German History Vol. 43, No. 2, pp. 161–180

A Farewell to the Thucydides Trap: The 'Anglo-German Antagonism' as History and International Relations Paradigm*

Matthew P. Fitzpatrick

Introduction

In 1912, looking back on the Agadir crisis, the American naval officer and noted historian French Ensor Chadwick summarized the contemporary situation in Europe:

> We see the two foremost nations of Europe, the two most highly civilised nations of the world, spending vast sums; the one striving to overtake, the other striving to preserve, supremacy in maritime power. Can anyone say that the game of Morocco was worth the candle? […] Is England to be destroyed by Germany, or Germany to be destroyed by England, or France to disappear as France because the special trader wants an extension of his field? […] It would seem that the words *Delenda est Cartago* [*sic*] must be in the hearts of many, both German and English. But why this feeling? The Englishman cannot hate the German *per se*, nor the German the Englishman to the extent of desiring one to annihilate the other. There must be some deep and powerful reason which does not appear upon the surface […] This reason is in that ever most potent cause of international dissension—trade jealousy.[1]

Chadwick's assertion—that global trade and the zero-sum competitive nature of pre-1914 imperial globalization had led to a poisoning of Anglo-German relations—has loomed large in historiography ever since the First World War. Echoing sentiments perhaps most famously outlined in the British Foreign Office memorandum penned by Eyre Crowe in 1907, some historians have argued that the conduct of the two powers during several international crises supports this antagonism paradigm.[2] Whether recounting the two Moroccan crises, the scramble for Africa, the Samoan tangle, differences over the Boer War, competition in East Asia or naval rivalry in the North Sea, the story is ostensibly always the same: a threatening Germany forcing concession after concession from a reluctant Britain.

* This research has been enabled by an Australian Research Future Fellowship (FT210100448 – Strategic Friendship: Anglo-German Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region). Thanks also to Flinders University for assisting me in hosting the 2023 conference 'Best of Enemies? Anglo-German Relations and Empire'. This article and those in the rest of this Special Issue are the product of that conference. They should be read together with a similarly themed Special Issue of the journal *Australian Historical Studies* (forthcoming as 56, 4 [2025]), which looks at similar questions of Anglo-German relations through the lens of Australasia and the Pacific. Special thanks to Richard Scully for reading and commenting on an earlier draft and to Jan Rüger for his important advice regarding the subject matter of this paper. Neither is responsible for the views expressed here.

[1] F. E. Chadwick, 'The Anglo-German Tension and a Solution', *American Journal of International Law*, 6, 3 (1912), pp. 601–13, here pp. 607–8.

[2] E. Crowe, 'Appendix A: Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany' [1 Jan. 1907], in G. P. Gooch and H. Temperley (eds), *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, vol. 3: *The Testing of the Entente, 1904–6* (London, 1928), pp. 397–420, here pp. 402–20.

 https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghaf028
Advance Access publication 26 June 2025

This binary picture of great-power antagonism is, as Thomas Sanderson argued in his critique of Crowe's memorandum, only a portion of the picture.[3] While in some imperial sites intense economic (and associated geopolitical) competition seemed to point ineluctably towards future conflict, elsewhere commercial and imperial imperatives dictated that Britain, Germany and their respective subjects work closely together. Under the veneer of what some have assumed was enduring great-power rivalry lay a foundation of common, or at least overlapping, trans-imperial purpose and cooperation.

Examples of Anglo-German amity abound. As late as the end of 1914, for example, with the First World War well underway, the chairman of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), Charles Addis, came under enormous pressure from his compatriots to disassociate himself from his German colleagues in the Deutsche Bank, colleagues with whom he had enjoyed an indispensable and highly profitable decades-long partnership in North Asia. Their cooperation had seen the two banks work closely with the British and German Foreign Offices to bring the commanding heights of the Chinese economy under joint Anglo-German control, a process complicated only by the meddling of rivals such as France, Russia, Japan and the United States, who saw themselves as being excluded in the 'financial battle for Peking' by the lockstep actions of the Anglo-German consortium.[4] As late as the first week of January 1915, Addis replied to his critics, warning,

> It may be urged that the economic reasons in favour of the retention of German firms must bend to the political reasons for wiping them out. Personally, I do not believe it is a good policy to crush Germany […] Our quarrel is with the German government, not with the German people. Our aim is to destroy German militarism, not to prey on private property. When the war is over, we will shake hands and be friends again. Do not let us do anything now to make a rapprochement more difficult hereafter.[5]

A few months prior, Governor Erich Schultz had made a similarly clear-eyed assessment of the still-warm relations between German and British subjects in German Samoa after more than a decade of colonial cooperation there. Although the war was already in full swing in Europe, Schultz refused to intern, restrict or even disarm British subjects living in the colony. When the New Zealanders under Colonel Robert Logan came to occupy Samoa, those same British colonists, led by their acting vice consul, Thomas Trood, repaid the governor's wartime solidarity by signing a petition that spelled out the extent to which they 'fully appreciated the kindness shown' to them 'by Dr Schultz and the German officials and residents in Samoa since the war was announced'. They hoped, the petition continued, 'that in the event of a change of flags His Excellency Dr Schultz and the German residents will meet with the same consideration that we received'.[6] This request from the colony's British subjects was ignored, however, by the

[3] T. Sanderson, 'Appendix B: Memorandum by Lord Sanderson' [21 Feb. 1907], in Gooch and Temperley, *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, vol. 3, pp. 420–33.

[4] A. Skřivan and A. Skřivan, 'The Financial Battle for Beijing: The Great Powers and Loans to China, 1895–1898', *Historian*, 79, 3 (2017), pp. 476–503; M. P. Fitzpatrick, 'Globalisation or Empire? Revolution, the State and the Geopolitics of Chinese Debt, 1895–1914', *Enterprise & Society* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2024.21; G. Moazzin, 'Networks of Capital: German Bankers and the Financial Internationalisation of China (1885–1919)', *Enterprise & Society*, 20, 4 (2019), pp. 796–808.

[5] Addis to Hillier, 4 Jan. 1915, in HSBC Archive HQ HSBCK 0003 Letters (unnumbered).

[6] Petition, 29 Aug. 1914, signed by Thomas Trood and ninety-two others, Bundesarchiv Berlin, R1001/2627, 'Correspondence Relating to the Occupation of German Samoa by An Expeditionary Force from New Zealand', p. 64.

commander of New Zealand's ramshackle occupying force, with a wave of internments of prominent German subjects following.

I. New Approaches

These anecdotes may well be simply that, exceptions that prove the structural rule of wartime hatred built upon long-term prewar enmity. Or they may point to the differences between the political friction of European metropoles and the context-bound cooperation of the 'men on the spot' that Michael Fröhlich investigated thirty-five years ago in his study of Anglo-German relations in Africa.[7] Alternatively, these instances of imperial amity may suggest that there are complexities and contradictions in Anglo-German relations prior to 1914 that complicate Paul Kennedy's now more than 40-year-old schema that posited the centrality of 'Anglo-German antagonism' to the causes of the general European war of 1914 to 1918.[8] Indeed, the examples cited above—as well as others like them discussed in the articles in this Special Issue that highlight relations far from the heart of Europe—might well offer new answers to old but still-pressing questions related to the central place of trans-imperial relations in global commerce and imperial diplomacy prior to the First World War.

