments in their own protection, and they risk entrapping the US in showdowns with China. Chi-
The US has no experience in such situations. Thus, Charles Maier notes, the US has “the more greater escalation rather than searching for a new bargain. The information asymmetry arises because of a state’s unwillingness to again accept diplomatic defeat.” Which future crisis, if any, will prompt one of the two giants to opt for greater escalation rather than searching for a familiar denouement? No one knows. Perhaps one country will opt for escalation if it believes its power transition with China by employing “coercive means short of major war,” China, in turn, will respond with “coercive diplomacy.” A stronger China might act more decisively to displace the US from the Asia-Pacific; if and when, moreover, it begins to assess that its participation in today’s liberal international order is yielding diminishing returns, it may exhibit more open revisionism. Even so, any schadenfreude the US might feel in response to protracted Chinese weakness would likely prove short-lived. Such weakness would undermine the US economy, which is already struggling to recover its pre-crisis momentum. It would also limit China’s ability to co-operate with the US on issues ranging from climate change to nuclear proliferation. It is in America’s national interests for China to address its formidable internal problems — including its lack of allies insulates it from such burdens. Thus, Charles Maier notes, the US has “the more great power to find a new equilibrium with an emerging one … because every adaptation looks like a retreat.” The US has no experience in such situations. Therefore, Charles Maier suggests an era of international relations in which the configuration of the global order will prevent it from effectively transitioning to a new equilibrium. China, for its part, will have to accept that the evolving conception of the global order will prevent it from resuming the sorts of relationships that it had with its neighbors in centuries past. Each country, meanwhile, will have to accept the other as an enduring competitor. While a war between the US and China would be catastrophic, it is not the only possible end state of US-China relations that would undermine global order. One concerning scenario involves the emergence of competing US and Chinese blocs in the Asia-Pacific region. Another involves diplomatic exhaustion: that is, even if the US and China do not go to war, perhaps they will conclude that mutual strategic distrust is sufficiently great as to make sustained co-operation impractical. The real challenge, and unprecedented opportunity, for both countries is to inaugurate an era of international relations in which strategic competition between a leading power and a rising one can enhance global order. Preoccupation with history could blind them to that duality: what a pity it would be if, in fixing on the comparison between 2014 and 1914, the US and China come to regard the avoidance of war as the objective of their relationship rather than a condition for its development.

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