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## To Escape the Thucydides Trap, Washington Must Prioritize

By Clay Parham

### Executive Summary

More than 2,000 years ago, Greek historian Thucydides suggested that the “rising power of Athens and the fear it brought in Sparta” made the Peloponnesian War inevitable. Popularized by Graham Allison as “Thucydides’ Trap,” this theory of great power transition suggests that when one power rises, war often occurs. However, contrary to Thucydides’ prescription, great power transition does not make war inevitable. World powers such as the British Empire have avoided war by redefining their national interests. Often, this contraction is only temporary, and the great power returns to preponderance. As we deal with our own great power transition with China, we need to re-examine our own national interests and be comfortable with limiting their scope.

The United States will continue to have major interests in East Asia, including Taiwan, but these interests do not justify war against another nuclear power. By drawing down its own force levels in East Asia to induce burden shifting to regional allies like Japan and South Korea and providing credible reassurances to China of the limits of U.S. support for Taiwan (paired with the sale of defensive weapons to Taiwan), the United States will decrease the chances of conflict. A narrower view of strategic interests in Europe and East Asia could help avert great power war and build the foundation for a potential American return to preponderance.

### Introduction

No grand strategy literature today can be published without reference to China’s rise and the United States’ decline. Every great power has, at some point, fallen, and while scholars have claimed the United States has been in relative decline for decades, the dramatic rise of China has renewed fears of U.S. decline among scholars and policymakers alike. If the United States is in relative decline, does Thucydides’ Trap make war inevitable or are the United States and China on a path to war?

In examining historical examples, one can find some cases of states that successfully navigated their decline, most notably in British Empire at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What made the British successful in navigating their decline? Did shared norms and culture between the United States and Great Britain mean the British could pass the responsibility on to the Americans? Did Britain’s unique geographical position allow her to retrench better than continental powers? Or is oft-maligned appeasement a good strategy? This paper suggests that a new

explanation for when states choose to retrench or go to war is necessary. Under this explanation, Britain was able to successfully retrench in the 1890s since her vital interests were never touched by the rising powers of Japan and the United States. In contrast, the Britain of the late 1930s was unable to avoid war as her interests overlapped with the rising Nazi Germany.

Through the application of these historical lessons, which prescribe a strategy of restraint regarding China, the United States can avert a potential great power war.

## Theories of Warfare during Decline

There are two main strategies great powers take in managing their decline: preventive war or retrenchment. Preventive war theories can be traced back to Thucydides, who famously stated that it was the “rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”<sup>1</sup> Often placed in contrast to preventive war is retrenchment.<sup>2</sup> Both preventive war and retrenchment theories suggest that declining powers make a deliberate choice to either start a preventive war or to retrench. However, a differentiation must be made between a state’s peripheral and vital interests.

### Preventive War

Preventive war occurs when declining powers decide to fight a war now instead of risking a rising power becoming too powerful to beat in the future. There has been much written on preventive war. Robert Gilpin, for instance, states that the “first and most attractive response to a society’s decline is to eliminate the source of the problem.”<sup>3</sup> The so-called “Thucydides’ Trap” is a case of a successful preventive war, where the dominant Sparta, worried about a rising Athens, declared and won a war against the burgeoning city-state.<sup>4</sup>

A popular explanation for preventive war rests in game theory, showing “the easier it is to destroy a state” the more likely a state will be to “attack at the slightest provocation rather than wait to be attacked” if the conditions are favorable.<sup>5</sup> Further, leaders’ perceptions at the ease of winning an offensive war change the chances of war. For example, European leaders immediately preceding World War I believed

an advantaged offense meant preventive war was necessary. According to Stephen Van Evera, this “Cult of the Offensive” made leaders in pre-World War I Europe worry that a delay in mobilization would be disastrous. Meanwhile, “official communications of German are filled with warnings that German power was in relative decline, and that Germany was doomed unless it took drastic action.”<sup>6</sup> This meant that Germany, worried about a delay in mobilization and its declining power, had to go to preventive war to survive.