The contributions to this Special Issue, focused primarily on Anglo-German relations in Africa and Asia, illustrate the extent to which metropolitan officials and British and German subjects outside Europe were forced to navigate a complex course between cooperation and competition. In the domain of high politics, relations between the two powers were characterized, these articles show, by pragmatism, flexibility and context-specific considerations of commerce and security. These imperatives are closely examined in this issue by Julius Becker, whose article focuses on the North Asian context, and by Jakob Zollmann, who examines how a long-standing border dispute in Southern Africa was negotiated by the two powers. Closer to the lived experience of the colonial frontier, both Felicity Jensz and Iris Leung show how relations between German missionaries working in British colonial spaces and the British authorities administering these colonies remained amicable and mutually beneficial at the grass-roots level, even when their colonizing aims differed, right up until the First World War.[9]

As Sarah Panzer's discussion of Japanese leaders such as Katō Takaaki and Zollmann's treatment of Hendrik Witbooi also make clear, these European interactions were frequently shaped by the agency of extra-European peoples and nations, including the colonized, who expressed and followed their own preferences and priorities in their dealings with large foreign imperial powers. So too, in the European metropoles themselves, British and German governments and their respective Foreign Offices could not operate without addressing the pressures of public and political opinion. In this regard,

[7] M. Fröhlich, *Von Konfrontation zur Koexistenz: die deutsch-englischen Kolonialbeziehungen in Afrika zwischen 1884 und 1914* (Bochum, 1990).

[8] P. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London, 1980). The most detailed and wide-ranging historiographical assessment of the fate of this paradigm and its contribution to the broader *Sonderweg* debate remains J. Rüger, 'Revisiting the Anglo-German Antagonism', *Journal of Modern History*, 83, 3 (2011), pp. 579–617.

[9] On the relationship between missionary and secular colonizing endeavours, see J. Best, *Heavenly Fatherland: German Missionary Culture and Globalization in the Age of Empire* (Toronto, 2020).

Andrew Bonnell's treatment of the German Social Democratic Party demonstrates how the party sought to position itself in response to British colonialism. He highlights the ambivalences of a party that contained both influential revisionists, who saw colonialism as serving the imperatives of world historical progress, and a majority who were keen to critique the imperial violence of Britain out of a sense of fraternal affiliation with the Boer population but did not want to be seen to make common cause with German nationalists also opposing Britain's war.

Together, these articles underline the extent to which Kennedy's superseded but stubbornly influential antagonism paradigm requires close re-examination and, arguably, robust negation, as one-sided (in its ascription of colonial crises solely to German actions), teleologically flawed (in its orientation towards explaining German guilt for the outbreak of the First World War) and misleading in its conclusions—not least because of the way in which the antagonism paradigm has influenced political science and international relations, crowding out more complex ways of viewing causality and the imperial prehistory of the First World War.

Just as progress has been made by historians such as Christopher Clark and William Mulligan in complicating earlier monocausal explanations of the origins of the First World War, so too the Anglo-German antagonism should be reappraised for its suitability as an analytical paradigm, in particular with due consideration given to its global dimension.[10] Echoing Dominik Geppert and Robert Gerwarth's doubts regarding the 'traditional scholarly focus on the rise of the Anglo-German antagonism' prior to 1914 and sharing their scepticism about 'a clash of cultures', the articles in this Special Issue offer a sense of the finer grain of the relational ambivalence at the heart of Anglo-German history, particularly in the colonial context.[11] The articles here look beyond Europe for a history that, as many historians have suggested, vacillated between conflict and cooperation, 'appropriation and resistance', 'entanglement and antagonism'.[12] Without airbrushing the real points of contention between the two powers, the articles in this collection affirm John M. Mackenzie's insight that 'imperialism on the ground was often more cooperative than competitive'.[13] They offer further evidence of Ulrike Lindner's view that 'global interconnectedness always functioned in parallel to nationalist distinctions' and that by the beginning of the First World War, 'a common imperial project' was just as evident as antipathy.[14] In the main, the following articles concur with Fröhlich's assessment that 'overseas rivalry at no point took on such an intensity as to have inflicted irreparable damage to bilateral relations'.[15]

[10] C. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012); W. Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2017).

[11] D. Geppert and R. Gerwarth, 'Introduction', in D. Geppert and R. Gerwarth (eds), *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain: Essays on Cultural Affinity* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 1–13, here p. 3.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 13; R. Muhs, J. Paulmann and W. Steinmetz (eds), *Aneignung und Abwehr: interkultureller Transfer zwischen Deutschland und Großbritannien im 19. Jahrhundert* (Bodenheim, 1998); Rüger, 'Revisiting the Anglo-German Antagonism', pp. 581–5.

[13] J. M. Mackenzie, '"Mutual Goodwill and Admiration" or "Jealous Ill-Will"? Empire and Popular Culture', in Geppert and Gerwarth, *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain*, pp. 91–113, here p. 93.

[14] U. Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen: Deutschland und Großbritannien als Imperialmächte in Afrika 1880–1914* (Frankfurt/Main, 2011), pp. 10–11.

[15] Fröhlich, *Von Konfrontation zur Koexistenz*, p. 311.

II. The Antagonism Paradigm

The intricacies of Kennedy's thesis, as fleshed out in his still-influential *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (1980), do not require extensive rehearsal here. At heart his book argued that the rise of Germany was simply incompatible with the continued global hegemony of Britain. Like Chadwick, Kennedy believed that 'the most profound cause' of this great-power estrangement 'was *economic*'.[16] Germany's 'booming overseas trade, political influence abroad, colonial acquisitions and an expanding fleet […] necessarily implied a relative diminution in Britain's own commercial / colonial / maritime position'.[17] Given such zero-sum conditions, Kennedy argued, Germany's expansion was ill-advised, indeed positively dangerous. For Kennedy, that the British Empire, as global hegemon, 'accounted for something like 44% of foreign investment on the eve of the First World War', was immaterial.[18] It was only German imperialism that represented a threat to world peace. Like other historians before him, Kennedy accepted Britain's right to global pre-eminence as a historical given and ignored the fact that Britain's imperial predations were continuing right alongside those of Germany, only on a far larger scale. By relegating British imperial expansion to an indistinct past and naturalizing Britain's global empire as a precondition for geopolitical stability, Kennedy deflected any attempt to assess the striking commonalities apparent in the actions of the two powers, arguing that 'the German desire (and attempt) to grow at the expense of its neighbours cannot be excused by reference to the earlier misdeeds of others'.

In effect, Kennedy's tendency to overlook the predatory nature of global British imperialism while emphasizing the destabilizing effects of German imperialism reproduced the sense of British exceptionalism rebuked in 1899 by Germany's foreign minister, Bernhard von Bülow, in his famous 'hammer or anvil' speech:

> The English Prime Minister has long said that the stronger states will get stronger and the weak states will get weaker. Everything that has happened since is proof of the correctness of these words. […] We cannot allow that some foreign power, that some foreign Jupiter says to us, 'What can we do? The world has already been divided.' We do not want to encroach on any foreign power, but we don't want to let a foreign power tread on our toes, and we won't allow ourselves to be pushed aside by any foreign power, not in political or commercial matters.[19]

For Kennedy, any such German presumptions that questioned British imperial hegemony were grossly 'imprudent' attempts to enter into the British preserve of global power politics.[20] Britain, which Kennedy admitted 'had indeed carved out a colossal world empire' escaped his opprobrium because he believed that this empire had expanded while 'emphasising the rights of European peoples, converting to free trade and allowing open access to its colonies since the mid-nineteenth century'. Ostensibly, it had been able to 'harmonize its national policy with the general desire and ideals

[16] Kennedy, *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism,* p. 464. Emphasis in the original.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 465.

[18] N. Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London, 1998), pp. 34–6.

