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Interview – Christopher Layne

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The most exciting research—and the most compelling debates—are about old issues that were sidelined after the Cold War, when the collapse of the only great power rival to the United States, the Soviet Union, led to triumphalist “end of history” or “unipolar moment” euphoria gripping U.S. scholars and practitioners of international relations (IR) and foreign policy. That fad pushed aside the importance of both great power politics, and nuclear deterrence—especially extended deterrence. China’s rise has rightly returned these issues to the fore as the world is now no longer unipolar.

In my *Foreign Affairs* article, “Coming Storms: The Return of Great Power War,” I argued that war between the United States and China is all too easy to imagine, and to a lesser extent so is serious conflict between the United State and Russia. History—and great power politics—are back with a vengeance, and the timeless issues of war and peace have reclaimed their rightful place at the center of the discipline.

Although prominent scholars such as Michael Beckley as well as Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth still maintain that the distribution of power in the international system is unipolar, this argument is increasingly difficult to sustain. The Sino-American relationship and the American foreign policy establishment’s panic over China’s rise are powerful evidence that great power politics has returned. This has prompted renewed interest in power transition theory. A new line of research addresses the role of status and prestige in great power competition (see also Jonathan Renshon’s *Fighting for Status* and *Status in World Politics*, edited by T.V. Paul et al.) . Robert Gilpin in *War and Change in World Politics* noted the importance of status and prestige factors, as did Thucydides, who argued that states were motivated by fear, interest, and *honour*. But this topic really did not receive its due until quite recently. As I explain to my students in the introduction to international politics course I teach at the Bush School, debates about current policy are also debates about theory, and vice versa. Real world events drive important research in IR.

The collapse of the largest nuclear weapons state, the Soviet Union, in 1991 made nuclear deterrence—the threat to use nuclear weapons to deter attacks on the United States or its overseas allies—less of a priority in IR studies. Today it has returned to center stage. NATO expansion to the Baltic States, coupled with the resurgence of Russian power, has compelled security studies scholars to revisit extended deterrence issues in Europe. The same is true in East Asia, where the credibility of U.S. commitments to Taiwan and Japan once again is being debated. As Keir Liber and Daryl Press in *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution* have shown, technological changes—including highly precise delivery systems, and miniaturized/low yield nuclear warheads—are making the unthinkable, thinkable. During the Cold War, the risks of using nuclear weapons were considered so great that war between great powers

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was impossible. It is no longer inconceivable today, however.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Growing up, I spent countless hours playing *Diplomacy* and Avalon Hill military simulation games as well as reading Winston Churchill's *History of the Second World War* and S. E. Morrison's *History of Naval Operations in World War II*. Acquiring a lifelong interest in military and diplomatic history, I was a born realist. Since then, my realist understanding of the world and U.S. foreign policy has not so much changed, as evolved. Kenneth Waltz opened my eyes to the complexities, and subtleties of international politics. He recommended William Graham Sumner's "The Conquest of the United States by Spain," which I found eye-opening. Sumner warned that if the United States annexed the Philippines and embarked on the path of empire, the United States would lose its distinctive forms of governance and political culture. His essay is foundational to the realist belief that the United States should practice strategic self-discipline in its foreign policy—namely, offshore-balancing and restraint.

Other insights from Waltz include an understanding of the logic of offensive realism before anyone had coined the term; as he said in class: "The thing about having lots of military capabilities is that if you have them, you are going to want to use them." He considered bipolarity important because the existence of the Soviet Union constrained U.S. foreign policy ambition and kept it from going off the rails (see his essay, "Stability of a Bipolar World"). Events following the Cold War show that he was right to worry about the consequences of unbalanced American power.

Several scholars helped me see the inherently aggressive and imperial nature of U.S. foreign policy. William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* demonstrates the relationship between domestic factors—especially economic ones—and foreign policy. Walter A. McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State* helped me understand the role of ideational factors in shaping American foreign policy, as did Michael Hunt's *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Melvyn Leffler's article "The American Conception of National Security" as well as Daniel Yergin's *Shattered Peace* opened my eyes to how the U.S. helped bring about the Cold War: The marriage of overwhelming hard power capabilities and a proselytizing liberal ideology led the United States to adopt an "offensive realist" policy, to use the modern term, toward the Soviet Union. Writing during the Vietnam War, Robert W. Tucker warned that any great power that defines threats to its security in terms of other states' domestic political systems—and seeks regime change—is inherently imperial in nature.