Several scholars have challenged the notion that preventive war is the logical response to relative decline. Preventive war is a risky process, as Gilpin notes, since the scope of a preventive war can quickly expand. In fact, a preventive war can serve as the catalyst for a declining power’s demise.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, “preventive war theories underestimate the efficacy of mutual accommodation” by both the rising challengers and the declining power.<sup>8</sup> The rising challenger sees their growth hampered due to ties with domestic institutions, which are necessarily stressed by war. The declining power, meanwhile, wastes resources in a great power war that could have been used to regain its power.<sup>9</sup> In other words, war does not pay.

### Retrenchment

Retrenchment is often placed as an alternative to preventive war. Paul MacDonald and Joe Parent succinctly define retrenchment as the “intentional reduction in the overall cost of a state’s foreign policy.”<sup>10</sup> Practically, this can take several forms, including withdrawing military forces from overseas commitments, offshore balancing against rising powers, and focusing on domestic reforms to tighten institutions. For example, a great power withdrawing military commitments to focus on increasing innovation is a prudent use of retrenchment that can help reverse a great power’s decline.<sup>11</sup>

Most obviously, retrenchment manifests itself through the reallocation of military forces to more critical areas.<sup>12</sup> The declining power will only militarily retrench when “it expects the existing order to be adequately maintained after its retrenchment.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the retrenching power must be confident that the rising power is not revolutionary, since the revolutionary power has goals of “overhauling the existing economic order... [and] demand[ing] changes

to global governance that better reflect their increasing influence in world politics.”<sup>14</sup>

However, retrenchment need not be solely military retrenchment. Other options exist such as entering of alliances with a non-threatening power.<sup>15</sup> However, entering alliances has three commensurate risks: First, the great power may pay a disproportionate share to defend (as is the case with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO), which may eventually lead the lesser power to use the resources of the greater to overtake them. Second, increasing alliance commitments causes diminishing returns while the chance of defection increases. Finally, the lesser ally may embroil the greater in costly disputes. The last form can often lead to the “continuing deterioration in a state’s prestige and international position.”<sup>16</sup>

Retrenchment is not a panacea. To successfully retrench, the declining state must make an honest appraisal of its decline and match its level of retrenchment with its decline. States have had varying degrees of success with retrenchment at a level commensurate with their level of decline, and states are generally successful only when faced with a small amount of decline.<sup>17</sup> Once a state enters drastic decline, no amount of retrenchment will reverse the decline. Furthermore, MacDonald and Parent find that not only is retrenchment more prevalent than preventive war, but the only powers that succeed in reversing their decline do so because of their retrenchment.<sup>18</sup> However, costly actions like wars greatly increase the chances of drastic decline, since military defeats represent significant losses in prestige, manpower, and production.

## Interest Contraction Theory

However, despite the discussion of the differences between preventive war and retrenchment, not enough credit is given to the flexibility states have in choosing preventive war or retrenchment. In a classic example, Britain chose appeasement (a form of retrenchment) of the Nazis in the 1938 Munich Agreement. But less than five months after the annexation of Czechoslovakia, Britain declared war against Nazi Germany, and not the Soviet Union, despite an undeclared Soviet offensive and subsequent partitioning of Poland. However, the much-maligned appeasement strategy had worked for the British in the past. A declining British Empire in the 1890s

resorted to appeasement of the United States and Japan, preventing war between the declining and rising powers. The separation between major and vital interests accounts for the discrepancy in results.

Instead of regarding retrenching as a form of appeasement, policymakers should view retrenchment as a form of interest contraction. This new theory of retrenchment, Interest Contraction Theory, determines that states have major and vital interests. The interests of a great power are contractable, but only until they reach vital interests. As a rising great power’s interests overlap with the declining great power’s interests, conflict occurs within the intersection.<sup>19</sup> The declining great power then must decide to either contract to allow the rising power to fill that gap or go to a preventive war to defend their interests. While the declining power can always start a preventive war, once the intersection of conflict intrudes on the declining power’s vital interests, war must occur. This is a form of hegemonic conflict theory. Hegemonic conflict comes from a “disequilibrium” between the rising and the declining powers. Further, as the relative power of the rising state increases, the “dominant power counters this [increase] through changes in its policies that attempt to restore equilibrium.”<sup>20</sup> If the dominant power fails to restore equilibrium, war results.

