



applying the right lessons improperly—can have disastrous consequences for policymakers and the nation they serve.

In many ways, for example, the misuse of historical analogy was a key driver of the disastrous U.S. decision to fight a war in Vietnam. As French colonial forces in Vietnam neared defeat in the mid-1950s, President Eisenhower [invoked](#) Neville Chamberlain's failed attempt to appease Hitler at Munich: "If I may refer again to history; we failed to halt Hirohito, Mussolini, and Hitler by not acting in unity and in time. That marked the beginning of many years of stark tragedy and desperate peril. May it not be that our nations have learned something from that lesson?" This frame, however, constrained how the United States understood the problem and its available options. It drove the United States to view the communist insurgents fighting the French as tools of China and the Soviet Union in their scheme to aggressively spread communism around the world.

Yet there was one problem with this analogy: Vietnam was not Munich. The war in Vietnam was not evidence of dominoes falling at the behest of Moscow's commands, but rather a combined anti-colonial war of liberation and post-colonial civil war that had only limited implications for American national security interests. Robert McNamara, an architect of the Vietnam War who served as Secretary of Defense for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, [painfully acknowledged](#) his mistakes and those of his colleagues. He ignored or rejected any evidence that ran counter to Cold War orthodoxy: the Vietnamese communists were primarily motivated by nationalism, not loyalty to international Communism, and the domino theory was simply wrong. By misunderstanding the nature of the conflict in Vietnam, American presidents and officials drew improper historical

analogies that drove them towards disastrous policies costing millions of lives.

Understanding the Rise of China and its Competition with the United States

As China rises in geopolitical power and asserts its interests with increasing levels of aggression, scholars and policymakers have similarly looked to history for lessons that could help U.S. policymakers navigate the burgeoning competition between China and the United States. Yet, as with Vietnam and Munich, policymakers must be careful in their use of history to guide and inform policy decisions.

Probably the most famous historical analogy related to U.S.-China dynamics, Graham Allison's [Thucydides Trap](#) references the titular historian's assertion that "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable." Allison argues that the Peloponnesian War was only one example of a rising power challenging a ruling, established power. He finds that between the year 1500 and today, a rising power had challenged an established power sixteen times and went to war in twelve of them. Using what the book's promotional materials call "uncanny historical parallels and war scenarios," Allison maintains that the trap identified by Thucydides represents "the best lens for understanding U.S.-China relations in the twenty-first century."



of Athens instilling fear in Sparta—was not his statement on the causes of war generally. Rather, he famously [described the motivations of war](#) to be “fear, honor, and interest.” Moreover, the historian Donald Kagan has [written](#) that at the time of the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, Athenian power was in fact not growing, the balance of power had begun to stabilize, and Sparta was more worried about a slave revolt than it was concerned about the rise of Athenian power.

Lastly, does the Peloponnesian War actually represent the best lens for understanding U.S.-China relations in the twenty-first century? While there certainly are some important similarities in terms of the relative balance of power, there are several important differences. In Allison's version of the Peloponnesian War as a stand-in for U.S.-China competition, the rising power Athens is the stand-in for China and the established power Sparta is a stand-in for the United States. Yet unlike China today Athens was democratic and the region's dominant maritime power at the helm of a large network of alliances—qualities that better describe the United States. While Sparta was an authoritarian land power—qualities it shares with China. Additionally, both China and the United States have something that neither Athens nor Sparta had: nuclear weapons. In Allison's analysis of sixteen rising powers and the twelve conflicts that resulted, it's notable that no war between a rising and an established great power has emerged from this dynamic since the advent of nuclear weapons. It would be fair to argue that these distinctions are ultimately less significant than the impact of changes to the relative balance of power, but these distinctions and differences of context should at least be in the minds of policymakers as they read analogies between the wars of Ancient Greece and consider their applicability for contemporary geopolitical challenges.

Meanwhile, others have sought to draw parallels between China and Wilhelmine Germany.