[19] Bernhard von Bülow, 11 Dec. 1899, in *Stenographische Bericht über die Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, 10. Legislaturperiode, 1. Session, 1898/1900, vol. 4 (Berlin, 1900), 119. Sitzung, pp. 3292–5.

[20] Kennedy, *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism,* p. 467; P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London, 1988), p. 213.

common to all mankind'.[21] Accordingly, it would have been better if Germany had simply not sought to question Britain's domination of global markets, had not joined the other powers in claiming mercantile and settler colonies, and had not presumed to have a navy that might compete with (but not remotely eclipse) that of Britain—in sum, had not risen (as France, Russia and other powers had) to compete with Britain at all.[22] Unwilling to recognize that German imperialism and British imperialism were closely bound together, Kennedy pursued a one-sided, determinist line of argument that foregrounded the effects of the 'elemental German push to change the existing distribution of power' and reduced the agency of the world's largest and most powerful empire to mutely accepting 'a substantial diminution in national influence and safety', a situation which he believed 'was bound to provoke a reaction on their part'.[23]

Kennedy was neither the first nor the last to posit that the structural drivers of global mercantile and imperial competition had caused a serious deterioration in Anglo-German relations or that this deterioration was integral to questions of war and peace in 1914. Although also concerned with other factors, in 1927 Friedrich Meinecke had pointed to the 'growth in global trade and global politics' as partially to blame for what he saw as a breakdown in Anglo-German relations.[24] As early as 1933, Ross J. S. Hoffman had similarly argued that global economic rivalry was 'the soil out of which the great questions at issue between the two nations grew' and as such 'a basic cause for the anti-German orientation of British world policy'.[25] Closer to Kennedy's time, Hugh Neuburger and Houston H. Stokes observed that the growth of the German economy had been closely related to military matters, with 'predictions of Germany's overtaking of Britain' becoming a 'staple of British politics in the two decades before World War One'.[26]

Perhaps most influentially, Fritz Fischer also wrote that in entering the global imperial fray, Germany had effectively 'entered into single combat with England' in the decade before 1914.[27] Crucially, like Kennedy after him, Fischer wanted to critique German imperialism as a uniquely destabilizing force jeopardizing the seemingly benevolent global *Pax Britannica*. Like Kennedy, Fischer's history assumed a static global British Empire under attack from a uniquely malign German Empire. He investigated neither the devastating global consequences of European imperial competition (including that of Britain) more broadly nor the ways in which the powers (including Britain and Germany) that were engaged in imperial globalization often bypassed conflict and opted instead for trans-imperial cooperation to press their claims onto colonized peoples. For Fischer, the colonial inequities and violence emanating from the British Empire prior to

[21] Kennedy, *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, p. 468.

[22] This view, it is worth noting, is at odds with Kennedy's later axiomatic argument that 'the relative strengths of the leading nations in world affairs never remain constant', Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. xv.

[23] Kennedy, *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, p. 469.

[24] F. Meinecke, *Geschichte des deutsch-englischen Bündnisproblems, 1890–1901* (Berlin, 1927), pp. 5–6.

[25] R. J. S. Hoffman, *Great Britain and the German Trade Rivalry, 1875–1914* (Philadelphia, 1933), p. 279.

[26] H. Neuburger and H. H. Stokes, 'The Anglo-German Trade Rivalry, 1887–1913: A Counterfactual Outcome and Its Implications', *Social Science History*, 3, 2 (1979), pp. 187–201.

[27] F. Fischer, *Weltmacht oder Niedergang: Deutschland im ersten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt/Main, 1965), p. 37. See also F. Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/1918* (Düsseldorf, 1961), pp. 28–36.

1914 remained beyond critique, with the global rights and claims of the British Empire an accepted constant. Meanwhile, Germany's role after entering the global imperial arena was evidence of a crippling and uniquely damaging *Sonderweg*.

Since Fischer's powerful intervention, Anglophone and German accounts held in common this presumption of the naturalness of Britain's global empire as a structural good guaranteeing the security of an enlightened international system that required British hegemony as a benevolent stabilizing force.[28] Decolonizing and recasting this starry-eyed British perception of themselves as global civilizers and pacifiers who selflessly worked to ensure the continuation of a peaceful geopolitical status quo remains a work in progress.[29] This Anglophilic blind spot was accompanied by a sense that it was German expansionism in particular (rather than European imperial competition *tout court*) that had provoked a series of global crises in which Britain remained largely unsullied by ruthless considerations of imperial realpolitik and instead merely responded to German provocations. Exemplifying this historiographical tendency, Imanuel Geiss (for example) maintained that it was German *Weltpolitik* alone that 'fundamentally altered the global situation, which led directly to global war'. Meanwhile, the status quo hegemon Britain merely reacted by leaving 'its splendid isolation' occasionally to 'look after its allies'.[30] That Geiss saw British claims to the right to rule over the innumerable peoples of Africa, Asia, Australasia, the Pacific and the Americas as indicative of a preference for the serenity of 'splendid isolation', offers a clear sense of the extent to which Britain's benighted self-understanding had infiltrated postwar German scholarship.

More than forty years after Kennedy insisted that the notion that war guilt was 'shared by all' was 'flaccid', historians have moved on from his antagonism paradigm, just as they have from Fischer's sense that Germany's pre-1914 *Weltpolitik* rested predominately on 'the aim of breaking Britain's domination of the world'.[31] An earlier era of historiographical certainty has been replaced by a period of generative historiographical fragmentation, in which remaining Fischerites contend with the findings of historians scrutinizing the role of other powers just as forensically as Fischer had Germany's.[32] Historians now view as questionable Kennedy's lopsided attribution of responsibility to the Germans for a putative Anglo-German estrangement, but occasionally poisonous responses to attempts to move on from the dichotomous logic of the

[28] For an overview of the response to Fischer's work, see A. Mombauer, 'The Fischer Controversy, Documents and the "Truth" about the Origins of the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48, 2 (2013), pp. 290–314. The apogee of this view came with N. Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, 2004).

[29] P. Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London, 2019); S. Sanghera, *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (London, 2021).

[30] I. Geiss, *Das Deutsche Reich und die Vorgeschichte des ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich, 1978), p. 215.

[31] Kennedy, *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, p. 467; F. Fischer, 'The Foreign Policy of Imperial Germany and the Outbreak of the First World War', in G. Schöllgen (ed.), *Escape into War? The Foreign Policy of Imperial Germany* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 19–40, here p. 21.

[32] A. Mombauer, 'Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I', *Central European History*, 48, 4 (2015), pp. 541–64. Rüger baulks at the work required to reconcile these rival historiographies, noting that the 'challenge of bringing the two together in one narrative is immense' ('Revisiting the Anglo-German Antagonism', p. 617), but arguably a lack of historiographical consensus offers more scope for complex historical landscapes. See M. P. Fitzpatrick, 'Truth Telling, Historiographical Agonism, and the Colonial Past in Germany and Australia', *Australian Historical Studies*, 55, 1 (2024), pp. 6–25.

antagonism paradigm and its corollary, sole German war guilt, make it worth briefly restating some recently made points of clarification.[33]

Most obvious among these points is that the war in 1914 was not a product of Anglo-German enmity. As Jan Rüger has pointed out, an overwhelming majority of historians now understand that the First World War can no longer be assumed to be simply 'the logical conclusion of a long-term deterioration in Anglo-German relations'.[34] Christopher Clark was correct to point out that in entering the war in 1914, Britain was just as (if not more) concerned about the global imperial consequences of alienating France and Russia (both of whom were well poised to make things difficult for Britain in Africa, Asia and the Pacific) as about the need to contain Germany.[35] Similarly, William Mulligan was right to argue that despite long-standing claims that a narrowly binary Anglo-German antagonism had unalterably set the course for conflict in the decade leading up to 1914, 'a general war was not an inevitable or even a probable outcome of international rivalries before 1914'. Indeed, as Mulligan made clear, stressing the putatively ineluctable effects of a structuring bilateral rivalry between Britain and Germany can only lead historical research 'into something of a teleological tunnel'.[36]

As the following sections make clear, however, the antagonism paradigm has persisted as received wisdom in fields beyond history, in ways that have real-world consequences. Most significantly, it has encouraged twenty-first-century international relations scholars to deploy the Anglo-German antagonism paradigm as an exemplar that underwrites theories of the geopolitical present. In these theories, mid- to late-twentieth-century histories (such as those of Fischer and Kennedy) that positioned the British Empire as a benevolent guarantor of global stability, unjustly attacked around the globe by Germany, function as legitimating narratives for hawkish attempts to naturalize the global hegemony of the United States and to follow a policy of strict encirclement and containment of China.