This understanding works the concept of vital and major interests into the discussion of the merits of retrenchment versus preventive war. It defines vital interests as “circumstances where serious harm to the nation would result” if they are lost.<sup>21</sup> Vital interests also include those which secure a states’ independence, autonomy, or sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> Vital interests expand beyond the borders of the state. For example, the British Empire’s vital interest in the late Victorian Era was to keep control of the European continental naval forces, even if it meant sacrificing the colonial garrisons to the United States and Japan.<sup>23</sup> The territorial sovereignty of the United States today is America’s vital interest.

In addition to vital interests, states have major interests, which are situations “where a country’s political, economic, or social well-being may be adversely affected” by their loss.<sup>24</sup> In the aforementioned example, a loss of control of the Atlantic and Far East constituted a large threat to the British, but not one worth challenging the rising

powers of the United States and Japan. For the modern United States, the Taiwanese semiconductor industry is a major interest, due to semiconductors' ubiquitous role in the modern economy and the fact that their production is concentrated largely in East Asia.

## **Case Study: American Rapprochement in British Decline: 1890-1910**

The British Empire of the Victorian Era was by far the world's largest great power. Britain in the mid-1800s had full control over the sea, was the largest industrial economy – accounting for 40-50 percent of the world's industrial potential in 1860 – and directly controlled 20% of global trade.<sup>25</sup> So complete was British mastery of the seas, and by extension their ability to project power onto land, during the Victorian period that there were no long-lasting military conflicts in Europe like those of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Granted, there was one notable exception (the American Civil War) and several regional conflicts (such as the Franco-Prussian War and the Crimean War) but by and large there was little large-scale conflict. However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a lack of innovation and a rapidly industrializing Germany facilitated an erosion of the British economic advantage.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the Crimean War renewed fears of a Franco-Russian alliance, whose combined fleets could stand against the Royal Navy.<sup>27</sup> For the first time since the Napoleonic Era, British naval hegemony faced challengers.

The British admiralty, concerned by the strengthening powers, pushed for a reexamination of British naval structure. In 1889, they recommended codification of two policies which had implicitly guided British military doctrine since Napoleon: the “command of the sea,” a “functional measure of capability” for a qualitatively stronger navy, and the “two-power standard,” a “straightforward comparison of forces” equal to the second- and third-largest navies of the continent combined.<sup>28</sup> To achieve the two-power standard, Parliament passed a £23 million expansion of the fleet, a hefty sum for a traditionally-austere Britain.<sup>29</sup> However, by the end of the 1890s, declining British economic power, British taxpayers' unwillingness to pay for a standing navy, and a rising Japan and United States made the two-power standard

increasingly difficult to achieve. In 1901, the admiralty made “the decision effectively to abandon world-wide sea control” and position the bulk of the Royal Navy in Europe, leaving the colonial armies to fend for themselves in the event of a conflict.<sup>30</sup>

### **British Interests**

The British Empire of the late 1890s and early 1900s was in a precarious position. It was clear by that point that the United States was on the rise. The United States had just won the Spanish-American War by harnessing its industrial power to drastically increase the size of its navy and thereby achieved its goal of complete control of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile Japan had imperial aspirations and was building a sizeable blue water fleet to compete with Europe in the Pacific.<sup>32</sup>

Typical explanations for a rising and declining state do not adequately answer how Britain and the United States avoided war. In fact, there were several opportunities for war. In late 1895, there was a dispute over boundaries in Venezuela that narrowly avoided after arbitration succeeded in the British giving way to the United States' demands, leading to a former governor of Canada to suggest a war with the United States was likely.<sup>33</sup> Only a few years later, disagreements over the Alaskan boundary again led to appeasement of the United States.<sup>34</sup> In short, Britain was trading concessions in their interests for cool Anglo-American relations.

Chief among British concerns during the period of rapprochement was free access of the Mediterranean. Britain relied on India for much of its security, and the burgeoning friendship between France and Russia (especially if those fleets coordinated in the Mediterranean) directly threatened the British capability to respond to a Russian invasion of India. That meant that British vital interests were in maintaining access to the Mediterranean.

