

6-30-2012

1862: The Superpower, the United States, and the War that Didn't Happen (Why America and China Are Not Destined To Fight — Unless They Forget Everything) 超級大国、美国和没有爆发的战争

Michael Vlahos

United States Naval War College

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/eassc_publications



Part of the [International Relations Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Michael Vlahos. "1862: The Superpower, the United States, and the War that Didn't Happen (Why America and China Are Not Destined To Fight — Unless They Forget Everything) 超級大国、美国和没有爆发的战争" East Asia Security Symposium and Conference 东亚安全座谈谈论会. Beijing, Jun. 2012.

http://epublications.bond.edu.au/eassc_publications/35

1862: The Superpower, the United States, and the War that Didn't Happen (Why America and China Are Not Destined To Fight — *Unless They Forget Everything*)

1862 : 超级大国、美国和没有爆发的战争（为什么美中之间并非注定斗争—除非他们忘记了历史）

Michael Vlahos
Professor

[United States Naval War College](#)

Peer-reviewed Conference Paper
2012 East Asia Security Symposium and Conference
同行互评会议论文
2012 东亚安全座谈谈论会

http://epublications.bond.edu.au/eassc_publications/

Published Version March 2014

For information about this paper or the East Asia Security Symposium and Conference Peer-reviewed publishing site please contact the Editor-in-Chief [Jonathan H. Ping](#)
想要了解关于论文、或东亚安全座谈谈论会同行互评出版地址的信息，请联系总编辑
乔纳森·H·平
jping@bond.edu.au

1862: The Superpower, the United States, and the War that Didn't Happen (Why America and China Are Not Destined To Fight — *Unless They Forget Everything*)

Abstract: From 1861-1865 (and less so until 1868, when the Alabama Claims dispute was settled) the nation acknowledged by all as the only true world power — Great Britain — was directly threatened by the fast-rising navy of the United States of America (US). Moreover the very strategic depth of its empire — Canada and its source of Atlantic power — was at risk, and thus the entire calculus of Britain's world position was for a time in some danger. Yet this window of vulnerability passed without conflict, let alone war.

Although the US was engaged in 'a great civil war', this time of intense strategic competition in many ways reminds us of, and speaks to, the current US-China strategic competition, especially in its overriding naval dimensions. In many ways it was a more dangerous tussle, with periods of crisis (especially December 1861-April 1862) when war could have come at any moment.

Yet both the US and Great Britain sought paths of restraint and an implicit strategic demarche that ultimately not only lowered the possibility of war, but also encouraged eventual strategic modus vivendi — without formal elaboration or contentious negotiations. Why was there no conflict at sea? How did both parties come upon a working understanding that reframed a fast-fuse face-off into a stable strategic posture — that met both nations' larger military needs?

This excursus will compare the US-British relationship along a range of criteria in strategic competition, and contrast it to the China-US relationship today. Its wider objective is to isolate and identify those elements in the mix that helped things turn out as they did positively, for both the US and the United Kingdom. Then, more elusively, it seeks to find similar elements in today's US-China strategic competition — that we might especially take advantage to defuse a proclivity on both sides toward war as our mutual, on-demand [because we can!] solution.

Key Words: PLAN naval buildup, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Air-Sea Battle, US-China naval competition, US-China war at sea, American vs. Chinese Seapower, American Civil War, *U.S.S. Monitor*, *H.M.S. Warrior*

1862：超级大国、美国和没有爆发的战争（为什么美中之间并非注定斗争—除非他们忘记了历史）

摘要：1861年至1865年之间（到1868年阿拉巴马索赔纠纷结束时，情况已有所缓和），英国—唯一被公认的世界强国，面临着美国飞速上升海军力量的威胁。此外，英国的战略纵深—加拿大及其大西洋动力的源泉—也岌岌可危，因此英国在世界上的地位一度不稳。但在这个敏感脆弱的时期，却没有任何冲突爆发，更不要说战争了。

尽管美国当时正在进行“一场伟大的内战”，但这一时期激烈的战略竞争，在许多方面都使我们联想到了目前美中之间的战略竞争，尤其是在最为重要的海上力量方面的竞争。从许多方面来看，当时的情况更危险，发生过数次危机（尤其是从1861年12月到1862年4月之间），随时可能爆发战争。

但美英两国通过寻求保持克制的方法和比较模糊的战略方针，不仅降低了爆发战争的风险，也促成了最终双方的战略妥协—两国并没有进行任何正式阐述或举行具有争议的谈判。两国之间为什么没有爆发海上冲突？双方是如何达成谅解，扭转紧张和对峙态势来实现战略稳定状态，从而满足了两国更重要的军事需求的？

本文将按照一系列标准来研究美英两国在战略竞争中的关系，并将其与当前的中美关系进行对比。研究更广泛的目的，是剖析并指出在当时各种情况中，哪些因素最终促成了美英两国最终实现积极的结果。另外，本文试图寻找当前中美竞争中存在的相似因素—我们应该好好加以利用，得到一个共同且必要的[因为我们可以!]办法，来化解双方可能爆发战争的可能性。

关键词：中国人民解放军海军建设、尖阁列岛/钓鱼岛、海空一体战、美中海军竞争、美中海上战争、美中海上力量对决、美国内战、*U. S. S. Monitor*、英国皇家海军“勇士号”

1862: THE SUPERPOWER, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE WAR THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN (WHY AMERICA AND CHINA ARE NOT DESTINED TO FIGHT — UNLESS THEY FORGET EVERYTHING)

Imagine a great continental power, now a great rising power. Imagine too that it is close to surpassing (in Purchasing Power Parity terms) the economy of the greatest power, the world power. Imagine further that the rising power has persistent claims on its continental neighbors — including islands offshore — that the world power finds troubling, even threatening.