Two other scholars have contributed to my conceptualization of great power behavior on the international stage. Robert Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics* demonstrates that great powers compete—and fight for—not only power but also for status and prestige. He also recognized that power transitions cause shifts in the prevailing international order. Moreover, his scholarship articulated a theory of why leading great powers—hegemony, or near hegemony—ultimately decline. Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* shows that there is a life cycle for great powers: No great power in modern international history (post 1500) has, or can, remain on top forever.

Reading Kennedy's *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* today underscores the eerie parallels between the Sino-American relationship and the run-up to the Great War: Economic rivalry, ideology, and contrasting domestic structures and institutions were at least as important as geopolitical factors in driving the competition between the reigning power, Britain, and the rising one, Germany. The spiral of antipathy between the two states helped bring about war in 1914.

You have warned of the increased risk of conflict between the United States and China, as Beijing's rise has eroded Washington's once-hegemonic international position. What makes this danger so great?

The Sino-American relationship is potentially explosive because it signifies that the international politics system is facing what I call the "E. H. Carr Moment." In *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, Carr explored one of the fundamental issues of statecraft: When the balance of power is shifting from an incumbent hegemon to a rising challenger, how can the former's aim to preserve the status quo be reconciled with the latter's goal of revising the international order in its favor? Rather than accede to the rising challenger's demands, an incumbent hegemon may dig in its heels to

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maintain the prevailing order—and its privileged position therein. Yet here's the dilemma: If the incumbent stands firm, it runs the risk of war with the dissatisfied challenger. But choosing accommodation with the challenger means coming to terms with the reality of its decline and the loss of its hegemonic position. This is the dilemma the United Kingdom faced in the run-up to 1914.

It is tempting to conclude that war between Britain and Germany a century ago was inevitable. Yet, there was serious debate in London about whether to contain or conciliate its formidable rival. In a January 1907 memorandum, senior Foreign Office official Sir Eyre Crowe made the case for containment. (See the third volume of *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898–1914*.) Britain, he said, should oppose Germany's attempts to increase its geopolitical influence, and to move up the ladder of the international hierarchy of status and prestige. Crowe argued that yielding to Germany's demands would only serve to increase its expansionist appetite. Germany intended "ultimately to break up and supplant the British Empire" (p.407). He concluded that the Anglo-German rivalry resulted from a fundamental conflict of interests that could not be papered over by diplomatic fudging, which could only sacrifice British interests. War, Crowe argued, could be avoided either by submitting to German demands—which would mean forfeiture of Britain's own great power status—or, as he counseled, by amassing enough power to deter Berlin.

Lord Thomas Sanderson, who had just retired as the permanent undersecretary of state of the Foreign Office, rebutted Crowe in a February 1907 memorandum (see *British Documents*.) The key to understanding German diplomacy was that a unified German state was latecomer on the world stage, arriving only in 1871: "It was inevitable," he observed, that a rising power such as Germany was "impatient to realize various long-suppressed aspirations, and to claim full recognition of its new position" (p.429). Sanderson understood that refusing to acknowledge Berlin's claims for status and prestige was risky, because "a great and growing nation cannot be repressed" (p.431). This thinking reflects the logic of the Carr Moment: Britain's choice was either to accommodate or to resist German aspirations—and the latter meant a high chance of war. For Sanderson, the choice was clear: "It would be a misfortune that [Germany] should be led to believe that in whatever direction she seeks to expand she will find the British lion in her path" (p.431). Rejecting Crowe's argument that London should uphold the status quo, Sanderson famously remarked that from Berlin's perspective "the British Empire must appear in the light of some huge giant sprawling over the globe, with gouty fingers and toes stretching in every direction, which cannot be approached without eliciting a scream" (p.430). Of course, as we know, Crowe's views prevailed over Sanderson's, and in August 1914 Britain and Germany found themselves at war.

As was true for Britain and Germany before World War I, today powerful international and domestic forces are pushing the United States and China down the road to confrontation. Hence the Carr Moment of our time: Will the declining hegemon in East Asia—the United States—try to preserve a status quo that increasingly will no longer reflect the prevailing distribution of power? Or can the United States reconcile itself to a rising China's revisionist demands and the realignment of the international order in East Asia to reflect shifting power realities?