There certainly are some parallels: like China today, Germany was a relative newcomer as a great power; [had](#) rapidly industrialized; was autocratic; made massive infrastructure projects; overpowered; o



Finally, there is the oft-repeated specter of the emergence of a “New Cold War” between China and the United States. While some [pundits](#) and [observers](#) have raised their [concerns](#) about this new frame to understand dynamics between Washington and Beijing, none added more fuel to the fire than a major speech about China by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. He leveled several undeniable accusations of China’s egregious behavior—including its theft of intellectual property; its unfair trade practices; its pressure on foreign companies; its efforts to interfere in the political processes of other countries; its repression of Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the Chinese people themselves; and its efforts to gain more influence in international institutions while undermining established international laws and norms. Yet Pompeo took these facts and framed them using rhetoric that was blatantly reminiscent of the [Cold War](#). His speech featured several comparisons between China and the Soviet Union, and repeatedly invoked the Cold War—while making no other historical allusions during his remarks. He described China as a threat “for our economy, for our liberty, and indeed for the future of free democracies around the world” before declaring:

The [Chinese Communist Party (CCP)] regime is a Marxist-Leninist regime. General Secretary Xi Jinping is a true believer in a bankrupt totalitarian ideology. It’s this ideology, it’s this ideology that informs his decades-long desire for global hegemony of Chinese communism. America can no longer ignore the fundamental political and ideological differences between our countries, just as the CCP has never ignored them.

Secretary Pompeo clearly sees the Cold War as a powerful lens to understand U.S.-China competition. As with Munich or Germany’s rise prior to World War I, policymakers should be careful about their use of historical analogies when making policy decisions. If their understanding is framed by an inaccurate reading of history, or if the important differences in content and context between analogies are not considered, the result could be disastrous. Concerningly, the content of Pompeo’s speech—and other rhetoric from the Trump administration on China—troublingly include description of the history of U.S. strategy toward China (and the Soviet Union, for that matter) that are simply inaccurate.

For example, the Trump administration’s rhetoric about U.S. policy toward China is based on an inaccurate description of how past administrations handled China. According to their narrative, previous administrations were either blind or naïve about the realities of the Chinese Communist Party and “[got China wrong](#)” because— as described in the Trump administration’s 2017 [National Security Strategy](#)—“For decades, U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China’s rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China.” Others outside of the administration argue that the mere act of recognizing the People’s Republic of China in 1979 was the United States’ “[greatest foreign policy failure](#).” In this telling, The Trump administration portrays itself as the first to realize China’s true nature by rejecting policies that emphasize engagement and cooperation in favor of a more confrontational approach designed to maximize American interests.

The problem with this description is that it is far too broad and mischaracterizes the intent and





Communist Party is the mission of our time," and "the free world must triumph over this new tyranny." He called on "the freedom-loving nations of the world [to] induce China to change." Finally, in a disconcertingly direct reference to Cold War invocations of Munich, he declared "If we bend the knee now, our children's children may be at the mercy of the Chinese Communist Party, whose actions are the primary challenge today in the free world."

The problem with all of this is that the Soviet Union and the Cold War are not strong analogies to understand China and the burgeoning U.S.-China competition. Fitting U.S.-China competition into a cold war frame would be a significant stretch and require either a broader definition of "cold war" that has little distinction from "competition" or "rivalry," or—as Pompeo did at times in his speech—a mischaracterization of the challenge posed by China as similar to that



underestimated the cohesion and resolve of an aroused American society and overestimated their own martial prowess as a means of defeating U.S. material superiority.”

Yet there are also important distinctions that limit the applicability of the Pacific War to current security calculations in the Indo-Pacific. First, China is not Imperial Japan. By the time war started in 1941, Japan had been at war for much of the previous 47 years, having defeated China (twice), Russia, Germany’s colonies in Micronesia and China, and French colonial forces in Indochina. As a result of its victories, Japanese military forces occupied today’s Vietnam, maintained a brutal colonial presence in Korea, occupied Taiwan, and supported the puppet state Manchukuo in northeast China. Yet despite well-deserved concerns about Chinese ambitions and its assertiveness along much of its periphery, as well as justified criticisms about its domestic human rights record, China has not by any measure been a militarily aggressive military power like Imperial Japan.

Additionally, the United States is not the same kind of power it was in 1941. While the U.S. had some military presence in the Philippines and in China, it was not nearly as capable or formidable as U.S. forces forward based in Asia today. Moreover, U.S. allies and partners today are far more capable at defending themselves and contributing to coalition operations today than they were in the 1940s. By any measure, the U.S. represents a far more formidable opponent to China today than it did to Imperial Japan in 1941.