III. The International Relations Trap

Having examined Anglo-German relations so carefully, it is not surprising that Kennedy then turned his structuralist approach towards the construction of a broader theory of the 'rise and fall' of great powers since the sixteenth century.[37] In this later work, Kennedy offered a more pronouncedly realist framework for a long-run geopolitical history. As Michael Mann described Kennedy's case,

[33] Kennedy, *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism,* p. 467; G. Schmidt, 'Great Britain and Germany in the Age of Imperialism', *War and Society*, 4, 1 (1986), pp. 31–51; Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 560; Rüger, 'Revisiting the Anglo-German Antagonism'. For incensed reviews of *Sleepwalkers* from an older generation of Germanists, see, for example, J. C. G. Röhl, 'Goodbye to All That (Again)? The Fischer Thesis, the New Revisionism and the Meaning of the First World War', *International Affairs*, 91, 1 (2015), pp. 153–66; R. C. Moore, 'Neo-Revisionism and the Origins of the First World War', *London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 23, 22 (2023), pp. 21–51; J. A. Moses, 'Christopher Clark, the German Historians and the First World War: Telling It How It Essentially Was?', *ISAA Review*, 17, 1 (2019), pp. 5–24.

[34] Rüger, 'Revisiting the Anglo-German Antagonism', p. 615; J. Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 248.

[35] Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 544–7.

[36] Mulligan, *Origins of the First World War*, p. 230.

[37] Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

As a Realist he assumes the existence of states and their inherent tendencies to struggle with each other for regional and sometimes global domination. It is in the nature of the consequent geopolitical system that a few will become Great, and a select few become Hegemonic. But it is also inevitable that they will soon decline again, to be replaced by others having their turn. What determines this rise and decline is fundamentally the uneven geographical distribution and economic and technological development. At points of change in the geopolitical order, economic and technological dynamism will have passed from the dominant Powers to some other area of the globe and to the Powers who inhabit it. Provided those newcomers can convert that rising resource base into military power, they will become Great Powers.[38]

This process of rise and fall, driven by emerging powers challenging established ones, was best understood, Kennedy asserted, as ancient, dating back to Greece in the fifth century BCE. It was Thucydides, he continued, who first observed the iron law of rise and fall at work: war between Athens and Sparta had been made inevitable by 'the growth of Athenian power and the fear that this caused in Sparta'.[39]

Others in the field of international relations have followed Kennedy in the search for a long-range theory for the causes of war. Most recently, in 2017 Graham Allison reworked Kennedy's 'Thucydidean' realism into a transtemporal theory of rise and fall that used not only Athens and Sparta but also the history of Anglo-German relations as a primary case study:

As Paul Kennedy neatly puts it, the leaders of Britain and Germany considered that their clash in 1914 was 'but a continuation of what had been going on for at least fifteen or twenty years' and had begun 'because the former power wished to preserve the existing status quo, whereas the latter, for a mixture of offensive and defensive motives, was taking steps to alter it'.[40]

In his highly mechanistic theory of international relations based on a precariously narrow reading of Thucydides's oeuvre, Allison posited that the friction between rising and declining great powers has been (and remains) the central historical dynamic governing the propensity for armed conflict.[41] He termed this transtemporal theory of imperial antagonism the 'Thucydides trap'. Critically, however, Allison took Kennedy's historically framed antagonism paradigm and turned it into a vehicle for geopolitical prognostication. According to Allison's reading of Kennedy, earlier rivalries such as that ostensibly structuring Anglo-German relations are best understood as harbingers of an all-but-inevitable global future of continuing binary conflict between hegemons and aspiring hegemons. In his monograph and several associated articles, Allison has argued in no uncertain terms that the global history of great-power competition such as that between Britain and Germany points to an apparent historical law that all but determines that China and the United States must go to war in the near future.[42] While Allison avers that his work was an attempt 'not to predict the future but to prevent it', the data he offered suggests that great powers avoid war in only roughly 25 per cent

[38] A. Giddens, M. Mann and I. Wallerstein, 'Comments on Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*', review symposium, *British Journal of Sociology*, 40, 2 (1989), pp. 328–40, here p. 332.

[39] Thucydides, quoted in Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers,* p. 198.

[40] G. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?* (London, 2018), p. 83.

[41] One reviewer summed up Allison's treatment of Thucydides as 'sloppy, superficial, oversimplified, overconfident and repetitive'; see J. Kirschner, 'Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right', *Security Studies*, 28, 1 (2018), pp. 1–24, *https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508634*, here p. 12.

[42] Allison, *Destined for War*. The book was also the launching pad for an entire research project at Harvard University devoted to seeking out further Thucydidean pairings across history. See *https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/overview-thucydides-trap*.

of cases.[43] As Richard Hanania has argued, Allison ended up 'all but foreclosing' the chances of avoiding war, by presenting the wish for peace as 'hopelessly naïve' given the overdetermining structures of history.[44]

Alongside his foundational exemplar of Athens and Sparta, Allison's most important and detailed case study is that of European political relations prior to 1914, painted in dichotomous colours strikingly similar to those used by Kennedy. As Allison wrote in *The Atlantic*, it was his view that the tensions between the two powers offered proof positive of the axiom that 'when a rising power is threatening to displace a ruling power, standard crises that would otherwise be contained, like the assassination of an archduke in 1914, can initiate a cascade of reactions'.[45] As Allison told a public-policy forum in Beijing in March 2019, this example showed how the mutual antagonism between China, as a rising power, and the United States, as a dominant power, could see 'third party actions or accidents' spiral towards war. His evidence lay with the origins of the First World War, as he saw them. 'Think of 1914', he argued,

> You had a rivalry between Germany rising and Great Britain. An archduke who was a second level official from Austria-Hungary was assassinated in Sarajevo in June 1914. He was not connected to Britain. He was not connected to Germany. But that action and the reactions to it within six weeks had the whole of Europe at war with each other. And in four years had destroyed all of Europe and Europe's position as the leader of the world at that time.[46]

As recently as 2020, Allison has reiterated his view that 'the risks of war in the decade ahead are eerily similar to those faced by Germany and the UK a century ago'.[47]

In terms of German historiography, Allison's understanding of the First World War is a narrower, more binary, and less empirically grounded version of Geiss's earlier view that 'all the other imperialist powers, frightened by the breath-taking dynamism of the German upstart, pulled together'.[48] His treatment of Anglo-German relations also recalls Michael Howard's view that war came because Germany threatened the 'European global order upon which British power and British prosperity rested' and John C. G. Röhl's view (which he held in common with Volker Berghahn and numerous other historians) that 'the deepening antagonism' and, ultimately, war between Wilhelmine Germany and Britain was the result of 'the Reich's drive to become a *Weltmacht*' and Britain's determination 'to contain that grand ambition by forming a ring of ententes to contain Germany'.[49]

[43] *https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/case-file*.