Even more, imagine how the world power has historically restrained the rising power. Its instrument of restraint is the world's largest navy, because that navy can blockade the rising power's coasts and attack its centers of military power. And deterring this rising power is still informed by the possibility of conflict — for these two powers fought a bitter, three-year war fifty-plus years ago. So imagine the world power's strategic consternation when the rising power creates a super-weapon that can sink its biggest capital ships: the very rock of its great navy is now suddenly at risk. Of course, the world power I describe is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Island¹ (UK, Great Britain, Britain, British), and the rising power the United States of America (US), in 1862.²

The UK and the US in 1862 not only look very much like today's US and the People's Republic of China (PRC, China); they very nearly came to blows in the winter of 1861-62. Moreover these two parties had very much more to fight over. The US was in existential crisis, in the midst of a great civil war, and thus on a strategic hair-trigger. Worse yet, the British Government was actively supplying the most advanced weapons to the rebel cause, and offering Confederate safe havens, like the UK naval base of Bermuda, on close-by, convenient offshore islands.³ Furthermore the Queen's very declaration of UK neutrality served as de facto recognition of the rebel cause. There were still those who remembered the last time the UK and the US fought, in 1812-1815.⁴

There were also big economic fears. The UK needed Confederate cotton for its mills — Britain was the heart of the industrialized world — and the US blockade of the rebel south had cut UK access to its economic lifeblood. A UK counter-blockade would free cotton, and although the US Navy had some grand steam frigates, the Royal Navy had an armada of steam battleships that, as in 1812, could lock-down the New England and Atlantic coasts.

¹ Present formal names are used for all historical names that preceded them.

² See gapminder.org to compare British Empire and American economies from 1800-1860, and how quickly the US was closing the GDP gap. www.bit.ly/Nd0Zbe (accessed March 20 2014).

³ Stephen R. Wise, *Lifeline of the Confederacy: Blockade Running During the Civil War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988). Also, 'Bermuda's British forts from 1609,' is a helpful site illustrating Britain's military response to the American Civil War: <http://www.bermuda-online.org/forts.htm> (accessed March 20 2014).

⁴ *Letters and Papers of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Thomas Byam Martin* (Navy Records Society, 1901) 154. From a letter to the Admiralty in 1840, he wrote, 'In the late American war the heavier arming of the American frigates induced the Admiralty to issue a secret order (no matter how wisely or not) cautioning the captains commanding frigates not to seek action with ships of superior force — that is, our ... ships were not to encounter American frigates ...' How bad memories linger on!

Southern independence would ensue, and the Empire's greatest economic rival cut neatly into more digestible competitors.⁵

Thus when the spark of crisis was struck — called the 'Trent Affair' — why was there no war? Both sides were eager, the outcries were shrill, and war fever ran hot. Admiral Milne put the whole battle fleet in Bermuda. All was in readiness. But nothing happened. Here was a short-fuse, high-explosive international crisis that by all rights should have led to war. Moreover it was a superpower 'scenario' that Chinese and American war-planners would find incredible in today's world. Yet a US-PRC military confrontation is still more likely in future than a UK-US war in 1862.

This historical counterpoint raises two questions: Firstly, why, with everything going for it, was there no war in 1862; and secondly, why, in the absence of any basis for battle, is future conflict between the US and the PRC more likely?

The Great American Super Weapon

There was a naval revolution in the 1850s. After all this was a new age of industrial iron, and the master of its technology was Great Britain. When the French Republic introduced shell guns that could shatter the 'wooden walls' of British battleships, the British started building iron ships, clad in iron armor, bigger than any the world have ever seen, fully twice the size of France's latest 'ironclad'. The first ever built, *H.M.S. Warrior* is still around (pictured below⁶):



And a glorious ship it is: Huge, fast, and beautiful — and around its waist was a broad belt of forged iron plates, 4” thick, backed by 18” of solid oak.

⁵ Amanda Foreman, *A World On Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2012). See her discussion of various motions to recognize the Confederacy early on, and especially, the *de facto* recognition the British Government granted by acknowledging the Confederacy's 'belligerent status' (266).

⁶ Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hms_warrior.jpg (accessed March 20 2014).

However, with the artillery the British stayed with what worked, the strong 68-pounder, and worked as many into its armored broadside as possible (as pictured below⁷).



These large, strong weapons were well-suited for use in battle. Thus the Royal Navy built a grand, revolutionary capital ship with just enough new iron armor to protect it from the naval artillery it preferred to carry.

American inventors Erikson and Dahlgren had a very different idea: they skipped revolution and embraced full-scale transformation. Why carry a 68-pounder as your main weapon, Dahlgren asked, when you could cast something like this instead (picture below⁸).

