Sir Walter Murdoch Memorial Lecture (2012)

Hegemonic Boss Dragons and Two-Sun Skies:
The Rise of China and the Future of the Asia-Pacific

Lecture delivered by: Kim Richard Nossal

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It is a real pleasure to be back at Murdoch, and I thank the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Richard Higgott, for his very kind and far too generous introduction. But as he says, Richard and I go back aways. The last time I was at Murdoch, it was with Richard, when he was an ordinary member of faculty, and we were writing a book on the implications of the end of the Cold War, and we were looking at the impact of the change in global politics on middle powers like Australia and Canada—about which more in a bit.

Tonight the pleasure of being back at Murdoch after so many years is magnified by the honour that the University has done me in inviting me to give this prestigious lecture.

But I do not mind admitting to you that a couple of things that Jon Baldwin said in his introduction really make me just a little nervous. The first is that when I was invited to give this lecture, I looked at who had given this lecture in the past, and I have to say that it is very daunting as a lecturer to know that one is joining a group of very prestigious and distinguished individuals who have come before me at this podium. But I have to tell you that listening to actually listen to that list of names being read out, with all the letters after their names as indicators of what they contributed to society: a governor general, a soon-to-be-appointed governor general, a former prime minister, a premier of Western Australia, an editor of a global newspaper, a CEO of a major telecommunications firm, a

Nobel laureate… For me, someone without any letters after his name, it was a rather daunting list.

The second thing that made me just a little nervous was Jon's introduction to the lecture, which, he reminded all of us, must be "thought-provoking, topical and of significant interest" and "memorable."

As you might imagine, it is a little unnerving for a lecturer to hear the audience being told up front what the qualities of the lecture they are about to hear should be. But I am assuming that this is just part of the push for quality assurance in university education for which Australians are so well known. I do not know if TEQSA [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency] has developed framework standards for memorial lectures, but if not, then clearly Jon's introduction stands as an indication of the degree to which Murdoch is ahead of the curve…

However, I can comfort myself that, on two of the criteria that Jon mentioned—topicality and interest—the subject of tonight's lecture will more than meet the bar, for surely there is no issue more important to all of us around the Pacific than the major transformations that are underway in the politics of the region—and the debate that these changes have sparked.

That debate focuses on the consequences of the spectacular transformation of China since the late 1970s, a transformation that is best illustrated by the growth of Chinese wealth in the last thirty years. And it really doesn't matter how one shows it—whether in purchasing power parity, or in yuan, or in GDP per capita—the trend line is generally the same: a long and secular rise, growing very sharply in the last decade.

But this has been accompanied by another kind of rise with a similar pattern: in the same period, we have seen a slow secular rise, growing very sharply in the last decade, of China's military spending. Again, the trend line is unmistakable – and for many people, that trend line is alarming. And indeed all one has to do is fiddle with the plotlines on the graph, and one can easily make the trend line appear even *more* alarming.

One of the reasons for the alarm is because of another trend occurring at the same time. For China's rise has occurred at a time when many people are arguing that the US is in decline. The discourse of American decline is evident everywhere: in the academy, in the elite press, in the popular press, and of course everywhere on the web. And even those who claim not to be declinist, like Fareed Zakaria, have actually contributed to the declinist discourse by giving us a catchy term like “post-American world” that readily serves as a synonym for that decline.[1]

The declinist perspective points to a number of different indicators: the steady loss of manufacturing jobs; the huge number of insolvent or near-insolvent municipalities in the US; the persistently high unemployment rate; a federal debt that has climbed to almost $16 trillion, a good portion of it held by foreigners.

Declinists point to the increasingly dysfunctional politics in the United States, in which Americans cannot have adult conversations with each other without becoming mired in mindless sloganeering and hyperpartisanship. They point to the dysfunctions in American society that have resulted in the world’s largest prison population and the world’s highest incarceration rate. And they point to America’s foreign policy challenges since 9/11, often characterizing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as evidence of the decline of American power.

This juxtaposition of rise and decline has sparked a debate over the longer-term trajectory of global politics, a debate that revolves around a single issue: the strategic implications of the rise of China. In particular, how will the rise be met by the US, the preeminent power in contemporary global politics—the world’s “hegemonic boss dragon,” as the US has been described by two senior colonels in the People’s Liberation Army?