[44] R. Hanania, 'Graham Allison and the Thucydides Trap Myth', *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 15, 4 (2021), pp. 13–24, here p. 24.

[45] G. Allison, 'The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China headed for War?', *The Atlantic* (24 Sept. 2015).

[46] G. Allison, 'How to Escape the Thucydides Trap', speech given at the 2019 Harvard Alumni China Public Policy Forum, Center for China and Globalization, Beijing, 22 Mar. 2019, as quoted in H. H. Wang, *Escaping Thucydides's Trap: Dialogue with Graham Allison on China-US Relations* (Singapore, 2023), pp. 82–3.

[47] G. Allison, 'Beyond Trade: The Confrontation between the U.S. and China', *Security Times* (Feb. 2020), *web.archive.org/20240226201603/https://www.the-security-times.com/beyond-trade-confrontation-us-china/*.

[48] I. Geiss, 'The German Version of Imperialism, 1898–1914: Weltpolitik', in Schöllgen, *Escape into War?*, pp. 105–120, here p. 117.

[49] M. Howard, 'Die Deutsch-britischen Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert: eine Haßliebe', in W. J. Mommsen (ed.), *Die ungleichen Partner: deutsche-britische Beziehungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1999), pp. 125–30, here p. 130; J. C. G. Röhl, '"The Worst of Enemies": Kaiser Wilhelm II and his Uncle Edward VII', in Geppert and Gerwarth, *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain*, pp. 41–66, here p. 62.

This view been superseded, as Katherine C. Epstein has pointed out, by work that has shifted away from the rise-and-fall paradigm, which posits 'a narrowing of strategic focus to Germany', towards a broader appreciation of Britain's 'continuing dedication to global hegemony', which was bolstered by its power as 'underwriter of the global economy'.[50] In problematizing the faulty historical assumptions of the Thucydides trap and those who espouse it, Epstein cautions that 'consumers' of history—such as political scientists like Allison as well as the policy-makers that heed their advice—should understand if they 'are determined to "use" historians' work', they must keep in mind that deploying 'inferior historical scholarship is really no better than speculative philosophy'.[51]

In many respects, Allison's work demonstrates the salience of Epstein's warning. His purpose in foregrounding Britain and Germany in his theory of history is not to better understand the complicated prehistory of the First World War but to instrumentalize a prepackaged understanding of this history to support his primary thesis, that the war followed the 'same bleak pattern—and many of the same dynamics—as other Thucydidean conflicts over the centuries'. What matters is not the texture of a complicated set of events but the overarching impression that Britain was 'beset by anxieties typical of many ruling powers' and 'Germany was driven by the ambition and indignation characteristic of many up-and-comers'. In the end, Allison argues, 'Britain had no choice but to fight because it feared that a powerful Germany left unchecked across the Continent would threaten its existence.'[52] In a nutshell, Allison draws on Kennedy's rendering of the ostensibly dichotomous dynamics of the antagonism paradigm—characterized, Stafford wrote, by a 'strong whiff of inevitability'—for reasonably straightforward, programmatic theoretical reasons that align with his metahistorical analytical project and his grim assessment of the present.[53]

With Allison's Thucydides trap thesis, the complex and multidimensional questions of cooperation, conflict and war in the final three decades of Europe's long nineteenth century have been reduced to a simple binary conflict that might in turn provide a series of maxims that underwrite his deeply pessimistic and arguably simplistic structuralist interpretation of contemporary geopolitics and the risk of war. Absent is any sense of the important recent (and not so recent) historiographical shifts away from Kennedy's antagonism paradigm which might problematize this Manichaean worldview. Instead, Allison continues to rely heavily on superannuated iterations of historical research that overemphasized the centrality of Anglo-German antagonism. In Allison's Thucydides trap theory, Kennedy's and Fischer's increasingly superseded readings of the First World War have found new life, influencing political decisions regarding contemporary international security and geopolitical conflict.

That Allison's view has become politically influential is no exaggeration. In an era of geopolitical nervousness, his book has clearly struck a chord, with former US president

[50] K. C. Epstein, 'Scholarship and the Ship of State: Rethinking the Anglo-American Strategic Decline Analogy', *International Affairs*, 91, 2 (2015), pp. 319–31, here pp. 320, 326, 330.

[51] *Ibid*., pp. 327–31.

[52] Allison, *Destined for War*, pp. 57–8.

[53] D. Stafford, Review Article, 'A Moral Tale: Anglo-German Relations, 1860–1914', *International History Review*, 4, 2 (1982), pp. 249–63, here p. 251.

Joe Biden declaring Allison to be 'one of the keenest observers of international affairs around'.[54] Similarly enthusiastic about the Thucydides trap theory have been the late Henry Kissinger, former Australian prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Malcolm Turnbull, chairman of the World Economic Forum Klaus Schwab, and former secretary general of the United Nations Ban Ki-Moon. In China, President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang have also explicitly referred to Allison's Thucydides trap model to warn against further military escalation in the Pacific region.[55]

To be sure, the instrumentalization of the history of Anglo-German relations as a geopolitical morality play, stripped of its complexity and attendant historiographical caveats, is not restricted to Allison. During the Cold War the antagonism paradigm was drawn upon frequently by political scientists who were similarly seeking to explain the inevitability of a march to war between contending great powers. As the United States and the Soviet Union stared with both trepidation and perverse thanatopolitical longing into the abyss of thermonuclear war, political scientists recast the past roles of the freedom-loving British and authoritarian Germans as now inhabited by the United States and the Soviet Union respectively. The Anglo-German antagonism became less history and more trope, an analytical commonplace frequently deployed to explain how and why the US–Soviet Cold War could be expected to turn hot.[56]

Nor is Allison alone in reading the recent rise of China through the lens of Wilhelmine Germany. As early as 1997, the neoconservative foreign-policy hawk and future deputy US secretary of defence and president of the World Bank Paul Wolfowitz warned that like Wilhelmine Germany, China too might well be 'a country that felt it had been denied its "place in the sun"'.[57] Alastair Johnston cautioned against embracing this misleading transtemporal analogy a few years later.[58] More proximately, in 2014 Reinhard Wolf anticipated some of Allison's arguments regarding the similarities between China and Wilhelmine Germany.[59] Perhaps most prominently, in 2011 Henry Kissinger also anticipated Allison's argument.[60] In fact in many respects, Allison's book might be understood as a detailed extrapolation of the concerns and methods used by Kissinger in his book *On China* that seeks to answer its epilogic question, 'Does history repeat itself?'[61] In his book (which Allison cites approvingly), Kissinger too had pointed to the ostensible 'zero-sum game' of Anglo-German relations prior to 1914 as a potential harbinger of a twenty-first-century Pacific war. Just as in the case of twenty-first-century China, he reasoned, with the emergence of a strong, united and globally competent Germany in nineteenth-century Europe, the balance of the international

[54] Wang, *Escaping Thucydides's Trap*, pp. xxvi–xxvii.

[55] *Ibid*., pp. xxvi–xxvii.

[56] H. Gardner, 'Averting World War III: Beyond the World War I, World War II Analogies', *SAIS Review*, 8, 2 (1988), pp. 121–35; S. M. Lynn-Jones, 'Détente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911–1914', *International Security*, 11, 2 (1986), pp. 121–50; G. Schöllgen, 'Introduction: The Theme Reflected in Recent German Research', and W. Gutsche, 'The Foreign Policy of Imperial Germany and the Outbreak of the War in the Historiography of the GDR', in Schöllgen, *Escape into War?*, pp. 1–19 (here p. 1), and pp. 41–62 (here p. 57) respectively.