Whether Beijing and Washington will be able to bridge their differences through diplomacy in coming years remains to be seen. However, as long as the United States and China remain committed to their current strategies—and the respective ambitions that underlie them—the potential for conflict is high. Avoiding war will depend more, *much* more on Washington's policy than on Beijing's. Here, the debate between Crowe and Sanderson serves as an object lesson. Today, when it comes to China, Crowe's spirit pervades the American foreign policy establishment. The United States professes the benevolence of its intentions toward China, even as it refuses to make any significant concessions to what China views as its vital interests—or acknowledge Beijing as its geopolitical equal. Like Crowe, the U.S. foreign policy establishment believes that Beijing should be satisfied with what it has—or more correctly, what Washington is willing to let China have—and not ask for more. American foreign policy analysts correctly discern that Chinese leaders believe that the United States is determined to thwart China's rise. Nevertheless, they advocate hard line policies that can only confirm Beijing's perceptions and reinforce its sense of insecurity.

Washington has the "last clear chance" to avoid the looming Sino-American conflict by undertaking a policy of strategic adjustment in East Asia. America's political culture and sense of national identity will make it difficult for the United States to do this. So will the tendency of U.S. policymakers look to the "lessons" of the 1930s rather than the events that had precipitated World War I when invoking history as a guide. This is a mistake that could have

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significant policy consequences because “the proper lesson” to be drawn from the Great War’s outbreak, as David Calleo observed in *The German Problem Reconsidered: Germany and the World Order, 1870 to Present*, “is not so much the need for vigilance against aggressors, but the ruinous consequences of refusing reasonable accommodation to upstarts” (p.6). If the United States wants to avoid a future head-on collision with China, it must eschew Crowe’s counsel and embrace Sanderson’s. That is the real lesson of 1914.

To analyze the Sino-American relationship, we need to adopt a neoclassical realist approach that looks at both systemic, and internal, factors to assess U.S. foreign policy options. The constraints of the international system surely are at play in today’s relationship between the two countries. But so are “unit level” factors; especially in the United States where domestic politics and liberal ideology play an outsized role in shaping its policy toward China. It would take the equivalent of a strategic earthquake to shift the outlook of Washington’s foreign policy establishment toward the accommodation of Beijing’s tangible claims as well as its demands for status and prestige equal to that of the United States. With no evidence of such a shift occurring, we should be worried about where the Sino-American relationship is headed.

Which U.S.-China conflict scenarios do you believe are most probable?

There is an awful lot of cognitive dissonance within the U.S. foreign policy establishment today. Many still believe that—or say that they believe that—that the United States possesses preponderant power. Yet, during the last three years a near hysteria with regard to the implications of China’s rise has overtaken the foreign policy establishment. It is odd that immediately after taking office, top-ranking Biden administration officials have had to say over and over again that the United States is not in decline. To paraphrase William Shakespeare, they “doth protest too much.”

The magnitude of China’s geopolitical challenge eclipses that of the Soviet Union by an order of magnitude. At its peak during the First Cold War, the GDP of the Soviet Union was never greater than two-fifths of that of the United States. By contrast, as the Second Cold War intensifies today, when measured by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), China’s GDP has *already* surpassed that of the United States. And, measured by market exchange rate, China’s GDP will overtake the United States by the end of the decade. With the exception of nuclear weapons, on the other hand, the Soviet Union was never able to close the economic and technological gaps with the United States. While the Soviet Union was—as German chancellor Helmut Schmitt put it—“Upper Volta [now Burkina Faso] with missiles,” China has emerged as a serious competitor in the realm of high technology.

Notwithstanding some U.S. scholars who insist that China “can’t innovate,” this is plainly not the case. In many areas—such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, 5G technology, electric vehicles, and green technology—Beijing is running neck and neck with Washington. China’s military modernization, and expansion, has been just as impressive. Although China is not yet able to compete with the United States globally, in East Asia the military power gap between the two countries is disappearing fast.