However, the British still had major interests in the Americas. There were still colonial garrisons in the Americas, especially as Canada was still a major colony of the British. Fortunately for the British, the United States stayed out of European politics. The United States traditionally avoided the “entangling alliances” of Europe and was so isolationist that “even as late as 1892 the New York Herald was proposing the abolition of the State Department, since it had

so little business to conduct overseas.”<sup>35</sup> This was a sentiment carried by the British Admiralty, who by 1901 assumed “that Japan and the United States could be relied upon to support (or at least not to challenge) British interests.”<sup>36</sup> This sentiment was eventually held by most British policymakers, as they would later pursue an explicit alliance with Japan and an implicit pact with the United States.

By the outbreak of World War I, the British were in a much stronger position than even ten years previous. A reduction in their commitments – retrenchment, essentially – and a conscious appraisal of vital and major interests allowed the British government to avoid war with the United States. Certainly, the days of the Pax Britannica were over. The British would never again be the greatest power in the world, but they avoided costly, unnecessary wars by accurately resituating their interests.

### **British Appeasement: 1938-1939**

How, then, did the British appeasement of the United States and Japan succeed in the 1890s and 1900s yet fail in the 1930s against the Germans? The answer, again, is explained by Interest Contraction Theory. In contrast to the 1890s and 1900s, where the interests of a rising United States and Japan did not overlap with the British Empire’s vital interests, the rise of Germany directly threatened a vital interest of the British: maintaining a balance of power in Europe. As a result, in September 1939, Britain joined France and officially declared war on Germany. This was despite London’s precarious position at the start of the war and German dictator Adolf Hitler’s initial reluctance to fight the British. In fact, in August 1939, Hitler pledged the “power of [the] German Reich at [Britain’s] disposal” if Britain agreed to let him partition Poland.<sup>37</sup>

World War I had been devastating to almost every participant (with the notable exceptions of the United States and Japan).<sup>38</sup> Britain was no different, although by 1934, Britain’s path to economic recovery was well underway. Resultantly, British spending on the military decreased throughout the 1930s as the military spending from Germany, Japan, and Italy increased. By 1936, Germany under Hitler was remilitarizing quickly, especially in the Rhineland, which alarmed the French to a greater and the British to a lesser extent. However, the

British government was still unwilling to go to war, cautioning the French to not start an arms race in the area.<sup>39</sup> The remilitarization of Germany did not stop with the Rhineland. In March 1938, under pressure from Hitler, the Austrian chancellor resigned. The resulting Anschluss with Nazi Germany formed Großdeutschland, further expanding German military power.

During the Anschluss of Austria, Britain maintained its traditional strategy of detachment from European affairs. It was not until a manufactured crisis of ethnic-Germans in Czechoslovakia and the resulting calls by Hitler to invade the Sudetenland that the British became deeply involved. In September 1938, the prime minister of Britain, Neville Chamberlain, agreed to the demands of Hitler, who had threatened war over the Sudetenland if Britain did not allow its annexation.<sup>40</sup> This settlement would become the Munich Agreement, and the policy itself a continuation of Chamberlain’s much-maligned appeasement. Despite Hitler’s assurances that he was only protecting Germans in Czechoslovakia and would not annex more, in March 1939, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia and established a client state. Britain did not declare war at this point, although the army had begun rearmament and mobilization in January and had formally agreed to an alliance with France in February 1939.<sup>41</sup>

It was not until the September 1939 Nazi invasion of Poland that Britain and France declared war on Germany. Curiously, despite fears of the communist Soviet Union, Britain did not declare war on the USSR, even after the Soviets attacked Poland in an unprovoked war. There have been myriad reasons posited for this, especially since the provisions of the Anglo-Polish Agreement of August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1939, stipulated directly that it was to take effect under “any action of the so-defined European power” – although a secret protocol limited that clause to only be German aggression, not Italian or Soviet.<sup>42</sup> However, none adequately explain in totality why the British chose to go to war over Poland rather than Czechoslovakia, or why Britain chose to fight the Nazis instead of the Soviets over Poland.