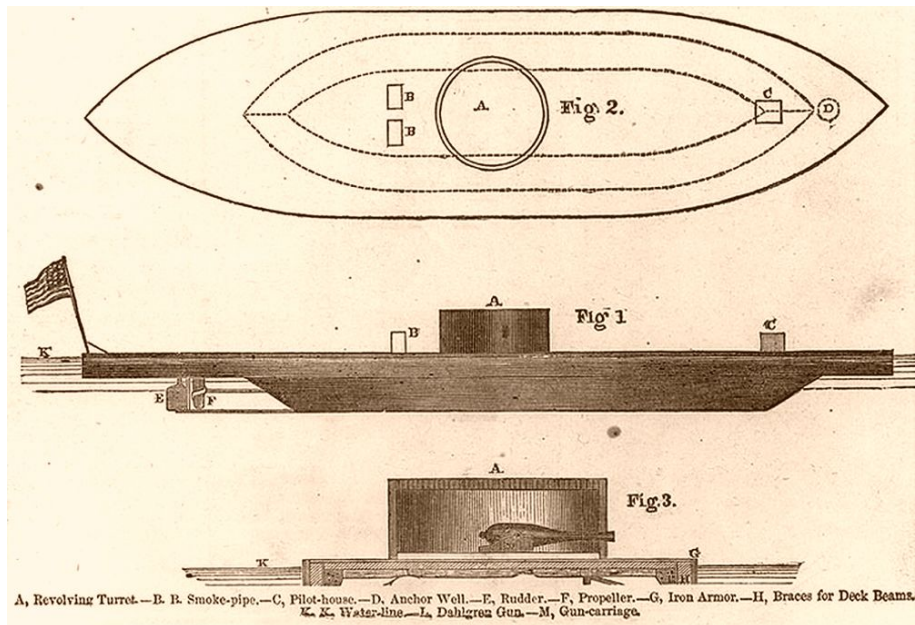


⁷ Wikimedia Commons

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/ba/Warrior_cannon_2.JPG (accessed March 20 2014).

⁸ Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rodman_gun_va.jpg (accessed March 20 2014).

The new American 15” gun did not fire a 68-pound iron ball, but rather a 440-pound solid shot!⁹ Firing tests against Warrior mock-ups literally smashed through thin armor and wood, tearing a great hole in the world’s new cynosure of size, power, and high technology. Going further, Erikson asked, why put such a super weapon in a conventional ship, which after all meant an exposed hull with thin armor? Instead, why not put this gun in a rotating turret, on a low, rafted body impervious to shot and shell? The astounding result is pictured below¹⁰:



These ideas became the *U.S.S. Monitor* in the early spring of 1862, and the UK Admiralty suddenly held its breath. In the space of just months the US created both a super weapon and a working delivery system that could sink the greatest warship in the world. Against new US monitors, British wooden steam battleships were mere sacrificial offerings. But now even their greatest naval creation — the six giant ironclads under construction in 1862 — could not approach a 15” monitor with certainty of survival. Their guns might pound away at the turret of the little ship, like puny Confederate artillery, and achieve but these small dents, identified by red arrow in picture below.¹¹

Today, some British historians burnish the glowing rub of Victorian supremacy, as though historical narrative had anointed this as a rite for all time. Hence the *U.S.S. Monitor* was just a blip, a technology-nothing in the scheme of British sea power destiny.¹² In his superb

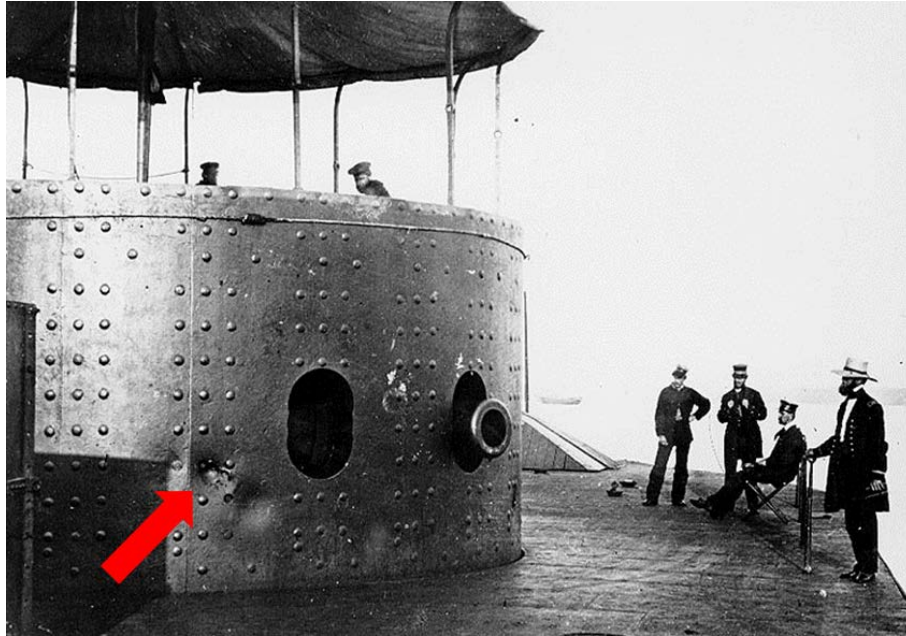
⁹ Spencer Tucker, *Arming the Fleet: U.S. Naval Ordnance in the Muzzle-Loading Era* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989) 220.

¹⁰ Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:USS_Monitor_plans2.jpg (accessed March 20 2014).

¹¹ Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:USS_Monitor_Turret_after_action.jpg (accessed March 20 2014).

¹² See for example, John Beeler, *Birth of the Battleship: British Capital Ship Design, 1870-1881* (London: Chatham, 2001) or more pointedly, various throwaway taunts by Andrew Lambert, as in *Battleships in Transition* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1984) or with Robert Gardiner, *Steam, Steel and Shellfire* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1992). Such condescension toward an earlier America is typically not unsubtle, but neither is it arduous to discern.

reinterpretation however, Howard Fuller cuts this crowing off at the knees.¹³ Fuller starts by reminding us of the sticky persistence of reigning historical narrative. Even modern Americans buy into it — those ‘Mahanian’ who want nothing to do with detestable monitors, who dream only purely of real battleships.