Will the US simply concede the field to China, as Hugh White phrased it, and “pivot” back to Fortress North America? Or will Americans push back in order to try to retain their dominant position? And if so, will the push-back succeed? Or will the American “hegemonic boss dragon” be replaced by a hegemony with Chinese characteristics, to use Aaron Friedberg’s play on an old Chinese Communist Party trope?[2] Will this process be peaceful or conflictual? And what impact will it have on those smaller political communities around the Pacific that have ties to both the US and China?

Tonight I would like to offer some thoughts on this debate. But I would like to do so from what might be thought of as a “Murdochian” perspective.

When I was invited to give this lecture, I admit that I did not know much about Sir Walter Murdoch—other than he was the only ordinary professor I had ever heard of who had had a university named after him, making Murdoch—the university and the professor—unique.

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[1] Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World,* 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

[2] Aaron L. Friedberg, “Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics,” *The National Interest* (July/August 2011), 18–27: http://web.clas.ufl.edu/users/zselden/coursereading2011/Friedberg.pdf.

It was only after becoming more acquainted with Murdoch that I began to appreciate the qualities that might have prompted those who created this university to decide in the winter of 1970 to name the university after him.

One quality in particular that I wanted to focus on tonight has already been mentioned by Jon in his introduction: that Sir Walter's essays in the press and his talks on the radio were marked by a fondness for skepticism. As John La Nauze, Murdoch's biographer, reminds us, Sir Walter always wanted his readers and listeners to "clear their minds of cant."[3] Sir Walter freely admitted that he didn't have much time for the niceties of "constructive criticism," unapologetically preferring instead "destructive criticism." He delighted in "grumbling," or what he liked to call "growling."[4] And so it is in the spirit of Murdoch's admonition to growl that I want to offer some thoughts on the debate about the rise of China.

For the debate has a key feature that in my view should inspire a measure of "Murdochian" skepticism: and that is its phantasmagorical nature. Now I am well aware that, while Sir Walter Murdoch might well have approved of one being skeptical about something, he would definitely *not* have approved of using a word like phantasmagorical, particularly not in a public lecture.

We can be reasonably sure of this because one of his essays from the 1930s was on sesquipedalianism, or the use of long words. This word comes to us from the Latin for a foot and a half, and Murdoch's essay on sesquipedalianism, itself a word that is an ironic foot and a half long, poked fun at those who would use long words to impress. In his view, there was nothing like keeping it simple; anyone "who uses words of more than two syllables," he wrote, "is running counter to the genius of our mother tongue."[5]

But in this case, phantasmagorical is, I want to suggest, *just* the right word to describe the debate about power transition in the Asia-Pacific, even if it is four syllables longer than Murdoch thought was a word's ideal length. A phantasmagoria—literally an assembly of ghosts—was a theatrical performance that featured optical illusions produced by magic lanterns. First performed in Europe in the late 18th century, the moving images of scary phantoms by all accounts transfixed audiences—the forerunner, it is often said, of the contemporary horror movie genre.

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[3] John La Nauze, *Walter Murdoch: A Biographical Memoir* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1977), 106.

[4] Sir Walter Murdoch, "On Growling," in *72 Essays: A Selection* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1947/1970), 20–23.

[5] Murdoch, "Sesquipedalianism," *72 Essays*, 164–68.

And when I look at the debate about the rise of China, I am struck by how phantasmagorical that debate is—how much it is marked by throwing up menacing images, phantoms designed to scare, but phantoms that, when one looks carefully, actually do not have much substance.

Look at how the rise of China has triggered what one reviewer called "a stream of China-threat books," books that take the objective facts of this rise and spin them into compelling tales of threat.[6] Some scenarios focus on the economic conflicts between the two countries—the so-called "loss of jobs" to China, the quarrels over currency and exchange rates or intellectual property, or the anger over Chinese commercial espionage and outright theft. Other scenarios focus on the issue of the Republic of China on Taiwan, and how the future of Taiwan could become a cause of war between these great powers. Some focus on Chinese assertiveness over its nine-dotted line claims in the body of water that is known variously as the South Sea, or the West Philippine Sea, or the South China Sea, and a recognition that nothing leads to nastiness more easily than quarrels over real estate. Most common, however, is the argument that increased military spending by China will inevitably give rise to conflict, as Beijing seeks to use its military power to advance China's interests, and the United States seeks to offset that expanding power.

