Framing the Issue: A Foreword

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Four years ago, Graham T. Allison of Harvard University coined the term “the Thucydides trap” to describe a dynamic wherein an established hegemon so fears the growing clout of a rising power that it takes preemptive steps to circumvent it, thus triggering a security competition between the two powers. Historically, this competition has often escalated into outright military confrontation.¹ The dynamic takes its name from Thucydides’ foundational international relations text, History of the Peloponnesian War, which states that “it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable.”²

As China continues to rise, many of the most respected experts in international relations have offered a diverse range of contributions to the growing debate over whether the United States and China will fall into this Thucydides trap. Some prominent scholars and policymakers have suggested that United States and China will be unable to manage their security dilemma. John J. Mearsheimer, the “father” of offensive neorealism, speculated that though China is currently too weak to challenge the United States, it will eventually pursue regional hegemony in Asia. Mearsheimer does not believe that his preferred policy of containment will be able to prevent growing U.S.-Chinese tensions from devolving into direct conflict.³

However, most scholars agree that the United States and China can use careful diplomacy and policy initiatives to avoid the strategic competition and outright conflict that the Thucydides trap describes. Henry Kissinger, for example, challenges the idea that “a contest for supremacy between
China and the United States is inevitable” and asserts that it is entirely possible for the United States to “preserve its security” without confronting China. Graham Allison argues that the United States and China are confronting the “dangers two parties face when a rising power rivals a ruling power,” but that they can avert “catastrophe” through heightened dialogue and mutual accommodation of “irreducible” interests. Zbigniew Brzezinski once advanced the idea that the United States and China could jointly share power as part of a G-2, and he has since argued that the United States could promote stability by “[accommodating] China’s rising global status.” Fareed Zakaria holds that the United States’ relative power is declining, but that this does not preclude its flourishing. Hugh White has argued that the wisest U.S. response to China’s rise would be to abandon its current goal of primacy in Asia in favor of a regional power-sharing agreement, which could increase mutual respect between the two states and avert a crisis. An entire school of thought generally holds that the United States and China will turn toward a global partnership.

Among policymakers, Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned the Thucydides trap in a conversation with New Perspectives Quarterly in which he rejected the thesis that “strong countries are bound to seek hegemony.” President Barack Obama likewise has stated the importance of cooperation on a host of issues. Both states have crafted initiatives – the U.S. “Asia pivot” or “rebalance” and the Chinese “new type of major power relations” – designed to address mutual friction in the Asia-Pacific region.

The issue promises to remain salient for years to come, as China shows few signs of returning to its prior weakness. China officially became the world’s largest economy in purchasing power parity terms in January, according to the IMF. Although its exceptional growth period has recently ended, the IMF predicts that China’s current growth rate will persist for at least two more years. Beijing has expanded its humanitarian aid and foreign direct investment, founded new international financial organizations, and crafted initiatives to bolster the economic infrastructure of countries along a dual mainland and maritime “Silk Road.” Its military
spending is growing 10 percent a year,\textsuperscript{15} and its naval fleet will outnumber Pacific-based U.S. ships by 2020.\textsuperscript{16}

The Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies at the George Washington University has sought to launch conversation among experts and policymakers about how best to prevent serious tensions from arising between the United States and China. Toward this end, it has hosted a symposium on U.S.-China relations, and its director has traveled to China to speak with scholars and students. He also wrote and published a set of U.S. foreign policy prescriptions collectively known as “mutually assured restraint.”\textsuperscript{17} In this spirit, the Institute has opted to sponsor this special issue of the \textit{International Affairs Review}, which is dedicated to exploring a range of perspectives and novel policy proposals to prevent the United States and China from clashing in the wake of China’s economic growth and military modernization. The articles that follow engage with the concept of the Thucydides trap as it applies to the contemporary U.S.-Chinese relationship. Broadly, these articles challenge the offensive neorealist approach to the Thucydides trap, insofar as they hold that United States’ fear of China is not inevitable and propose mechanisms for avoiding conflict.

\textbf{Endnotes}

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\item 2 Some scholars have outright rejected the applicability of Thucydides’ words to the contemporary United States-China relationship, notably Karl Eikenberry. See: Karl Eikenberry, “Thucydides Trap,” \textit{American Review}, August 2014, http://americanreviewmag.com/stories/Thucydides-Trap
\item 5 Graham Allison, “Thucydides trap has been sprung in the Pacific,” \textit{Financial Times}, August 21, 2012, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5d695b5a-ead3-11e1-984b-00144feab49a.html#axzz3W52BkJ00
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