The potential flashpoints that could spark a military conflict between the U.S. and China are pretty well known: an incident in the South China Sea, a Chinese move on the Senkaku islands (which are administered by Japan and claimed by China), an implosion of the regime in North Korea, and—of course—Taiwan. The *Economist* recently described the island of Taiwan as “the most dangerous place on earth.” 2034: A Novel of the Next World War illustrates one scenario for the start of a Sino-American war: A confrontation in the South China Sea escalates into a major war between the United States and China. The status of Taiwan—a *de facto* independent country claimed by China as a renegade province—is especially fraught. President Xi Jinping has reiterated Beijing’s goal of establishing sovereignty over Taiwan by 2049, the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Washington should not underestimate the importance of this issue to Beijing, or the depth of the irredentist and nationalist sentiment among mainland Chinese.

What strategic advantages does each side possess in competition with the other?

If we are talking about a potential military conflict, China would have the home field advantage. It could also concentrate the full weight of its military power in the potential theater of operations. The United States, on the other

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hand, must disperse its military forces to defend its (purported) interests in Europe, Persian Gulf, and the Middle East. The United States has, of course, its traditional allies in Europe and the Anglosphere. How much help they actually would be in a war with China is questionable. Many U.S. allies have extensive economic ties with China—relationships that they do not want to put at risk by supporting hard-line U.S. policies toward China involving sanctions and trade restrictions. If the U.S. and China become involved in a military conflict, it is likely that most U.S. allies—the United Kingdom and Australia excepted—would remain on the sidelines (if conflict breaks out over Taiwan, it is an open question of what Japan would do). In short, in the event of a Sino-American war, the European allies would be behind the United States—as far behind as they could get.

Although some well-known foreign policy commentators routinely predict that China will collapse, the country's economy and state are a lot more resilient than these people want to admit. American policymakers and analysts don't want to address this issue. In fact, if one is wagering on the respective brittleness of China and the United States, there is a strong case to be made that Washington is more at risk of being undermined by internal decay than Beijing is. The United States is so divided today—over race, politics, and more—that one wonders if it still is one country in any meaningful sense. A war with China could put the cohesiveness of U.S. society to the test, and it is by no means assured the United States would pass.

What options do Washington and Beijing have to de-escalate the conflict? Will the structure of the international system force the United States to accommodate China?

China is seeking hegemony in East Asia—its home region. And it also wants to be accorded by Washington status and prestige equal to that of the United States. China's pursuit of these goals, however, puts it on a collision course with the United States, for two reasons. First, hegemony in East Asia is contested. By virtue of its victory over Japan in the Second World War, the United States has been the incumbent hegemon in East Asia since 1945. There cannot be two hegemons in the same region at the same time. Or, per a Chinese saying, "Two tigers cannot live on the same mountain."

Second, to reach an accommodation with China, the United States would need to acknowledge the former's claim to a status and prestige equal to its own on the international stage. The American foreign policy establishment is aware of the Communist Party's complaints about China's "century of humiliation," or the period from the First Opium War in 1839–41 to the Communist Party's 1949 assumption of power. But it is doubtful that Americans really comprehend the depth of China's sensitivities about this period, or the role that re-establishing China as a great power played in the Communist Party's rise. Moreover, the U.S. foreign policy establishment values America's standing—or at least what it *perceives* to be U.S. standing—as the preponderant power in the international system.

To manage the Sino-American competition peacefully, Washington would need to make important concessions to Beijing. Most important, the United States would have recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. It would also need to come to an understanding with China over the status of the South China Sea. The United States would also need to stop interfering—as Beijing sees it—in China's internal affairs. This would mean reversing course and ceasing to construe the Sino-American relationship as an ideological competition between democracy and authoritarianism.

What are the costs and benefits of President Joe Biden's commitment to renewing U.S. support for democracy abroad?

The United States is repeating the same mistakes with China that it made with the Soviet Union during the early years of the Cold War. The United States could have either dealt with the Soviet Union as a traditional great power competitor or as an ideological rival. Great power competitions can be managed through mutual compromise, recognition of spheres of influence, respect for each sides' legitimate interests, and non-interference in internal affairs. None of this is possible in an ideological struggle.

The United States opted for an ideological crusade against communism. America's liberal ideology convinced Washington that its ideals were truly universal. In *The Peace of Illusions*, I argued that liberal ideology, specifically

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American liberalism, was the driving force behind U.S. Cold War policy. The U.S. establishment thus viewed competition with the Soviet communists as a Manichean struggle between good and evil: The lurid language of NSC-68 referred to the “grim oligarchy of the Kremlin,” and declared that the “world cannot exist half slave and half free.” Hence, the U.S. would not accept the idea that the Soviet Union had security interests in East Central Europe that necessitated the establishment of a Soviet sphere of influence in that region. Documents such as NSC 20/4 make clear the real aim of U.S. policy was the elimination of the Soviet Union as a rival—Cold War-era policies including the “roll-back” should be viewed in that light.