Yet in 1862 the *U.S.S. Monitor* was the US’s savior-ship. Moreover, as Fuller describes, it was explicitly aimed not at the Confederacy, but at the UK itself. The monitor idea told a stunning story like no other ship could, and thus, *this* was the true nightmare of British leaders.¹⁴

For example, Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Milne, commanding the great Royal Naval flotilla in Bermuda (rushed expressly to defend British North America) wrote privately:

‘If these ships of the line now here were cut up into small vessels, they would be of use to me, but except for Demonstrations clear of ... *Monitor*, they are of no use ...’¹⁵

US Minister to the UK, Charles Francis Adams, had an argument with Secretary for War Sir George Cornwall Lewis at a dinner in London in late 1862. As Sir George ranted, red-faced

¹³ Howard Fuller, *Clad in Iron: The American Civil War and the Challenge of British Naval Power* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2008). Reading closely, however, a better subtitle might have been: ‘The Challenge *to* British Naval Power.’

¹⁴ A story of a monitor bludgeoning *H.M.S. Warrior* as imagined by Rado Javor in his picture *Monitor vs Warrior*, <http://radojavor.deviantart.com/art/Monitor-vs-Warrior-166716563> (accessed March 20 2014).

¹⁵ Regis A. Courtemanche, *No Need of Glory: The British Navy in American Waters, 1860-1864* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1977) 153. Kenneth Bourne reminds that the Royal Navy had been here before: ‘... a comparison of the American and British navies ... was read at a meeting of the cabinet ... on 25 July 1826. What they found worrying in this comparison was not so much American superiority in numbers of large frigates as the greater fire power of some of the battleships.’ Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815-1908* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) 26.

to the US's ambassador, it became crystalline clear that it was the *U.S.S Monitor* that stayed the Crown's formal intervention in favor of the Confederacy.¹⁶

British leaders had finally, and wisely, deferred on war with the Union. Three strategic certainties stayed their hand. The first was Canada. An emergency reinforcement of nearly 20,000 redcoats had strengthened defenses during the winter.¹⁷ However, this was Britain's entire strategic reserve, and it could not hope to cope with Union field armies already topping 120,000, and a full Grand Army of the Republic over one million. One officer wrote:

'If the Yankees are worth their salt, they will at once make peace with the South and pour 100,000 men into Canada where they can easily compensate themselves for their losses of the Confederate states, and England be perfectly unable to prevent it. ... I cannot see how we are to maintain our position in Canada this winter.'¹⁸

Then there was the British economy. It might get through a couple years of cotton shortages, but growing in Egypt might soon take up the slack, but it was a sure bet that in war, the lifeblood of Empire — its merchant marine — would be wiped out. The sleek raiders Britain had built for the Confederacy were already doing just that to the Yankee merchant fleet — and they had only given the rebels a handful, a clutch of three. The Union Navy in contrast had 60 steam cruisers built and building.¹⁹

Nevertheless, lastly it was the *U.S.S. Monitor* that decisively quashed the prospect of war. Suddenly Britain had too much to lose — Canada, and thus its empire in fact — if it chose to attack the Union coast and its cities. It was not worth it. The US had found a way to deter the world power, and thus save the very national enterprise for which it fought.

Many say China has developed a super-weapon in the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile. Like the *U.S.S. Monitor* and its giant guns, the new Chinese weapon can allegedly attack a US capital ship — the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier — hundreds of miles out to sea. American naval writers especially see a direct threat both to US possessions in East Asia and the US's ability to defend its allies, huddling anxiously around China's continental rimland.

Yet there is no crisis presently like that historically between Britain and the US in 1861-62. US-PRC economic relations, like Britain and the US in the 1850s, are deeply intertwined. In the absence of crisis, why are China's new weapons not serving, like the *U.S.S. Monitor*, to help deter crisis and the use of force in East Asia?

The big difference between now and then is in how the exercise of power is understood by Americans and Chinese, and how this exercise of power is understood in the dynamics of today's world situation. These understandings come out in ten ways, and each suggest the deeper considerations existing today make conflict between the US and the PRC more likely

¹⁶ Howard Fuller, *Clad in Iron*, xxiii.

¹⁷ *New York Times*, 'British Reinforcements in Canada,' July 10, 1861, <http://www.nytimes.com/1861/07/10/news/british-reinforcements-in-canada.html> (accessed March 20 2014).

¹⁸ Lieutenant G.J. Wolseley to Major Biddulph, December 12, 1861, cited in Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire*, 184.

¹⁹ Richard Basoco and William E. Georhegan, 'A British View of the Union Navy, 1864,' *American Neptune*, 27 (January 1967), 30-45.

than between Britain and the US 150 years ago. These reasons explain why war between Britain and the US was not wanted, and because it was not wanted, why it did not happen. In contrast, stacked like historical cordwood, these reasons are also ten darker indicators and possibilities about why war might seem attractive to the US and PRC, and why, therefore, it just might eventuate.

1. There was no narrative of war with the US among British elites. Further, there was not a popular press playing out war stories about fighting Americans. This is not the case today. The narrative is strong like a drumbeat, and it is not uncommon to see books in the popular press with titles such as *America's Coming War with China*.²⁰ War has not only been imagined, it has also been dramatically framed. In a score of breathless — ‘what would war look like’ — media narratives, it has already been imagined and predicted as a real prospect. For their parts, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) are attached to the deep narrative of breaking China out of its modern-era legacy of servitude — to not simply overturn the century of Chinese shame and degradation — but ring in a restoration of Chinese greatness.

