

In Response:
Comrades of Convenience

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“A rose is a rose is a rose,” goes the old line on the dangers of equivocation. Michael Sampson says as much in “Competition to Partnership,” which uses 19th-century British foreign policy in Central America, specifically the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850, as a guide for today’s American policy in the Pacific. Sampson correctly argues for compromise, but overplays parallels between historical Anglo-American and contemporary Sino-American relations. First, the United States is even more entangled in the Pacific than the British were in the Western Hemisphere. Second, American conflict was continuous and ongoing throughout the 19th century. Third, there are fewer bridges and more governmental differences between the United States and China today than there were between the United States and United Kingdom in the 19th century. These factors all contribute to the difficulty of achieving compromise today. Geopolitically, the current American “pivot to Asia” is the opposite of Britain’s pivot away from Central America in the 19th century.

The ideas expressed in this article reflect the author’s personal views, and are not official policy of the United States Department of Defense, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, or any component parts.

First, the United States is far more engaged with East Asia today than the United Kingdom was with Central America in the 19th century. The number and nature of American military and economic agreements with Pacific nations binds the United States to the region. Precarious imbalances in East Asian politics are further aggravated by contemporary economic arrangements wherein Washington leads the world financially and Beijing leads industrially. This is a challenge that Great Britain never had to face, having been the indisputable global leader of both finance¹ and industry² in the 19th century.

Further, few of China's neighbors see Beijing as a counterbalance to the United States, but as Sampson indirectly notes in referring to Nicaragua's request for American protection from Great Britain, nascent governments in the Western Hemisphere shared a common goal of preventing European expansion. Also, Britain and America had a similar regional policy. The British suggested a joint declaration of the Monroe Doctrine, but Washington refused. Conversely, China's neighbors have sought strong ties with the United States to counter Chinese irredentist claims. While Britain disengaged itself from the Americas except in its capital exports, the United States is doing the opposite in Asia today.

Sampson notes that Central America was key to U.S. grand strategy, as the Panama Canal connected its two shores and navies. The strategic comparison of a trans-oceanic canal may be apt, as a Chinese company is currently attempting the very same route through Nicaragua that the Clayton-Bulwer treaty was negotiated for. Despite current Chinese efforts to increase regional capital investments, there are no comparably large, local projects. By contrast, the United States was on far better diplomatic footing with its neighbors in the 19th century than China is today. Consequently, it had much better prospects for regional investment and related negotiations. In contemporary U.S.-China territorial disputes, China stands without allies and its concessions are politically expensive. In short, reaching compromise in East Asia now is much more difficult than accomplishing the same feat in 19th century Central America.

Second, the United States was involved in conflict in Latin America and beyond throughout the 19th century, which Sampson does not fully address. American expansionism was not limited to the Western Hemisphere and thus had outlets that potential regionally based Chinese expansionism does not. The United States projected military power far

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from its own shores as early as the famed First Barbary War of 1801 – 1805. American expansionism included the Sumatran Expeditions 1832 & 1838, China in 1844, Japan in 1858, and the colonization of Liberia by the American Colonization Society from 1821–1867.³ China followed this model in the 20th century, but only

regionally: Tibet in 1951, India in 1962, Vietnam in 1974 and 1988.⁴ China's power projection never left Asia and has become less visible over time. Though China engages in intercontinental power projections, it does so through multilateral operations like United Nations peacekeeping missions. China has developed and relied upon its soft power as it pursued goals similar to those pursued militarily by Great Britain in the 19th century.

A number of American conflicts – with the British and others – broke out in the Western Hemisphere before the 1898 Spanish-American War, most notably the Pig War of 1859.⁵ These cases demonstrate that the United States-Great Britain partnership that formed in Latin America was beneficial, but could not prevent conflict or war. If relations between China and the United States are to result in a similar pattern, the United States will be forced to compromise a number of important alliances to avoid a conflict with China.

Sampson does not detail the history of Anglo-American confrontation that made détente possible. Unlike China, Britain had been forced into its pre-Clayton-Bulwer treaty concessions by a series of military and diplomatic engagements. The Caroline Affair of 1837, the Aroostook War of 1838,

and the Oregon Crisis of 1844-1846 each could have escalated, but instead produced an environment in which Washington and London grew accustomed to putting out the fires their frontier citizens would so often light.⁶ By 1850, many of the territorial claims between Great Britain and the United States had been resolved.⁷ China has only resolved its territorial disputes with Pakistan and the former Soviet Republics.⁸

Third, America and China are further apart today than Britain and America in the 1800s. There are fewer bridges between the United States and China, which makes compromise more difficult. America was more inclined to join the international system of the 19th century than to compete with the existing order. Sampson points out China's attempts to produce alternative forums for economic and political entente and to set a time limit on the effectiveness of partnership through diminishing returns on compromise. Whether motivated by a desire for regional power, dissatisfaction with the current international system, or both, it is possible that China does not consider itself likely to receive the sort of concessions the U.S. received from Great Britain in the 19th century. Compare the swift legal settlement of British support for the Confederacy⁹ to the never-ending World Trade Organization lawsuits against China.¹⁰ The changes the United States wrought on international order were in some ways less worrisome to the British than Chinese ambitions are to the United States today.