### **Interests**

Like the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 1939 again saw Britain in a precarious position. Appeasement

had failed to stop the Germans in Czechoslovakia, the British populace was calling for rearmament, Poland was on the brink of war, and the Soviets had signed a non-aggression pact with the Germans. In this case, however, the Germans were not just threatening the major interests of the British.

Britain saw the protection of the continental balance of power as its most vital interest. So long as one European power was not dominating the continent, Britain could be reasonably assured of its security on the Isles. Britain had kept this strategy since the 1510s and 1520s, when Cardinal Wolsey articulated the “balance of Europe.” Notable British tragedies – including the Revolution of 1688 – resulted from abandoning the balance. In fact, Britain had fought the Hundred Years’ War with France explicitly to protect the European balance of power.<sup>43</sup> The question of why the annexation of Czechoslovakia did not lead to war but the annexation of Poland did is a matter of vital versus major interests.

Czechoslovakia was a major interest of the British. It was a democratic nation with a powerful, modern army and great manufacturing potential.<sup>44</sup> Czechoslovakia would have been a powerful ally in a war against Nazi Germany. However, the annexation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 did not sufficiently upset the balance of power in Europe. In 1937, Britain and France roughly matched the relative war potential of Germany.<sup>45</sup> If the Soviets are included, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union could effectively balance Europe. In other words, the expansion of German interests into annexation of Czechoslovakia only overlapped with Britain’s major interests, not their vital interests. As such, the British still saw peace as the best option.

However, there was one important event in August 1939 that precipitated a large-scale change in the balance of power: the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Suddenly, the balance of power was tipped towards the Germans. After Poland’s annexation, Germany was no longer contained within its traditional borders. Additionally, the Soviets could no longer be relied upon to help in a war against Germany. In short, the vital interests of the British were now threatened, and, as a result, war was the only option.

## **Interest Contraction Today: The United States and China**

Today, a central concern in policy circles is the relative decline of the United States and the rise of China. Since 2000, China has experienced unprecedented economic growth. By some measures, China’s GDP outstrips the United States, and by purchasing power parity, China has been the largest economy since at least 2016.<sup>46</sup> While China ostensibly claims its strategy is that of a “peaceful rise”, it has rapidly increased its military budget by as much as six percent yearly since 2014.<sup>47 48</sup> While it is still not as powerful as the United States, its comparative advantages in manpower costs and manufacturing capabilities mean it is quickly closing the gap.

As a result, China has asserted territorial claims in its professed sphere of influence. It has threatened the United States, clashed with India over the border in Kashmir, and increased bomber incursions around Taiwan’s airspace.<sup>49 50 51</sup> Of particular note for China is the South China Sea, which China considers to be a vital interest due to the value of trade and geographical proximity to Taiwan.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, China is beginning to move into Europe with acquisitions of 67 percent of Greece’s main port, the Piraeus,<sup>53</sup> and has started a “16+1 dialogue” with Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>54</sup> This expansion of interests has, since 2000, abutted the United States’ major interests in East Asia. However, the expansion into Europe, and the increasingly provocative use of the Chinese Maritime Militia in East Asia, is beginning to touch the vital interests of the United States, which means war, while not inevitable, is becoming increasingly likely.

## **Redefining US Interests**

China appears not only interested in becoming a regional hegemon, but by increasing its commitments outside of Asia, it may intend to shape an international order based around its interests. Additionally, military tensions between China and the United States continue to grow. However, Interest Contraction Theory states that war would only result – barring a preventive war from the United States (which Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler argue is usually a mistake) in the event of a clash of rising Chinese interests with the

United States' vital interests.<sup>55</sup>

It seems clear that the United States has major interests in East Asia. Taiwan is a strong regional partner of the United States, while the United States has about 54,000 troops in Japan and 28,500 in South Korea.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, six of the top ten U.S. trading partners are in East or South Asia, including China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.<sup>57</sup> If history is any guide, the rise of China will require a shrinking of U.S. interests in those regions, since overlapping interests results in war.