It is this last vision of great-power conflict that gives rise to calling up the phantoms of history. For it is striking how contributors to this debate use history to make their argument: the best guide to the decisions we need to make about our Pacific future, they tell us, are the lessons of the past. The key image thrown up from history's magic lantern is what happens when there is a power shift in global politics. History teaches us, or so we are assured, that war is the normal result when new great powers rise and existing dominant powers see a challenge or a threat to their dominance. And so the story told over and over again in the China debate is the story of what happened 2500 years ago when Athens rose and challenged the dominant power in the Peloponnese, Lacedaemon, or Sparta.

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[6] Indicative would be: Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (1997); Bill Gertz, *The China Threat: How the People's Republic Targets America* (2000); Constantine Menges, *China: The Gathering Threat* (2005); Ted Galen Carpenter, *America's Coming War with China* (2006); John Frankling Copper, *Playing with Fire: The Looming War with China over Taiwan* (2006); Jed Babbin and Edward Timperlake, *Showdown: Why China Wants War with the United States* (2006); Peter Navarro, *The Coming China Wars: Where They Will Be Fought, And How They Can Be Won* (2008); Peter Navarro, *Death By China: Confronting the Dragon* (2011).

Most students of international relations know by heart the immortal words that the historian Thucydides used to explain the outbreak of the devastating 27-year war that engulfed all of the Greek *poleis* in 431 BCE: “The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable.”[7]

This passage is often quoted in the contemporary debate, and invariably used for rhetorical effect to deliver a warning. For example, Graham Allison, former dean of the Kennedy School at Harvard University, one of the premier students of contemporary international students, argues that Athens and Sparta were caught in a trap from which there was no easy escape. “If leaders in China and the US perform no better than their predecessors in classical Greece,” Allison warns, “historians of the 21st century will cite Thucydides in explaining the catastrophe that follows.”[8]

Another commonly cited tale from the past that is supposed to tell us about the present and the future is the rise of Germany in the late 1800s. Henry Kissinger, for example, invokes the famous memorandum written by a senior Foreign Office official, Eyre Crowe, that analyzed the rise of Germany and the challenges Germany posed to Britain. Crowe’s analysis, delivered to his minister on New Year’s Day, 1907, was as relentlessly structural as Thucydides’s trap: Germany, Crowe argued, had no choice. There was no agency at work here—in other words, choices that German leaders could have made—only the unforgiving structures of the international system. So Crowe concluded that Germany *had* to rise, and its rise *had* to challenge British interests, and Britain *had* to respond with what Crowe called “the most unbending determination.”[9]

What we have seen is the emergence of what might be called a “Crowe School”—scholars who see the rise of China just as Crowe saw the rise of Germany. One of those is surely John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, author of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, the bible of an approach in international relations called offensive realism—no pun intended. Mearsheimer also uses history. In his case, the history he invokes is the history of his own country, and how it established hegemony over the entire western hemisphere.

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[7] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War,* trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972), Book 1, chapter 23.

[8] Graham Allison, “Thucydides’s trap has been sprung in the Pacific,” *Financial Times*, 21 August 2012.

[9] Henry Kissinger, *On China* (London: Penguin, 2011), epilogue. The original text of the Crowe memorandum: F.O. 371/257, Memorandum by Mr Eyre Crowe, “Memorandum on the present state of British Relations with France and Germany,” 1 January 1907, in *British Documents on the Origins of the War,* ed. G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, vol. III: *The Testing of the Entente, 1904-6* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1928), appendix A, 398–420.

For Mearsheimer, the logic is obvious: "I expect China," he told a University of Sydney audience in August 2010, "to act the way the United States has acted," which means that, in his view, "China will try to dominate the Asia-Pacific region much as the US dominates the Western Hemisphere." And that leads him to a view that echoes Crowe: "To put it bluntly, China cannot rise peacefully."[10]

Here in Australia, Hugh White also looks to history to support his view that a "China choice"—the title of the book that developed out of his 2010 *Quarterly Essay*—needs to be made.[11] White calls up Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and in particular the crucial failure of European rulers in 1453 to save Constantinople from the Ottomans because they did not understand the implications of allowing the city to fall. "By some," Gibbon wrote, "the danger was considered as imaginary, by others as inevitable."[12] In White's view, we risk making the same mistake—which is why he comes to his view that the US needs to share power with China.