2. The British Empire was acutely aware of its military and strategic limits. The US should be equally circumspect and cautious. The US is currently concluding two costly wars. Like Britain expending itself in the 1850s in the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny, US adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan suggest that re-entering conflict so soon would not be in the US's best interests.²¹ Yet unlike Victorian Britain, which only responded episodically to foreign naval challenge, the US's Defense World represents a giant and permanent war establishment deeply invested in making any military threat a productive basis for its own budgets and way of life going forward, year-after-year. Moreover, just such a grand enterprise (to Chinese military development and its threat) has already been framed as just such a productive story called ‘Air-Sea Battle’. The UK Admiralty had no such story in 1862 — *nor did it want one*. It would be another decade before Britain had the world-beating naval package it needed — and by then the US naval threat was gratefully gone.²² The US Defense World may be as acutely aware of limits as its Victorian antecedents, but it still believes that a good, steady threat will help make those limits recede. Thus by explicitly identifying East Asia as the strategic centerpiece of US national security attention, the US government has in effect officially announced the threat well in advance of any dangerous demonstration.

²⁰ See Amazon.com http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_ss_i_0_12?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=coming+war+with+china&srefix=coming+war+w%2Cstripbooks%2C161 (accessed March 20 2014).

²¹ The Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny were two very complex, expeditionary, major regional contingencies for Britain, just as challenging, and as nearly simultaneous, and America's adventures in Afghanistan and Mesopotamia.

²² Oscar Parkes, *British Battleships* (London: Seeley Service, 1956). Also see, Admiral G.A. Ballard, *The Black Battlefleet* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1980). Both Parkes and Ballard represented the next British naval generation after the time of the American Civil War, and yet while Parkes highlights with honesty the huge impact of the American monitors on British naval architecture and strategic thinking (especially when it comes to technology leaps and potential fleet rivals), Ballard steadfastly fluffs his bunk in the late Victorian picture-perfect tense of a Royal Navy *Candide*, where all things British are ‘the best of, the best of all possible worlds.’

3. The British Empire was acutely aware of the fragilities of its global economy. War with the US, like the US's own potential future war with the PRC, could be an economy-collapsing event. The loss of 'King Cotton' was a powerful warning to refrain from going all-out to pressure the Union. The Federal's blockade of the Confederacy threatened to sink the fiber lifeblood of the British economy. It took two years to relocate cotton production to the safety of its own imperial sphere in Egypt, but the height of UK-US crisis was also the height of hysteria in Britain over the loss of King Cotton. One editorial wiled that 'England must break the blockade, or her millions must starve'.²³ Likewise, people today remember the financial panic in autumn 2008 that nearly sank the global economy. Therefore, when it comes to avoiding war, the strongest single tie between Victorian Britain historically and the US today is the fear of economic implosion.²⁴

4. There was no investment in an adversarial UK-US strategic relationship. The outbreak of civil war did highlight political fissures, with landowning Tories tending to side with the South and Midlands mill men with the North. However, there was never anything like the idea of Britain's world position being tied to a long-term enemy.²⁵ In contrast, the Cold War framed a US strategic paradigm so comfortable to the national psyche and so necessary to the maintenance of a giant, permanent war establishment, that since the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) there has been a relentless search for substitutes, from Japan in the late 1980s to the Republic of Iran and then 'Radical Islam' and now, perhaps Russia again — but China has consistently found itself at the center of post-Cold War conflict narratives. There is a political-cultural constituency for a big enemy absent from mid-Victorian Britain.

Moreover, the US is at the mercy of anxious allies ringing the PRC. These allies — including former enemies like the Socialist Republic of Vietnam — were enticed and suborned by the US during an era where the US's obsessive need was the containment of Mao's PRC, and where the forging of an iron ring around communist China was its only goal. Now the US citizen must live with what the US has wrought.²⁶ Yet, on their own, US political and

²³ Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire*, 161-162. Also, see Frank Lawrence Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

²⁴ Both the US today and Great Britain in the 1860s arguably share a similar deep conservatism of worldview, seeking above all to maintain their place in world affairs, and their stability and wealth at home. Central to this was a national collective identity invested in the person of the monarch. In the case of Britain, it was an institution of hereditary and dynastic kingship; in America, it remains still an elected, hallowed, and sacred kinship. Both institutions speak to national societies looking to their leaderships to avoid big crisis and sustain a longstanding way of life. This conservatism of identity represents a powerful brake and restraint.

²⁵ Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire* and Howard Fuller, *Clad in Iron* — In both of these breakthrough studies, it is impossible to find a characterization among either British or Americans of each other as an 'enemy.' A potential threat, surely, under circumstantial duress, but a threat that is not an enemy is also not truly a threat, without an uncommon loss of common sense. Do such normative constraints apply to the US and China?

²⁶ Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) and also, Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire, China and the World Since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); plus *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963 Cold War International* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

military constituencies desire a threat, and yearn still more for the comfort and assurance — as in the Cold War — that ‘The Threat’ has offered US societies of war since 1940.

5. The US giant gun monitor created a bounded, limited strategic liability for the UK. To meet the new weapon in battle, the Royal Navy would have to closely invest US ports; in other words, existentially threaten US economic life. Beyond this narrow offshore realm, US monitors posed absolutely zero threat to British economic or strategic interests.²⁷ Today’s strategic liability in contrast is dangerously expansive. Long-range, targetable intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM) put US forces and sovereign interests at risk throughout the Western Pacific.²⁸ Moreover, the only path to effectively nullify the threat of Chinese IRBMs is to incapacitate the PLA’s command, control, communication, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities, which amounts to a first strike on the PRC’s strategic command and control. Inasmuch as the network for IRBMs is the same network for nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), such a strike takes on potentially apocalyptic overtones.