[57] P. Wolfowitz, 'Bridging Centuries: Fin de Siècle All Over Again', *National Interest*, 47 (1997), pp. 3–8.

[58] A. I. Johnston, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security*, 27, 4 (2003), pp. 5–56.

[59] R. Wolf, 'Rising Powers, Status Ambition, and the Need to Reassure: What China Could Learn from Imperial Germany's Failures', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7, 2 (2014), pp. 185–219.

[60] H. Kissinger, *On China* (New York, 2011).

[61] *Ibid*., p. 514.

state system shifted, challenging British naval hegemony. Resultingly, Kissinger argued, a 'crisis of the system' took shape, one that saw the emergence of a 'bipolar system with no diplomatic flexibility'.[62] Unlike Allison, however, Kissinger at least viewed this transhistorical parallel as 'by nature inexact', rather than as a firm basis for a unifying transtemporal theory of realist international relations.[63]

IV. The 'Crowe Memorandum' and Its Legacies

What of Allison's evidentiary basis for an enduring Anglo-German antagonism and its adherence to his version of Thucydidean realism? As a political scientist, Allison does not work closely with the archival materials required to substantiate the claims he makes, which he believes Kennedy has already proven. Nonetheless, following Kissinger, Allison leans heavily on the famed 1907 memorandum written by Eyre Crowe, a junior assistant clerk whose conclusions briefly piqued the interest of some but were resolutely disputed at the time by more senior Foreign Office figures.[64] For Allison, as for Kissinger, this document is the requisite smoking gun that underpins the thesis that Britain had no choice but to engage in a war for global hegemony against Germany.[65]

Written seven years before the First World War, the Crowe memorandum has inexplicably become a talismanic document said to have deeply and irrevocably coloured British attitudes towards Germany thereafter. It is worth making clear, however, as Richard A. Cosgrove did more than fifty years ago, that historians have overestimated the correlation of the Crowe document with the development of British foreign policy after 1907. It was, in fact, far more popular as a post-1918 point of reference for those seeking to understand the origins of British participation in the First World War than as a policy basis for British political and military planners.[66] It should not, Cosgrove emphasized, 'be interpreted as a guide to pre-war British diplomacy'.[67]

According to Crowe, there were only two alternatives for the global politics of his time:

> Either Germany is definitely aiming at a general political hegemony and maritime ascendency, threatening the independence of her neighbours and ultimately the existence of England; or Germany, free from any clear-cut ambition, and thinking for the present merely of using her legitimate position and influence as one of the leading powers in the council of nations, is seeking to promote her foreign commerce, spread the benefits of German culture, extend the scope of her national energies, and create fresh German interests all over the world wherever and whenever a peaceful opportunity offers, leaving it to an uncertain future to decide whether the occurrence of great change in the world may not some day assign to Germany a larger share of direct political action over regions not now a part of her dominions.

In either case, however, Germany was a threat to British global supremacy. For the anxious hegemon, the gradual and peaceful enhancement of the position of Germany

[62] *Ibid*., p. 516.

[63] *Ibid*., p. 522.

[64] Z. Steiner, 'The Last Years of the Old Foreign Office, 1898–1905', *Historical Journal*, 6, 1 (1963), pp. 59–90, here pp. 76–7.

[65] Allison, *Destined for War*, pp. 58–61; Kissinger, *On China*, pp. 518–20.

[66] R. A. Cosgrove, 'The Crowe Memorandum and British Foreign Policy, 1907–1914', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 72, 4 (1973), pp. 527–39, here pp. 530–1.

[67] *Ibid*., p. 528.

'would obviously constitute as formidable a menace to the rest of the world as would be presented by any deliberate conquest of a similar position by "malice aforethought"'.[68]

Allison's smoking gun evidence is hardly decisive. For all their colour and detail, Crowe's conclusions were disputed by the senior Foreign Office figure Thomas Sanderson, who reminded British officials that 'Germany is a helpful, though somewhat exacting friend', and that 'the history of German policy towards this Country is not the unchequered record of black deeds which the [Crowe] Memorandum seems to portray'.[69] Instead, he reminded British officials, 'there have been many occasions on which we have worked comfortably in accord with Germany, and not a few cases in which her support has been serviceable to us'.[70]

Sanderson had long been firmly of the opinion that 'the conduct of the German government has in some material respects been friendly' towards Britain, and that it remained important for both countries 'that we should work cordially together'. For him, those in the British Foreign Office (such as Francis Bertie and Louis Mallet) who were quick to denounce Germany were simply 'lunatics' driving the Germans further into the arms of the Russians.[71] The key difficulty for an ascendant Germany was not that it was rising, Sanderson argued, for a 'great and growing nation cannot be repressed', but that it would 'find the British lion in her path' everywhere around the globe.[72] Sanderson made clear that Crowe was wrong to present German colonial expansion as an expression of 'direct and unmistakable hostility to England', and that the most sensible path for British diplomacy was, in the words of Zara Steiner, to ensure that 'German sensitivity should be respected and her expansion not checked where it did not clash with important British interests'.[73]

Read now, particularly with Sanderson's critique in mind, the Crowe memorandum might best be interpreted as part full-throated expression of British imperial hubris in the wake of its humbling of Germany in partnership with the French at the Algeciras Conference in early 1906, and part frank admission of the pathological anxiety of a global hegemon that considered it an axiom of geopolitics that 'the power of a State supreme at sea should inspire universal jealousy and fear'.[74] According to Sanderson, Britain's hubris was such that 'to a foreigner reading our press, 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'.[75] Crowe, that is, depicted a characteristically British world-view in which all of Britain's global imperial actions, claims and possessions were manifestations of the unfolding of a just and balanced international order. As the Weimar-era German historian Friedrich Thimme later pointed out, Crowe expressed perfectly the British assumption that there was a 'natural harmony between British national and general

[68] Crowe, 'Appendix A: Memorandum', pp. 397–417.
[69] Sanderson, 'Appendix B: Memorandum', pp. 428–9.
[70] *Ibid.*, p. 428.
[71] Steiner, 'Last Years', pp. 76–8.
[72] Sanderson, 'Appendix B: Memorandum', p. 431.
[73] *Ibid.*, pp. 421–2; Steiner, 'Last Years', p. 79.
[74] Crowe, 'Appendix A: Memorandum', p. 402.
[75] Sanderson, 'Appendix B: Memorandum', p. 430.

global interests'.[76] For Crowe, Wilhelmine Germany's global expansion indicated the unique 'extortions' of 'a professional blackmailer' menacing Britain and other states 'by the threat of some vague and dreadful consequences' if their designs were thwarted.[77] Sanderson, by contrast, at least understood that 'if the mere acquisition of territory were in itself immoral, I conceive the sins of Germany since 1871 are light in comparison to ours'.[78]

In some ways, however, the Crowe memorandum was only incidentally interested in German affairs, concerning itself primarily with a stout defence of the new Entente Cordiale between Britain and France, which was designed to contain Britain's hitherto largest source of frontier friction in its global empire—France.[79] Replicating almost perfectly the well-known views of Bertie in the Foreign Office, one of the chief architects of the Entente Cordiale, it makes clear that it was in fact France and not Germany that was the greatest material threat to British global designs. It is no surprise to see then that Crowe's study of international affairs gave expression to the palpable relief of some in the British Foreign Office that incidents like Fashoda would no longer darken the horizon now that the iciness of Anglo-French relations that had followed Britain's unilateral annexation of Egypt had thawed.