By contrast, Aaron Friedberg totally rejects sharing power. He advocates confronting the rise of China by maintaining a power balance that is favourable to the US. This means doing things like developing a new generation of weapons aimed specifically at China, abandoning what he calls "diplomatic happy talk", creating a "community of Asian democracies," and, most importantly, pushing the cause of democratic reform in China. Like many others, Friedberg also calls up history to buttress his argument. It is not for nothing that the subtitle of his book is a deliberate echo of A.J.P. Taylor's great history of the 19th century, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe.*[13]

But the phantasmagorical nature of the Western debate is not simply the result of forces purely *within* western countries. On the contrary: there are exogenous—in other words, external—factors at play, in particular the debate that is underway in China about the future of great power politics in the Asia-Pacific.

The debate in China is actually more diversified than the one in the US and the West, with numerous voices: nationalist, isolationist, nativist, realist, neo-Leninist, neo-Maoist, globalist, multilateralist; there are hard-liners and soft-liners; there are strident voices, there are measured voices. Indeed, the China scholar David Shambaugh has identified fully seven different schools of thought in the debate over power transition going on in China.[14]

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[10] John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010), 389, 382.

[11] Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* (Collingwood, Vic: Black Inc., 2012); Hugh White, "Power Shift: Australia's Future Between Washington and Beijing," *Quarterly Essay 39* (2010).

[12] White, *China Choice,* 125.

[13] Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), chap. 11.

But a common feature in the Western debate is the tendency to pay attention to those voices in China that fit with the China-threat rhetoric. Consider, for example, how little attention is paid in the Western debate to the official Chinese government line about how best to think about the contemporary international system. The official line is that there is "one superpower, many great powers."[15] In this view, China is merely one of many great powers, with the United States as the acknowledged superpower.

Indeed, there are some analysts, such as Wang Jisi, dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, who are prepared to admit that that the official formulation actually understates the reality. As Wang has said, the one superpower "is more super, and the many great powers less great."[16]

But this view doesn't grab the kind of attention that some alternatives to the official line do. For there is also a well-developed view among some Chinese elites that the United States is definitely a declining power—and not at all the world's hegemonic boss dragon of the title of my lecture tonight—the characterization of the US that was supposedly contained in a widely-read and influential 1999 book, *Unrestricted Warfare*.[17]

I say supposedly, because the authors of *Unrestricted Warfare,* Senior Colonel Qiáo Liáng and Senior Colonel Wáng Xiāngsuì, did not actually use the phrase "hegemonic boss dragon" to describe the US. That delightfully colourful phrase was the translation provided by the US Embassy in Beijing, which translated the three characters used by the senior colonels literally—too literally, as it turns out.

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[14] David Shambaugh, "Coping with a Conflicted China," *Washington Quarterly* 34:1 (2011), 7–27. Note that he does not like the term "schools of thought," preferring the term "tendencies."

[15] 一超多强, *yī chāo, dūo qiáng,*.

[16] Quoted in Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, "How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing's Fears," *Foreign Affairs* 91:5 (September/October 2012), 45–46.

[17] Qiáo Liáng (乔良) and Wáng Xiāngsuì (王湘穗), *Unrestricted Warfare* [超限战, *chāo xiàn zhàn*] (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), Part 2, pp. 46-48, available at http://www.cryptome.org/cuw.htm. Note that an English translation was published in India as *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America* (Delhi: Natraj Publishers, 2007), with a picture of the World Trade Center towers burning on the cover. The subtitle and the cover image completely misrepresent the argument of the original.

For *bà* [霸] is indeed the character for hegemonic or dominating; *wáng* [王] is indeed an overlord or a boss, and *lóng* [龙] is indeed a dragon. But *bà* can also mean tyrannical or a tyrant; *wáng* is also the Chinese character for king; and *lóng* is also one of the characters in the Chinese word for dinosaur, *kǒnglóng* [恐龙], literally "fearsome dragon." And thus *bàwánglóng* [霸王龙] is also a "tyrant king dinosaur," or, simply, Chinese for Tyrannosaurus rex…

And this of course puts rather a different spin on the main message of *Unrestricted Warfare*. That book was about how to deal with a country that Qiao and Wang acknowledged had technological superiority, but which they argued had a variety of other weaknesses that could be overcome by a determined competitor. And, in their view, the United States was indeed a dinosaur—all that that implies. In other words, a large and powerful predator, but lumbering and capable of being out-maneuvered if you were canny and smart enough, and, most importantly, doomed to extinction.