Shrinking US interests can take several forms, but one clear strategy would be that of offshore balancing. This differs from the current policy of preponderance, which manifests in the:

creation and maintenance of a U.S.-led world order based on preeminent U.S. political, military, and economic power, and on American values; maximization of U.S. control over the international system by preventing the emergence of rival great powers in Europe and East Asia; and maintenance of economic interdependence as a vital U.S. security interest.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, the United States has, since the conclusion of the Cold War, focused on building a world order with itself as the sole hegemon. An alternative strategy of offshore balancing (as proposed by Christopher Layne) requires reshaping U.S. commitments and a narrower definition of U.S. interests: namely, defending US territory and preventing the rise of a global hegemon by “disengage[ing] from its military commitments in Europe, Japan, and South Korea” and instead relying on US air, nuclear, and naval power for protection.<sup>59</sup>

Interest Contraction Theory bears similarities with Layne's conclusions, though with a key definitional distinction. Using the successful British example of redefining national interests with the new theory of redefining national interests gives us insight into avoiding war with China: the United States must redefine its own vital and major interests so that it does not find itself fighting an unnecessary war.

To be clear, there have been recent efforts to

reprioritize American interests. One such example is the United States' tacit agreement with the creation of a European Union joint military. Before the Russo-Ukrainian War, President Joe Biden suggested to French president Emmanuel Macron that he aimed for a “stronger and more capable European defense” in addition to NATO.<sup>60</sup> More recently, the Department of Defense and the European Defense Agency (EDA) agreed to an “Administrative Arrangement” to assist the EDA with European military standardization.<sup>61</sup> This move contrasts with previous U.S. policy, which expressly prohibited the European powers from undertaking such an action. Another example is the moves towards greater protectionism in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where U.S. leaders from both sides of the aisle called for “proposals to repatriate supply chains, restrict government procurement spending to goods and services produced domestically, impose tariffs ... and subsidize domestic production of everything from pharmaceutical ingredients to personal protective equipment to semiconductors.”<sup>62</sup>

U.S. vital interests are not and should not be maintaining its status as the sole global hegemon since that hegemony can be lost without a resulting loss of sovereignty or territorial integrity. Instead, that rests comfortably within the sphere of major interests, a comforting thought for those concerned with the imminent outbreak of war, but if it wants to continue to avoid major conflict, the United States must be willing to accept a new definition of its interests, namely in East Asia.

## Policy Recommendations

While Interest Contraction Theory is somewhat deterministic, it does provide some guidance for moving forward. The United States should not engage in a preventive war, as doing so is riskier than retrenchment, especially against a nuclear power. More specifically, U.S. policymakers must recognize that the United States' only vital interest is defense of the homeland. In other words, only an invasion of U.S. territory absolutely necessitates a military response. All other wars against a great power rival aiming to delay shifts in the balance of power are preventive wars. Against a nuclear power, a preventive war may increase nuclear tensions and directly threaten the United States' territory. Risking nuclear war for other

interests, including major interests, violates a core principle of the theory and an effective U.S. grand strategy—that the United States should protect vital interests above anything else.

Unfortunately, however, Interest Contraction Theory relies on the rising power to accurately judge the vital interests of the declining power. In this case, that means China must not impede on the United States' vital interests. Fortunately, the stopping power of water, as posited by John Mearsheimer, should discourage China from impeding on America's vital interests, meaning that war between China and the United States is unlikely.<sup>63</sup> However, U.S. policymakers must recognize that conflating vital and major interests suggests to China that any expansion necessitates an overlap of their interests and our vital interests. Under that reading, then, China may feel incentivized to conduct a first strike our homeland, since, under their perception, any expansion would lead to war.

Practically, this means that the United States must show concretely that East Asia is only a major interest, and thus can be retrenched. First, the United States must allow Japan and South Korea to take control of East Asian security. This means a drawdown of U.S. Forces Korea and U.S. Forces Japan and the removal of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which prevents Japan from having an expeditionary military. That is not to propose abandoning U.S. alliances entirely. The British, after all, used alliance politics extremely well to contain Russian expansion in the Pacific during their relative decline. However, the United States should not have offensive capabilities around the borders of China. Furthermore, both Japan and South Korea are wealthy nations with capable militaries and more at stake in the region than the United States.