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Sampson does not integrate domestic concerns of 19th century Britain. The British had incentives to reconcile their differences with the United States in the 19th century because London faced perceived existential threats closer to home. Neither the United States nor China faces existential threats today. Differences in external pressure render the U.S. pivot to Asia the geopolitical opposite of Britain's pivot away from Central America.

Further, cultural considerations cannot be ignored. Sampson quotes Francis Napier without drawing this conclusion in the paper: “The English Race, whether by direct movement from the Mother Country or by transmission through the United States will undoubtedly spread.” Cultural differences between the United States and China contribute to uncertainty in a pervasive and poorly understood way, making compromise more difficult. Great Britain and the United States did not have to contend with as great a cultural divide.

Lastly, structural differences in the political systems of the United States and China cannot be ignored. Democratic peace theory observes that democracies rarely, if ever, fight wars against other democracies.¹¹ The Selectorate Theory explains why the wider distribution of power makes democracies more risk-averse.¹²

The worrying implications of China’s autocratic government are tempered by Beijing’s reliance on its tax base for revenue, which gives Beijing an extremely strong incentive to address the welfare of its citizens.¹³ Any meaningful compromise between the United States and China will be unattainable unless officials from both nations understand how government structure drives their counterparts’ decision making. This level of mutual understanding between the United States America and China does not yet exist, and a better grasp of mutual concerns is where the development of future policy must begin.

In light of these differences, Sampson’s central premise still holds: building a semblance of peaceful cooperation in the region is the best way to avoid unwanted conflict. However, American entanglement in the Pacific, historical differences in conflict, fewer bridges between the United States and China, and structural differences in domestic politics make repeating a 19th century British policy of compromise much less likely. Collaboration in the fight against terrorism, in addressing piracy, and in conservation of space security will slowly remove some of the opacity in the current relationship, but that will take time. Further, that Chinese irredentist claims are so tightly woven into its domestic concerns ensures lasting Sino-American friction. While the United States and China

may write another Clayton-Bulwer treaty, they should both expect the occasional Pig War.

Endnotes

- ¹ Albert H. Imlah, "British Balance Of Payments And Export Of Capital, 1816–1913," *The Economic History Review* 5, no. 2 (1952): 208-39 at 234-239, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2591057?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
- ² Paul Bairoch, "International Industrialization Levels from 1750 to 1980," *Journal of European Economic History* 11, no. 1 & 2 (Fall 1982): 269-333 at 275, 281, 284, 286, 288, 292, 294, 296, <http://www.jeeh.it/articolo?urn=urn:abi:abi:RIV.JOU:1982;2.269&ev=1>
- ³ Allan Reed Millet and Peter Maslowski, chapters 4–10 in *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1984).
- ⁴ Tara Boland-Crewe and David Lea, "Chronology of the People's Republic of China," in *The Territories of the People's Republic of China*, London: Europa Publications, (2002), 23-50.
- ⁵ E. C. Coleman, *The Pig War: The Most Perfect War in History* (Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: History Press, 2009), Chapters 2, 7, 10, 15, 22, 27.
- ⁶ Jon M. Flashnik, "'Blood is Thicker than Water': Anglo-American Rapprochement in the Mid-Nineteenth Century, 1823-1872" (PhD dissertation, Arizona State University, 2014), 3-13, 38-65, 161-162, http://repository.asu.edu/attachments/137387/content/Flashnick_asu_0010E_14124.pdf
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ⁸ Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 86, 140, 161, 165, 195.
- ⁹ Ephraim Douglass Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), 116-117, 138, 146, 151.
- ¹⁰ World Trade Organization, "China and the WTO," (accessed March 15, 2015), https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/countries_e/china_e.htm
- ¹¹ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *Principles of International Politics*, 4th ed. (beta), (New York: CQ Press, 2009): 157. For a thorough review, please see 157-176.
- ¹² Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, "Political Survival and Endogenous Institutional Change," *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009): 167–97, http://politics.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/2806/BdM_Smith2009cps.pdf
- ¹³ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, "Leader Survival, Revolutions, and the Nature of Government Finance," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 4 (October 2010): 936-950 at 937.