Their view was very much in keeping with a nationalist and realist tendency in the PLA that often characterizes the US as a declining power. That view of American decline has hardened and widened since the colonels were writing in the late 1990s, and particularly since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-2009.

Indeed, a number of books have emerged in the last decade that slag the US, and call on China to be more assertive—books that Shambaugh calls the "disappointment literature." For example, *Unhappy China*, published in 2009, advocates a strongly nationalist policy that would see China resisting American bullying, and instead leading the world. One of the authors of *Unhappy China*, Sòng Xiǎojūn, a former PLA Navy officer and now a frequent commentator on CCTV and in foreign media, goes so far as to describe the United States as an "old cucumber painted green"[18]—a Chinese colloquialism used in the context of something old and decaying that is tarted up to make it appear more attractive and appealing.[19]

A similar perspective is advanced in the work of Liú Míngfú, whose 2010 book *China's Dream: Major Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in a Post-American Era* outlines how the United States will be as "merciless" in opposing the rise of China as it was opposing Japan and then the Soviet Union; and this will lead to the "duel of the century." But it will also lead to what Liu calls a new "Yellow-Fortune Era" that will mark the return of the Chinese nation to its rightful place at the center of global politics: "to save itself, to save the world, China must prepare to become the [world's] helmsman."[20]

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[18] 老黄瓜刷绿漆, *lǎo huáng gūa shūa lù qī.*

[19] Song Qiang, Huang Jisu, Sòng Xiǎojūn, Wang Xiaodong and Liu Yang, 中国不高兴 [*Zhōngguó bù gāoxìng—Unhappy China*] (Beijing: Phoenix Media, 2008). In Sòng Xiǎojūn's view, China is ready to act the great power. As he put it to a Japanese newspaper in 2010: "If the United States is unable to serve as the "world's policeman," China is ready to take its place. Why shouldn't China take on the role of the world's top cop?" Sòng Xiǎojūn [宋曉軍], "China ready to replace US as world's 'top cop,'" *Asahi Shimbun*, 14 August 2010, http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201008130318.html.

These views of the United States are important because they feed into the Western debate, often seen as confirming the menace posed by a rising China.

Such are some of the phantoms. Why should we be skeptical about them? The difficulty is that the debate throws up images of the past, the present, and the future that are deeply problematic.

Consider the images of the past. What are we to make of the use of history in this debate? In a little book written in 2008, *The Uses and Abuses of History*, Margaret MacMillan, the Warden of St Antony's College at Oxford, a former colleague at Ryerson University in Toronto, provides us with a cautionary answer. Although she does not discuss power transition in the Asia-Pacific, MacMillan reminds us that while history can readily provide examples to guide our guesses about the future, historical analogies can also set us off on disastrously wrong paths, oversimplifying and drawing the wrong lessons from inexact comparisons.

So MacMillan, the professional historian, urges us to be skeptical whenever those who claim to speak with authority—professional historians, other academics, media commentators, bureaucrats, and political leaders and their advisers—argue that "history" teaches us that we should respond in a certain way. Because, as she notes, anyone, expert or not, can oversimplify, draw the wrong conclusions, or march confidently down the wrong path when it comes to a future that is always unknowable.[21]

And as a political scientist I am acutely conscious of the wisdom of MacMillan's warning about marching confidently down the wrong path. I mentioned at the outset tonight that the last time I was at Murdoch was just after the Cold War, and Richard and I were working on a project about the impact of the dramatic shifts in global politics and its impact on American leadership. But the end of the Cold War caught me, like so many of my colleagues who taught international relations, completely by surprise. The theoretical approaches that we were so earnestly and so confidently teaching our students in the

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[20] Liú Míngfú [刘明福], 中国梦 [*Zhōngguó mèng—The China Dream*] (Beijing: China Friendship Publishing Company, 2010), 75ff.

[21] Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 185.

1980s offered us not the tiniest inkling of the profound transformations that were to about to occur in global politics by the decade's end. Indeed, it is precisely the awful record of political scientists during that era that leads me to be very nervous when the debate that we are having today is phrased so clearly in the certainties of the lessons of the past.

A second cause for skepticism is that the portrayals of the present so often involve analysis that can be readily contested. Consider the core notion that underlines this debate—that China is "rising" and the United States is "declining." There are a number of critics who point out that the portraits we paint of the present are far too simplified.