With the geopolitical necessity of the Entente Cordiale for Britain's global imperial fortunes established, Crowe's reflections on Germany took the form of the elucidation of a resulting political corollary. Germany was not so much a threat to Britain as it was an opportune third party, instrumental for the process of solidifying Anglo-French accord. As Thimme argued in 1929, Crowe's prioritization of the Entente Cordiale implied a need for unanimity between Britain and France on all questions relating to third parties. This determination was aimed 'above all against Germany'. Anglo-French mutual assistance during the first Moroccan crisis was, he argued, clear evidence of that.[80]

On this point, Sanderson concurred. For Sanderson, it had been the French who had created the crisis in North Africa, through their 'exaggerated' demands on the Sultan of Morocco. The matter came to a head because, he argued,

> The German government and the German nation are extremely sensitive about being ignored or neglected in the discussion of important questions, and it is not surprising that on this occasion they should have been much exasperated and determined on inflicting on France a severe humiliation.

In doing so, he continued, it was no surprise that Germany also sought to 'separate' Britain from France and 'prevent the [Entente] Agreement from developing into an alliance'.[81]

Read through the lens of the Crowe memorandum, the Anglo-German 'antagonism' was a third-order result of Britain's decision to secure its global empire by cleaving to its alliance with its greatest, and most threatening, global imperial rival, namely France. Understood in this broader context, the Crowe memorandum cannot be used (as Allison and Kissinger have done) as a statement of government policy, but should be

[76] F. Thimme, 'Das Memorandum E. A. Crowes vom 1. Januar 1907. Seine Bedeutung für die Kriegsschuldfrage', *Berliner Monatshefte*, 7, 8 (Aug. 1929), pp. 732–68, here pp. 757–8.

[77] Crowe, 'Appendix A: Memorandum', pp. 397–419.

[78] Sanderson, 'Appendix B: Memorandum', p. 430.

[79] Steiner, 'Last Years', pp. 76–7.

[80] Thimme, 'Das Memorandum E. A. Crowes vom 1. Januar 1907', pp. 752–7. See also M. P. Fitzpatrick, *The Kaiser and the Colonies: Monarchy in the Age of Empire* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 161–87.

[81] Sanderson, 'Appendix B: Memorandum', p. 420.

seen instead as one side of an ongoing debate within the British Foreign Office about relations with Germany, with the other side of the argument offered by Sanderson, who, as Charles Hardinge commented at the time, 'took up the cudgels' in defence of Germany's cooperation and competition with Britain.[82] That it was the Entente *par-dessus tout* logic of Crowe and Bertie which proved decisive in July 1914 should not lead to the conclusion that the matter was settled after 1907.[83]

Crowe's memorandum has a long historiography of its own that extends back almost a century before Allison came to use it to 'prove' Kennedy's antagonism paradigm.[84] In Weimar Germany, Crowe was a byword for a determined and restrictive British policy of containment that had deliberately sought to push Germany to the brink of war, with Thimme writing scathingly in 1929 of the influence of Crowe's 'sham document' on prewar relations.[85] It was, he argued, the 'intellectual forebear of the German war guilt thesis'.[86] Unsurprisingly, Thimme was also quick to point to Sanderson as corroborating the Germans' own (similarly simplistic) suspicions that it was British rather than German intractability that had led to the First World War.[87] For his part, the left-liberal Hermann Lutz simply denounced Crowe in 1931 as the 'evil spirit' that had haunted the British Foreign Office.[88]

After the Second World War and already convinced of Fischer's thesis of German war guilt, Geiss described the Crowe memorandum as 'just and fair' and offering a 'balanced judgement of German intentions'. It provided, he argued, a 'rational explanation for the apparently irrational and bewildering manifestations of German *Weltpolitik*'. For those seeking an explanation of the trajectory of British policy towards Germany between 1907 and 1914, Geiss added, 'Crowe's memorandum can be regarded as the key document.' Crowe had convinced British officials, Geiss believed, to remain 'against a policy of concessions merely to "conciliate" (we would now say "appease") Germany on her road to more power'. Instead, Geiss believed, Crowe was right to advocate checking German power to ensure that its rise 'did not violate vital British interests either directly or indirectly, nor tried to upset the then existing balance of power in Europe and the world'—a remit so broad as to offer an almost limitless mandate for action.[89]

Unlike Allison, however, for Christopher Clark, who has also made the link between 'the political anxieties of the great-power executives' of Britain pre-1914 and the concerns of the United States regarding 'Chinese economic power' today, the lesson of the Crowe memorandum is simply that 'there was nothing inevitable about the ascendancy of Germanophobe attitudes in British foreign policy' and that (perhaps with Sanderson in mind) even when they did emerge, 'they were not universal'. The future, as he points out, 'was not foreordained'. To the extent that it existed, the mutual suspicion between

[82] Steiner, 'Last Years', p. 79.

[83] Thimme, 'Das Memorandum E. A. Crowes vom 1. Januar 1907', pp. 736–7.

[84] J. S. Dunn, *The Crowe Memorandum: Sir Eyre Crowe and Foreign Office Perceptions of Germany, 1918–1925* (Newcastle, 2013), pp. 1–46.

[85] F. Thimme, 'Das "berühmte Schwindeldokument" E. A. Crowes', *Berliner Monatshefte*, 7, 9 (Sept. 1929), pp. 874–9, here p. 879.

[86] Thimme, 'Das Memorandum E. A. Crowes vom 1. Januar 1907', p. 737.

[87] *Ibid.*, p. 735.

[88] H. Lutz, *Eyre Crowe: der böse Geist des Foreign Office* (Berlin, 1931).

[89] I. Geiss, *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War. Selected Documents* (London, 1967), pp. 28–33.

Germany and Britain was not uniquely binary; it was similar to that which had existed between Britain and France, or Britain and Russia, at various times and that which was a consequence of 'the polycentric world of the "great games" in Africa, China, Persia, Tibet and Afghanistan'. The ostensibly structuring Anglo-German antagonism was simply a situation in which 'the target was new but the mechanisms were familiar'.[90]

It was, however, Geiss's view rather than Clark's that trickled across the disciplinary divide to Kissinger and thereafter Allison, who have both expressed their agreement with Crowe's judgement that 'regardless of German intentions', increased German naval capacity 'would be an objective threat to Britain and "incompatible with the existence of the British Empire"'. For Kissinger and Allison, Germany's 'formal assurances were meaningless', or at least had to be treated as meaningless, because ultimately its rise implied 'a conscious scheme for hegemony'. Accordingly, Britain was 'obliged to assume the worst, and act on the basis of its assumptions'.[91]

Allison and Kissinger's championing of Crowe's 1907 analysis is unsurprising given that Crowe's assumptions are identical to those that undergird the Thucydides trap, namely that 'history shows' that the primary danger to a hegemon like Britain prior to 1914 or the United States presently must inevitably stem from the increasing 'predominance of a neighbouring State at once militarily powerful, economically efficient and ambitious to extend its frontiers or spread its influence'. Accordingly, 'by applying this general law', Crowe's memorandum offers contemporary advocates of Thucydidean realism the predictive power required to suggest that it might be necessary for the United States, like Britain, to take the measures it deems necessary, including war, to halt any 'schemes of expansion' that might one day bring into question the current geopolitical status quo.[92]

Despite its very modest historical role in framing the Anglo-German antagonism prior to 1914, the Crowe memorandum has now become a byword for the necessity of resolute realpolitik in the twenty-first century, with hawkish think tanks such as the London-based Council on Geostrategy, encouraged by Britain's triumph in the First World War, forging what they explicitly call 'a "Crowe Memorandum" for the twenty-first century', which aims at offering a rationale behind present China-directed policies of containment in the Pacific and galvanizing what it presents as 'the free and open international order' against China's 'malign and revisionist pressure'. In their 2021 report, the Anglo-German exemplar and the hawkish views of Crowe are positioned squarely as an argument for 'a dynamic deterrence posture' rather than 'accommodation or acquiescence'. In this context, the Crowe memorandum and the Anglo-German antagonism are presented as a warning from the past. 'Not since Wilhelmine Germany in the early twentieth century', the think tank asserts with reference to China, 'has a revisionist state held such relative material power or potential.' Accordingly, a 'New Crowe Memo' should become the basis for 'a new geostrategic approach fit for the twenty-first century'.[93] For its

[90] Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 162–7.