Former vice-president Mike Pence and then-secretary of state Mike Pompeo revived the NSC-68/Cold War style rhetoric when describing the threat posed by China to the United States. Like the Soviet Union, they asserted, China is a “bad” state and a menace because of its communist and totalitarian ideology. President Biden seems to be following the same path when he defines international politics as a struggle between autocracy and democracy. During the Cold War, Washington paid costs—both tangible and intangible—for this sort of crusader rhetoric. These included, on the tangible side, the Vietnam War and bloated defense budgets, and on the intangible side, the rise of the imperial presidency, and the erosion of civil liberties.

For the United States and China to remain at peace, policymakers need to understand that regime type does *not* determine other states’ grand strategies. While there are things Americans do not like about China—such as Beijing’s treatment of its Uyghur minority or its Hong Kong policies—Washington cannot do much about these issues. Pressing these issues will antagonize China and play into its refusal to be bullied by foreign powers. The Biden administration’s desire to divide the world on ideological lines, and engage in liberal crusades reflects the baleful influence of the so-called democratic peace theory—that democracies do not go to war with other democracies—which merely gives a veneer of theoretical sophistication to deep seated liberal dogma. This theory embodies an eliminationist ethos: Non-democracies are troublemakers in international politics and must be transformed into democracies. U.S. officials claim over and over again that American ideals are universal. But if these values are universal, why must we fight so many wars to get others to accept them?

The United States can either treat the Sino-American relationship as one of traditional great power competition—in other words, one of contending geopolitical interests, not values—or it can prosecute that relationship as an ideological struggle. While the former, realist option, offers the possibility that the relationship can be managed peacefully, the second option vastly increases the odds of a Sino-American war, and almost certainly will constrict the space for diplomacy. Yet, we all know what the foreign policy establishment believes—one cannot negotiate with an “evil” regime because doing so would be “appeasement.”

Biden has argued for a U.S. return to multilateral agreements such as the Iran nuclear accords. Is such a position tenable in an era of increased Chinese power and Russian ambition?

Even in an era of renewed great power competition, there are important issues that require collaborative efforts. Diplomatic history demonstrates that rival powers often have overlapping interests, and that they have been able to cooperate on those issues even while their relationship is contentious on other issues. President Trump erred in withdrawing the United States from the Iran nuclear accord signed in 2015 by the Obama administration. This agreement imposed a meaningful constraint on Iran’s nuclear ambitions and cracked open the door to a *détente* between Washington and Tehran. In renouncing the accord in 2018, the Trump administration allowed U.S. policy to be hijacked by American neoconservatives and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The three European signatories as well as Russia and China support resurrecting this agreement. So hopefully negotiations will succeed.

Climate change potentially is an area for collaboration between the United States and China. The Biden administration acted correctly in returning the United States to the 2015 Paris climate accords, from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2017. The United States should be part of the effort to reach an international agreement that will arrest—or even reverse—the impact of climate change. Yet, it is not clear that the United States, China, and the other major powers, will be able to do so.

Policies designed to address climate change could have an impact—positive or negative—on economic growth. And,

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of course, economic growth affects overall national power. So, particularly because the United States now defines the Sino-American relationship as an ideological struggle between autocracy and democracy, it could be difficult to keep geopolitical concerns from impeding meaningful agreements on climate change. National interests will usually trump global or transnational interests.

What is the most important advice you could give to early practitioners and scholars of international relations?

I would give the same advice that Ken Waltz gave me: “Focus on the big, important issues” and “Do big think, not little think.” Since Thucydides’ time, the fundamental issue of international politics has been the causes of war and peace in the international system. Waltz also said that it is imperative to communicate our ideas in clear, concise language and avoid jargon. Important research should be able to be communicated in a way that any well-educated lay person can understand. Instead of developing abstruse mathematical formulae, those truly interested in understanding international politics and foreign policy should study diplomatic history, the classic works of political philosophy, and the intellectual history that underlies the international political worldviews of policymakers. The great issues of international politics are timeless, so I would advise staying away from intellectual fads of the moment.