In other words, while there are numerous indicators that one can point to as evidence of rise and decline, there are other indicators that could as easily demonstrate that the trends are not as dramatic as the debate makes them appear to be. And this is because so much of the contemporary debate depends on trying to predict the future from the evidence that we pull from both the past and the present.

To be sure, the debate is filled with confident assertions about the shape of the future. But the simple fact is that we don't really know much beyond what we can see at present. And what we can see is two very large states that have a generally peaceful and cooperative relationship with each other; two states that are deeply and symbiotically dependent on each other for their continued well-being; two states that are in many respects very much like each other, indeed, who richly deserve each other.

But when I look at the present state of the relationship between the United States and China, I can see the wisdom of the two-sun sky metaphor preferred by my colleague Paul Evans of the University of British Columbia. His metaphor was inspired by a discovery by the NASA spacecraft Kepler, which had been launched in 2009 to explore the Milky Way for Earth-like planets. In September 2011, Kepler discovered a binary star—two stars that essentially orbit each other. And orbiting around this binary star is the first circumbinary planet known to humankind, which NASA named Kepler-16b.

For Professor Evans, a long-time student of Chinese politics and the politics of the Asia-Pacific, this planet with two suns was a perfect metaphor for the region, where all of us have links to both the United States and China.[22]

I agree that it is an excellent metaphor. But, to extend it a bit, we do not really know how stable our binary system is, and we don't really understand how the gravitational pull of this two-sun sky is actually going to evolve in the future. But if we do not really know how our two-sun sky will work, then I am led to wonder whether we shouldn't be skeptical about the very utility of a debate that depends so heavily on so many assured and confident statements about the future.

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[22] Paul Evans, "Global Security, the Shifting Axis, Kepler 16-b, and Two Suns," *Asia Pacific Memo*, #171, 17 July 2012, available at http://www.asiapacificmemo.ca/global-security-the-shifting-axis-kepler-16b-and-two-suns.

In other words, should we even be having this debate?

Peter Hartcher, international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, argued in a column in August 2012 that "Any China conversation [is] better than none at all."[23] He wrote the column in response to the dismissive treatment of Hugh White's work by the Julia Gillard government, and Hartcher's point was that we need the kind of discussion that White's paper had sparked.

At first blush, Hartcher's argument is unproblematic. In other words, who could disagree with the idea that countries need to have conversations about the future? And, bluntly put, I am not sure that the best response is to simply denounce the debate as "infantile," as Prime Minister Gillard did last week after Australia gained a seat on the Security Council (though I certainly understand why she might be exasperated by the notion that a Security Council seat will pose a problem for Australia).

On the other hand, I am not convinced that it follows that any old "China conversation" will do. What if speculation about menacing futures that are based on questionable appeals to the past and contentious analyses of the present—and always using visions designed to overstate and exaggerate—have the effect of actually creating and expanding adversarial attitudes?

Henry Kissinger has been most outspoken on the negative consequences of the present debate. He is openly worried that both the United States and China will "analyze themselves into self-fulfilling prophesies" about war,[24] and his persistent reminder has been, to use the title of his most recent article, that conflict is always a choice, not a necessity.[25]

But because the debate itself has now become one of the prime contributors to the dynamic of the relationship, it is tempting to call for a moratorium, putting it off until we all have clearer evidence of what the future holds. This, of course, is not going to happen, if only because the menace of threat inflation in international affairs, like scariness in horror movies and phantasmagoria, is so very deeply appealing. So we should not expect an end to the conversation any time soon.

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[23] Peter Hartcher, "Any China conversation better than none at all," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 2012.

[24] Henry A. Kissinger, "Avoiding a U.S.-China cold war," *Washington Post*, 14 January 2011.

[25] Henry A. Kissinger, "The Future of U.S.-Chinese Relations: Conflict Is a Choice, Not a Necessity," *Foreign Affairs* 91:2 (Mar/Apr 2012), 44–55.

But, it seems to me, we can—and should—be skeptical about this debate as it continues to unfold around us. And, when we listen to members of the *chatterati*—academics, commentators, former officials and others—as they hold forth confidently on what the future of the Asia-Pacific holds, or as they tell us what the lessons of the past suggest what we *must do* about the great power politics of our time, I am hoping that we will remember Sir Walter Murdoch—and do a little growling.