6. The Union Navy was lucky to steal a technology march on the World Navy — whose utility lasted about decade (but certainly when most needed, during the Civil War). By the early 1870s, the Royal Navy once again had a world-beating capital ship package that restored strategic stability.²⁹ Even if the US had continued to develop its monitor designs in the 1870s, they would have remained in the operational framework of coastal defense and limited liability.³⁰ Today is a contrast in technology instability. The US, like Victorian Britain, has invested the balance of its naval power in very large capital platforms. These ships are already acutely vulnerable to submarines and ballistic missiles — and this vulnerability is only likely to increase over time. There is no Victorian-era design solution that will save the US Navy aircraft carrier. Instead, the US has chosen to shift — in Air-Sea Battle — to command and control network dominance that only works if the enemy network is crippled first.

War that depends on network survival creates huge incentives to first strike.³¹ In other words, technology today is advancing just as fast as the 1860s, but in ways that do not favor the US unless the US’s ‘tip of the spear’ embraces, *de facto*, an early, prompt, all-out first-strike strategy. In contrast, the PRC exhibits an emerging power to strike and achieve its goals through force, while the US’s power to forestall such an attack declines. This shift only increases the incentive of the PLA to believe that its force represents an open-ended coercive

²⁷ Howard Fuller, *Clad in Iron*, 82, 126, 139, 146, 157-159, 285.

²⁸ National Air and Space Intelligence Center, *Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat*, 2013, <http://www.afisr.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-130710-054.pdf> (accessed March 20 2014).

²⁹ See the next-gen commentaries of Oscar Parkes and G.A. Ballard, but also contemporary commentary in *The United Service Magazine, Naval and Military Journal*, Hurst and Blackett.

³⁰ Norman Friedman, *US Battleships: An Illustrated Design History* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1996) 405-411.

³¹ See for example, David Gomber, Terrence Kelly, ‘Escalation Cause: How the Pentagon’s New Strategy could Trigger War with China,’ *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2013; William Yale, ‘Air-Sea Battle: A Dangerous, Unaffordable Threat,’ *The Diplomat*, November 09, 2013; T.X. Hammes, ‘Sorry, AirSea Battle Is No Strategy,’ *The National Interest*, August 07, 2013.

utility, and that this utility will in itself inoculate local PLA/PLAN aggression from any substantive US response.

7. The US, once legally reunited, turned inward. It simply ceased to be a UK competitor — except economically, and being an essentially demilitarized economic giant only helped to promote strategic amity. Again, the opposite attains between the US and the PRC today. In the 1870s there were still a number of UK strategic interests in the Americas, including Canada, Bermuda, the integrity of Cuba and Mexico, and others.³² However, post-civil war the US, once overly aggressive toward its neighbors, was taking some historical time-off.

The PRC, however, has aggressively pursued its near-sea claims, acting badly against the non-*Han* it rules, and declaring that dispute resolution can come only through submission. To a US war establishment, emotionally attuned to long-term confrontation, the dynamic looks much like a partnership for conflict. Moreover, unlike the technology shift in the 1860s that powerfully favored UK industrial infrastructure over the US, technology progress today does not inherently favor the US. In fact, such progress suggests a long-term paradigm in which civilian high-tech shifts offer rapid and effective military conversion, canonically outstripping technology improvements classically funded within the purely government investment sphere.³³

8. European events after the American Civil War reclaimed the UK's attention — diverting its back to the other side of the Atlantic. The *Risorgimento* and the Franco-Prussian War, and the resurgence of Russia against Turkey, all added up to a renewed focus on European strategic affairs. Britain, indeed, 'pivoted' back to the Continent.³⁴ But today the US is pivoting away from 30 years of strategic obsession with the Middle East, and its new continental adversary-focus is the PRC.

9. The British Empire in the 1860s was more exposed to lethal attack. Often obscured, perhaps in remembering the British Empire at its late-Victorian apogee, is the reality that the UK was both less rooted in global consciousness in the 1860s, and also uniquely vulnerable to US arms. Canada, not India, was the lynchpin of empire in British identity in the mid Victorian era. Canada was geographically huge, and in an age where the dominance of maps in collective national imagination was hitting schoolrooms for the first time, Canada told a special visual, scarlet/crimson story. This was the story of a Britain (for the first time in centuries) safe in the Atlantic, because of Canada. Moreover, Canada was cartographically gigantic in the visually-symbolic map-medium of the Mercator projection.

Canada was huge, hence Britain was huge, and hence the Empire was huge.³⁵ Yet it was instantly at risk in the winter of 1861. In 1861, in an emerging British imperial imagination

³² See 'Bermuda's British Forts from 1609,' <http://www.bermuda-online.org/forts.htm> (accessed March 20 2014).

³³ It is uncertain as to whether or not the great achievement of the creation of a mainly American-driven global network will translate into comparable strategic superiority for US military dominance in the world network we made.

³⁴ See for example, Peter Marsh's *Bargaining on Europe: Britain and the First Common Market, 1860-1892*, (New haven; London: Yale University Press, 1999).