Second, the United States must explicitly state that it will not protect Taiwan. The current strategy of “strategic ambiguity” about Taiwan serves only to conflate major and vital interests.<sup>64</sup> This is not meant to suggest that the United States should abandon Taiwan, and a U.S. policy towards Taiwan that mirrors its approach to Ukraine (defensive military aid and economic statecraft, but no U.S. boots on the ground or security guarantees) would prove beneficial, but the United States must not suggest Taiwan is worth a U.S.-China war. Because Taiwan is an island, in the

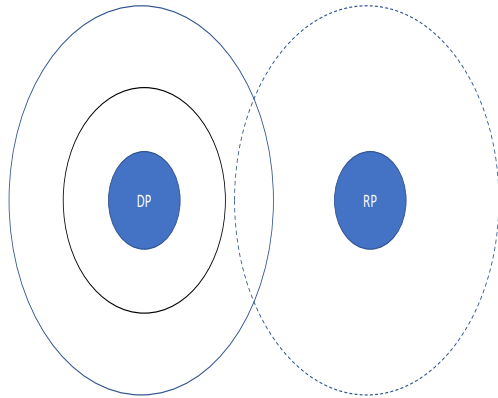
event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, Washington cannot supply Taiwan as easily as we can Ukraine, so supplies need to be sent earlier rather than later.

Third, the United States should further encourage the production of domestic semiconductors to reduce its reliance on East Asia. The U.S. military needs semiconductors for much of its modern high-technology weapons systems. Taiwan is not and will not be a vital interest, but U.S. policymakers may start believing that a preventive war is necessary if semiconductor supply is threatened. While fighting China over protecting Taiwanese semiconductors is a contradiction, since doing so would threaten the supply, America must take steps now to show both U.S. and Chinese policymakers that Taiwan is not a vital interest.

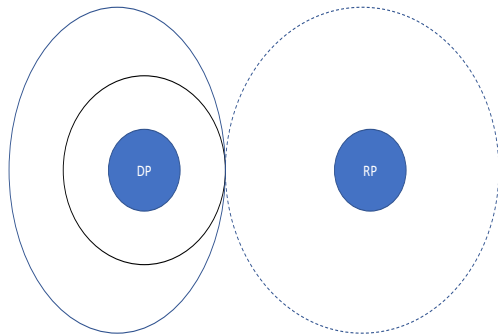
In short, the United States must recognize and communicate its vital interests. Doing so decreases the chance of war and increases its chance of returning from its relative decline.



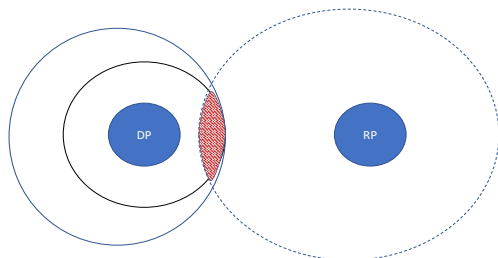
# Appendix 1



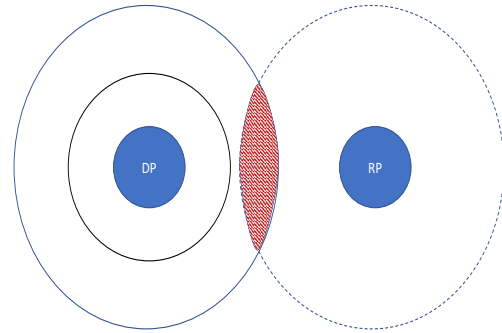
Situation: Conflict Intersection- as the rising power (RP) begins expansion, the interests of the rising power begin intersecting with the peripheral interests of the declining power (DP). This creates conflict at the intersection. The DP has two options: preventive war or retrenchment.



Option 1: Retrenchment- The DP begins retrenching. The maximum amount the DP can retrench is equal to the core interests of the DP. In this situation, retrenchment is successful at preventing preventive war.



Option 2: Necessary War- If the interests of the RP intersect into the core interests of the DP, the DP goes to war to defend core interests.



Option 3: Preventive War- The DP can always declare preventive war, even if their core interests are not intersecting the interests of the RP.

## Endnotes

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