Another obvious, though critically important,



events are too complicated for history to teach us anything useful. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand triggering World War I is a great example—it forces one to consider the counterfactual, If Archduke Ferdinand had not been assassinated, would World War I have been avoided? Similarly, one may ask what would have happened if Abraham Lincoln had lost the election of 1860 to John C. Breckinridge or if Giuseppe “Joe” Zangara had successfully assassinated then-President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 15, 1933 instead of killing Anton Cermak, the Mayor of Chicago. Would there have been a U.S. Civil War? Would the U.S. have entered World War II the way it did?

While I certainly agree with critiques of previous administration's approach China as overly valuing dialogue with Beijing or pursuing it at the cost of other interests, one cannot in good faith describe engagement with China as a complete failure. After Nixon's engagements, China became a helpful partner for the United States in the Cold War and halted its efforts to spread permanent revolution around the world. With the death of Chairman Mao and the rise of Deng Xiaoping, China began to change into a country that—gradually—embraced aspects of capitalism that allowed its economy to flourish and its geopolitical power to grow.

Some may certainly perceive the seeds of today's competition as a result of these efforts to engage. That China's actions have certainly been troubling in recent years and that China is more powerful today because of U.S. actions and the international system that allowed Beijing to focus on its own development in a peaceful, stable, and trade-conducive environment remains undeniable. It is also undeniable that engagement with China has not accomplished nearly as much as one would hope or expect. Yet that should not be interpreted

as engagement's wholesale failure. Moreover, a strategy that includes engagement cannot be judged on its own: it must be compared to alternative policy options. As Nixon wrote in the same *Foreign Affairs* article cited by Pompeo, “we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation.”

This essay has primarily focused on U.S. actions and decision-making in the context of historical metaphors and analogies while ignoring the critical role that China itself will play in defining the nature and intensity of its competition with the United States. It's undeniable that China's aggression across its periphery, as well as its increasingly oppressive treatment of its own people, inflames competitive dynamics with the United States and reduces American interest in, or appetite for, cooperation. Yet this is not the focus of this essay, primarily because Chinese scholars apply a completely different set of historical analogies—some appropriate and some problematic—to understand its relationship with China—few of which involve the Pacific War.

Some metaphors are more applicable than others, certainly. But the complexities of history should not dissuade us from using history as a tool for analysis and policy development. As argued by historian Robert Crowcroft:

Most fundamentally, history teaches us to look past the ephemeral and search out the underlying, long-term dynamics of problems. As a matter of routine, historians probe the roots of a situation and endeavor to trace causalities. Indeed, historians ought to grasp causality better than any other



expert group. If one can pinpoint the factors that brought a situation about, one can make helpful observations about how likely a proposed course of action is to succeed, or temper one's ambitions for a simple resolution.

Ultimately, the path to war is a complex mix of the structural and the specific, the predictable and the random. World War I may have been caused proximately by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, but in reality, that was only the incident that spurred a continent ready for war. The disintegration of empires, the establishment of new and aggressive powers, the stationing of militaries in situations where they must be used or lost, the rise of nationalism, and the ideology of war itself created a situation in which the killing of an obscure noble could start a war that killed millions. The lesson to be drawn from this history is not to protect all Archdukes, but rather to prevent a similar situation from developing again.

As Dr. Joseph Nye [noted](#), "Metaphors can be useful as general precautions, but they become dangerous when they convey a sense of historical inevitability." He employs a compelling metaphor for the impact of events on human decision-making: "the funnel of choices." He argues that are times when leaders have a tremendous amount of leeway in optionality in their decision-making. Yet, "events close in over time, degrees of freedom are lost, and the probability of war increases." His point is that there is nothing inevitable in human decision-making, but choices made narrow the options available in the future.

Conclusion

As of this writing, neither side has committed to a path that makes war probable, let alone inevitable. Yet, the danger is growing. Leaders in both Washington and China have the opportunity to

find a better path. For American policymakers, that means devising a strategy that defends the United States, our allies, and our interests and allows for both competition and cooperation. This approach, what some have described as "[competitive coexistence](#)," envisions a strategy that secures U.S. interests in critical domains while avoiding the kinds of threat perceptions and dangerous escalatory spirals that defined the Cold War.

Today, as the United States and China attempt to understand the nature of their burgeoning competition, it would be a mistake for U.S. policymakers to constrain themselves by misapplying historical analogies that limit their options or blind them to options and possibilities that are unique to this particular competition. Ultimately, navigating the dangerous complexities of U.S.-China competition will require learning from the past without being beholden to it.

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