³⁵ No one has yet remarked on how the British Empire benefitted from the overwhelming acceptance of the Mercator world projection in modernity. Hence a cartographic artifact

(the new artifact of identity), Canada was suddenly the desideratum — *the thing most wanted*. Today we talk with empty words of ‘strategic depth’. Though without Canada, Britain — in its precious maps, in its imperial imagination, in its own identity — was finished. Britain’s sea power dominance in modernity has been vested in ownership of the North Atlantic. That is what ‘strategic depth’ really means. Yet Canada was also now, suddenly, a strategic albatross, as the brittleness of its defenses in the winter of 1861 were starkly exposed. Limiting risk was the order of the day. In contrast, the US’s East Asia partners are traditionally feisty ‘tigers’ primed to fight. The risk here is not their defense, but getting sucked into fights they start.

10. British recognition of the Confederate States of America would have doomed Lincoln — and the Federal’s strategic path to reunification. Secretary of War Seward wrote to Adams during the crisis: ‘British recognition would be British intervention, to create within our territory a hostile state by overthrowing this Republic itself.’ Conversely, the United Kingdom’s world position — and its authority as international interlocutor — had an Atlantic vulnerability. As Seward continued in his letter, he warned Adams that British intervention meant a world war ‘between the European and the American branches of the British race.’³⁶

Hence for all these reasons, war with the US would have put the British Empire at risk. Moreover, enjoining such risk for a weak and thin *casus belli* would have further compromised world esteem. Both parties clearly understood what war would mean — and equally, both clearly understood how very little there was to gain, and also, just how much might be lost in a third Anglo-American war.

A Second Sino-American War?

Correspondingly, consider the consequences of a second Sino-American war (1950-53 being the first).³⁷ Consider a Chinese economic implosion following regime collapse; think of a US hit by homeland strikes that cripple its critical infrastructure, economy, and its world position. To be clear, the risk of two great civilizations immobilizing themselves and in the bargain, bringing down the entire global enterprise for all humanity: Seward’s warning times two.

Is this too much to bear or too unlikely? The answer lies in testing the mental compass of today’s US and PRC war-planners. In stark contrast to UK and US calculations in the 1860s, the US and the PRC today seem to embrace some strangely opposed war postulates — *both breathtakingly existential and yet also complacent*. Here, this paper considers three of these: *conflict will not be that bad; of course it will be limited; and it will be over when we have a winner*.

suiting sea navigators became a superb propaganda tool for the emerging Victorian empire, in which Canada became the Red anchor of a world-spanning enterprise, and big, big, big: <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/images2/pinkbitstrade.jpg> (accessed March 20 2014). Here is a Civil War era version: http://www.westga.edu/~mdenie/British_empire_Color.jpg (accessed March 20 2014).

³⁶ Howard Fuller, *Clad in Iron*, 56.

³⁷ William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

The conflict will not be that bad

Moreover, it will be a relatively ‘clean’ conflict. It is at sea after all, meaning that there will most likely be no civilian collateral damage. It is more like violent sport, with rules-of-the-game. Bob Kaplan is the strategic cheerleader of such reassurance:

‘Military engagements on land and at sea are vastly different, with major implications for the grand strategies needed to win — or avoid — them. Those on land enmesh civilian populations, in effect making human rights a signal element of war studies. Those at sea approach conflict as a clinical and technocratic affair, in effect reducing war to math...’³⁸

Of course it will be limited

The conflict will be merely about some ocean claims, after all. These are status disputes. If they get out of hand, they get out of hand. Even Taiwan, a more existential enterprise, is not inherently all-or-nothing. There is in all these potential contretemps a see-the-light moment when everyone naturally pulls back.

It will be over when we have a winner

The very nature of modern naval combat — or even a truism for sea fights from the beginning — is that the side first to strike has the advantage, that any battle at sea lends itself to a one-sided decision, and that, hence when one side proves itself the victor, the other side will politely sue for peace.

Kaplan is especially popular among Washington elites and military audiences, and here his breezy complacency has suggestive historical antecedents. In the 1920s, for example, Hector Bywater created a literary-strategic sensation with his thrillers about Japanese-American naval war, like *The Great Pacific War*.³⁹

The problem with existential strategic complacency is that we should know too much to permit it. Even from our own recent history, both Americans and Chinese should know that even titular limited wars bog down, fear of escalation comes to dominate all else, and they take forever to terminate. This in fact happened the very last time that the US and PRC fought — toe-to-toe — 60 years ago in Korea.⁴⁰ We should know better than to reward the political fantasy of extravagant military enterprises that are really tuned to needy (or even desperate) domestic audiences.⁴¹

Chinese notions of war today have been deeply steeped over the decades in a romanticizing of national struggle and subsequent realization and transcendence in battle. Chinese citizens

³⁸ Robert Kaplan, ‘How We Would Fight China,’ *The Atlantic*, June 2005, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/06/how-we-would-fight-china/303959/> (accessed March 20 2014).

³⁹ Hector Charles Bywater, *The Great Pacific War: A History of the American-Japanese Campaign of 1931-33*, (London: Constable, 1925).

⁴⁰ William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*.

⁴¹ See for example, Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao’s Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

are reminded daily and constantly on State TV, for example, of the righteous glory that abides in slaughtering the Japanese invader.⁴² Is it not possible, then, that this stream of mythopoeic incitement helps sustain nationalist anger against Japan today? American ‘policymakers’ should be wary when such entrenched narratives — so easily glorifying war — seriously inflect a nation’s conversation on its future purpose and identity.