[91] Kissinger, *On China*, p. 519; Allison, *Destined for War*, p. 59.

[92] Crowe, 'Appendix A: Memorandum', p. 403. Unlike Allison's broader (and more pessimistic) reading of Crowe, Kissinger posits the lesson of the memorandum is that turning minor events into talismanic struggles for hegemony leads only to disaster; see Kissinger, *On China*, p. 522.

[93] J. Rogers and A. Lanoszka, 'A "Crowe Memorandum" for the Twenty-First Century: Preparing for Intensified Geopolitical Competition', *Council on Geostrategy Policy Paper*, Mar. 2021, pp. 1–24, *https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/05/Policy-Paper-GPPP01-02032021.pdf*, here pp. 4–5.

hawkish authors, the lessons of the Anglo-German relationship and Crowe's assessment of it are unambiguous: 'Just as Sir Eyre knew that Imperial Germany's autocratic monarchy would exploit British equivocation and indecision, contemporary authoritarian regimes are little different.' Accordingly, the United States and its allies should 'assert red lines unflinchingly' as they 'put a bit of stick about' in international relations.[94]

Chinese scholars too are closely examining the salience of the Crowe memorandum to Sino-American relations. For Zhengyu Wu, the Crowe memorandum offers a means by which the 'parallel strategic interests between Great Britain then and the United States now' as well as 'the basic parallel between the rise of Germany and the rise of China' are being represented.[95] In his analysis, Wu zeroes in on Crowe's description of Britain's status as the world's largest thalassocratic empire and its self-perception as acting in defence of its 'political obligations towards the comity of nations' as the 'natural protector of smaller nations and […] champion of universal free trade'. Against this ostensibly heroic British selflessness, Wu continues, Crowe contrasted supposed 'German pathologies in its foreign policy', foremost among these being its 'single-minded pursuit of global ambition'.[96] Tellingly, however, in the end, Wu argues, Crowe was not concerned about any actual direct threat to Britain emanating from Germany, but rather feared the potential for disruption to the existing Anglocentric global order, and the hypothetical question 'whether Germany would pose a threat to the balance of power'.[97] In the same way, Wu concluded, US fears of an ascendant China are not specific and instead 'mainly revolve around the potential disequilibrium that a very powerful China would produce' in a geopolitical order that reflected and protected US interests. The 'strategic adjustments' in Britain heralded by the Crowe memorandum, he argues, mirror the US 'rebalance to Asia since 2011'.[98] Just as the Tirpitz plan was conceived not as a way to rival British sea power, but to rob Britain of its free hand to intervene at will in Continental Europe, so too US fears regarding China centre on the fact that growing Chinese sea power 'could greatly reduce America's ability to meddle in East Asian affairs in the future'.[99] Wu also points out that just as France and Russia were integral to British attempts to contain Germany, China's neighbours are also currently playing a key role in assisting the United States in containing China.[100] According to this reasoning, the current AUKUS agreement emerges, as some have suggested, as a modern-day Triple Entente aimed at containing yet another breakout power.[101] Historical inaccuracies baked into this faulty analysis aside, given the disastrous outcome of these pre-1914 treaty arrangements, it is surprising to see Crowe, his memorandum and the dynamics of the Anglo-German antagonism, as understood

[94] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[95] Zhengyu Wu, 'The Crowe Memorandum, the Rebalance to Asia, and Sino-US Relations', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 39, 3 (2016), pp. 389–416, here p. 392.

[96] *Ibid.*, pp. 393–4.

[97] *Ibid.*, p. 396.

[98] *Ibid.*, pp. 399–400.

[99] *Ibid.*, pp. 404–5.

[100] *Ibid.*, pp. 407–8.

[101] J. Hemmings, 'Should the Quad Become a Formal Alliance?', *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (Mar./Apr. 2022), pp. 65–77.

by contemporary political scientists, positioned as an empirical basis for an efficacious theory of the present.

V. Escaping the International Relations Trap

If the uses and abuses of the historiography of Anglo-German relations by international relations and security studies scholars such as Allison remain a source of grave concern, perhaps this is not entirely their fault. German historians have been slow to communicate outside their discipline that they have moved on from Kennedy's antagonism paradigm. It is worth considering what kinds of international relations theories might be enabled if historians made it clearer to their political scientist colleagues that the cause of the First World War was not, as many continue to presume, a decades-long struggle to decide the binary question of whether Germany or Britain would emerge as the global hegemon of the twentieth century.

As Reinhard Wolf, like a large number of other historians, has argued, 'World War I hardly fits the notion of a conflict chiefly motivated by the rising power's desire to defeat the reigning hegemon.'[102] Yet, courtesy of the use of superannuated histories of Anglo-German relations by contemporary theorists of international relations, the antagonism paradigm continues to cast a shadow over current geopolitical realities. The United States and China, Allison believes, are acting as antagonists in the Anglo-German model 'right on script, almost as if they were competing to see which could better exemplify the characteristics of the rising power on the one hand, and the ruling power on the other'.[103] World leaders, including US and Chinese presidents, are listening carefully to his reading of the past.

Correctly understanding the past, Allison believes, offers a chance to foretell the future. To this end, Allison argues, it is perhaps time for a 'White House Council of Historical Advisers', who might help the US president 'clarify the geopolitical history and the factors that lead to the challenges and choices that the president faces today'.[104] What might such an advisory board, the haruspices of global history, tell the president of the United States about the attempts to establish structural, trans-temporal links between Anglo-German and Sino-American relations? Perhaps it might begin by warning not only against such long-run theories of historical dynamics but also against building a simplistic and high stakes theory of the prospects for great-power warfare in the present based on a historiography indebted to a reading of German history that has been superseded. Hopefully, the research presented in this Special Issue, along with other research currently being conducted, will contribute to building a complex and complicated history shorn of any teleological foreclosure of the future.

Abstract

Prefacing a series of articles in the Special Issue examining the imperial and colonial dimensions of Anglo-German relations prior to and during the First World War, this article examines how outdated understandings

[102] Wolf, 'Rising Powers', p. 193.

[103] J. Mecklin, 'Interview with Graham Allison: Are the United States and China Charging into Thucydides's Trap?', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 78, 2 (2022), pp. 53–8, here p. 53.

[104] *Ibid*., pp. 57–8.

of Anglo-German relations are currently influencing political scientists who are seeking a historical basis for their theoretical models of twenty-first-century geopolitics. It looks at how Paul Kennedy's understanding of an ostensible Anglo-German antagonism has made its way into Graham Allison's recent theory of the 'Thucydides trap' and argues that improving the quality of contemporary international relations might well rely upon improving our communication of paradigm changes in German historiography.

Flinders University, Australia
matthew.fitzpatrick@flinders.edu.au