The British and the Americans were so blessed that, in a wrenching time of civil war, both nations brooked no such titillating illusions. They too had fought a long, fruitless war that soured and got out of hand 50 years before (1812-1815) — and yet perhaps they learned innately from the experience. Surely Chinese and Americans must remember the Korean War in which hundreds of thousands died. There were shining, transient moments of glory for each, but then each comedown also came close to national catastrophe.

Hence what else might account for the confrontational state-of-mind displayed by both the Chinese and the Americans? I suggest that it is a latter-day consequence of a mirrored mindset, which itself is the product of a convenient, unconfessed suspension of disbelief: of the disbelief, specifically, that aggressive war planning leads to war. Military and policy elites insist that planning is only prudent, and moreover, that the very seriousness of its nature makes war planning a deterrent to war.

However, in flagrant contradiction to what each declares solemnly as their own core belief — that preparing for war is an unfortunate necessity, yet the only way to prevent it — PLA/PLAN and US Navy/US Air (USN/USAF) force planners today openly declare in their hearts that war might well come — that it is in fact in our future — and that planning is truth, and the needed preparation that gives us an edge when the day comes.⁴³

Nonetheless going one more level down, this suspension of disbelief itself is a fantasy-construct. At the existential kernel-heart-of-the-core, PRC and US military elites believe the opposite: *that war simply cannot happen here* — because the PRC-US relationship really represents a fundamentally safe environment. But what, exactly, makes it safe?

The reified narrative we take from the Cold War is that nuclear war could never really have happened. Since at the level that counted the Cold War was really a safe environment, the grand military enterprises of both USSR and US were all about pitching big defense budgets. Call this the atomic anointment, and it may be working its residual touch more strongly today. That is because, having left the bad old Cold War days behind, neither Americans nor Chinese (nor anybody else) really believe a lowly conflict might ever escalate out of hand.

⁴² From high-cinema like Chuan Lu’s *City of Life and Death* (2009), to more demotic efforts like Mu Chu and Jackie Chan’s *Eagle Shadow Fist*, to straight-out *nationalismo*, like Zhu Hai Qiang’s 30-episode ‘Chinese Brother Company’ (2008), or Feng Xiaogang’s wrenching ‘Back to 1942’ (2012), the store of suffering, sacrifice, reprisal, and retribution is a thirst no draught can quench.

⁴³ A mutual dark metaphor has its trumpet call right here — you could call it a codependent war-symbiosis. Just look how Qiao Lang and Wang Xiangsui’s intentional *Bad Boy 1999* book is marketed on Amazon as *Unrestricted Warfare: China’s Master Plan to Destroy America*, and no one calls them on this canard:

http://www.amazon.com/Unrestricted-Warfare-Chinas-Destroy-America/dp/0971680728/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1388282723&sr=1-1&keywords=unrestricted+warfare (accessed March 20 2014).

Their collective unconscious assures them: this is not the *First Age* — we are beyond that. Hence, USN/USAF staffs feel wholly at home with Air-Sea Battle. It works just like the Cold War, and if they work it right, it works like a charm, or fetish, because that is what war with China has become.

Congruently, for the PLA/PLAN, the lesson garnered from the Cold War (*a lá* Quemoy and Matsu⁴⁴) is that little tiffs and contretemps are just part of the bigger budget/status pitch — so why not (in a safe environment) take things at least to 1958 levels? PLA/PLAN and USN/USAF planners enjoy the prospect of war because they simply believe it cannot happen — not as ‘real war’, at least. Perhaps a series of media-dramatic face-offs or confrontations, but that these will remain necessarily and absolutely self-limiting: that there are ironclad and unspoken limits on destructiveness, escalation, and duration.

Therefore, in complete contrast to the factors that restrained both UK and US leaders in the 1860s, there is among PRC and US military elites today an addiction to the exercise of aggressive temptation (and this is perhaps even more true for some of the US’s ‘Tigers’). This is a strategically unhealthy mutual state of mind. It represents a strategic sensibility increasingly eager to abuse whatever stability exists in the fragile equipoise of the current US-PRC relationship. Why do US and PRC military planners assume they can abuse it? Do they assume that it is so strong that its aggressive milking can productively serve the domestic agendas of the PLA/PLAN and the USN/USAF without rupture, forever? Simply, US and PRC military elites believe that stability can never be ruptured, so its limits can be pushed without risk. In that sense, stability is comparable to a goose that lays golden eggs, and a gift that keeps on giving.

However, in the last month a terrible wrinkle has emerged over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Suddenly, comparisons to a US-China naval stand-off have shifted to a more troubling confrontation between China and Japan, between two enmities so unrequited that no battle outcome can wipe away their shared stain.

After 1860, the modalities of both conflict and conciliation were all about the US and the British Empire — *only*. But what if Britain had invested in a longstanding ally and blood brother here in the New World — which it had also irrevocably pledged to defend like a fraternity brother? And what if this New World country got into an existential scrap with the US?

This is the US’ ‘rogue variable’ today, and it takes us out of the comfort zone of easy and controlled, bilateral amity-enmity. Unlike Great Britain and America in 1861, the US appears suddenly out of control. When viewed in the light of history, however, it is clear that the US was even more out of control of all things in April 1861. The Confederacy represented an agency of destruction and danger far worse than a conflict between Japan and China today. Worse yet, the Confederacy was an identity that Britons might have sided with against the US, which is to say, what was left of the US. From this perspective, today’s territorial disputes between Japan and China should not encumber the US so much.

History teaches that, even when confronted with a situation far worse than anything the US is facing today with tremulous allies and 3rd parties in East Asia, British and Americans figured out how not to go to war after December 1861. Do Chinese and Americans know how to do the same today?

⁴⁴ Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*.