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Washington's Crackpot Realism

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Framing the China threat as irredeemably antagonistic misses the reality that in order to survive, both countries must cooperate as well as compete.

Barney Low/Alamy

Then defense secretary Jim Mattis speaking with marines at the US embassy in Beijing, June 2018

Reviewed:

The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict
by Elbridge A. Colby
Yale University Press, 356 pp., $32.50

The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order
by Rush Doshi
Oxford University Press, 419 pp., $27.95

China Unbound: A New World Disorder

+ See All

The twenty years of war since the September 11, 2001, attacks have killed more than 900,000 people, displaced at least 38 million, and cost the United States an estimated $8 trillion.[1] During these two decades of intense fighting and killing, the US has been responsible for a quantity of suffering that would have been unthinkable when President George W. Bush, with the near-unanimous backing of Congress, launched his assault on Afghanistan. It is clear now that America's leaders deluded themselves and failed to ask basic questions about the ultimate goal of the war before invading: its human and financial costs, its benefits, or how it would end.

One might assume that such disastrous results, and the ignominious end of the war in Afghanistan last year, would lead to a period of reflection and soul-searching. Yet no such inquiry has occurred—at least not one that fully grapples with the shocking self-deception, pervasive misreading of events, and powerful groupthink that drove the longest war in American history.

Instead, without missing a beat, Washington power brokers and pundits, in and out of government, have fixed their gaze on a new foe: China. Think tank specialists and defense insiders are churning out books and articles on how to contain China and engage in what they have called a "great power conflict," a vague description encompassing all manner of hostile interactions—ideological, economic, political, and military. Last year, Admiral Philip Davidson, head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing that China is accelerating its ambitions to supplant America's leadership in the world, and that it could invade Taiwan within "the next six years."

The Strategy of Denial by Elbridge Colby well exemplifies this new confrontational and Manichean zeal. Colby's book clearly, but perhaps unwittingly, exposes the extreme peril we face, as he and others like him lay the intellectual foundations for yet another war thousands of miles from our shores, and one that is more treacherous than those we fought in the Middle East.

Colby worked under Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and helped write the 2018 US National Defense Strategy, which proclaimed that "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern." His book reflects a growing perception throughout the country that China poses a mortal threat to America and its Asian allies. A Gallup poll in March 2021 found that the share of Americans who see China as our greatest enemy doubled in just one year, from 22 percent to 45 percent.

Colby's focus is not on human rights or democratic values, ours or anyone else's, but rather on how to deter China and "wage war" against it to prevent it from dominating Asia—and ultimately the entire world. He emphasizes relentless military competition among states, while omitting any discussion of how we might compete economically with China or what part international institutions could play. He considers Asia the most important region in the world because it produces 40 percent of global GDP. There are, in his view, stable balances of power in Europe and the Persian Gulf, leaving the Pacific as the primary theater of conflict between America and China.

Colby believes that if China were ever to achieve what he calls "hegemony" in Asia, it would have substantial incentives to use such power to exclude the US from the region and "compromise Americans' freedom, prosperity, and even physical security." To contain China, he proposes a "binding strategy" that would enmesh the military of the US with those of our Pacific allies, such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan. This, he believes, would force China, if it invaded Taiwan, to attack these countries as well—resulting in a much wider war. The US position would thus be stronger because more countries would be fighting alongside us in an "anti-hegemonic coalition" against China.

He also looks to what he calls "thumotic impulses"—spiritedness or passion—to spur on the coalition to fight with greater resolve. Colby takes the concept from Homer's *Iliad*, in which Achilles, driven mad by his anger (θυμός, *thumos*) at the killing of his friend Patroclus, slays Hector. In recent years this theme has been articulated by a number of conservative scholars, such as Harvey Mansfield in his book *Manliness* (2006); Michael Anton, who served on President Trump's National Security Council, in his essay "The Flight 93 Election" (2016); Robert Kagan in *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (2008); and the political science professor Carson Holloway, who published an essay on *thumos* in which he described Trump as "a preeminently thumotic being."

Colby acknowledges that war with China over Taiwan could lead to the "limited" use of nuclear weapons and that as a last resort, "selective nuclear proliferation"—which is to say, providing nuclear weapons to allies—might be necessary. He adds:

> Selective nuclear proliferation to such states as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and even Taiwan might help bridge the gap between regional conventional defeat and US willingness to employ its nuclear forces, especially at scale.

Colby tries to assure us that China would be deterred from escalating to a broader nuclear exchange because of America's retaliatory power.

Confident about his strategy and markedly unconcerned about its catastrophic implications, Colby seems cavalier about the fog of war and the possibility of errant intelligence. He blithely ignores how much can go wrong. For evidence, consider the recently declassified video footage of a US drone strike during the final days of our withdrawal from Afghanistan that mistakenly killed ten innocent civilians, including seven children. In its subsequent review of more than 1,300 documents from a hidden Pentagon archive, *The New York Times* found that this wayward bombing was no aberration, but rather part of a pattern of airstrikes in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan over the past eight years that were "plagued by deeply flawed intelligence, rushed and imprecise targeting and the deaths of thousands of civilians, many of them children."

These are just the latest examples of shocking intelligence failures stretching back to the Korean War, Vietnam, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the US totally missed the fact that Russian missiles in Cuba were already loaded with nuclear weapons and would have been launched before any disabling US strike.

The danger here is not this specific book, but that Colby is not an outlier in Washington. In *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Rush Doshi, currently Biden's director for China at the National Security Council, writes from a similar zero-sum perspective but focuses more broadly on what he sees as China's decades-long determination to become the world's new hegemon. Citing voluminous Communist Party documents, he carefully traces the emergence of what he believes is China's grand strategy to drive America out of Asia and displace its paramount influence in the world.

Writing in scholarly, sometimes jargon-laden prose, Doshi presents the US–China contest as "a competition over regional and global order, as well as the various 'forms of control' that sustain it." According to him, the US cannot maintain its preeminent position unless it blunts China's worldwide military, economic, and political "order-building" and simultaneously reinvests in "the foundations of American order."

With respect to military engagement, this will entail deploying and sharing with allies a number of advanced weapons systems throughout the Indo-Pacific and conducting joint training and war exercises. On the political and economic front, Doshi calls for expansive industrial policies and innovative initiatives to keep America at the forefront of the vital technologies of the future. Though he recognizes the country's polarized political environment, he believes that there is enough bipartisan consensus on the threat from China that America can rise to the challenge.

Despite this unrelenting competition, Doshi envisions cooperation with China on what he calls "transnational challenges," such as nuclear proliferation and climate change. Unfortunately, he does not explain how cooperation on these threats would ever be possible in view of the mutual hostility and deep mistrust inherent in *his* grand strategy.

It's worth noting that "political realism," the school of thought that Colby and Doshi in their different ways represent, has genuine value. Such an approach can sharpen our understanding of the way nation-states have historically acted as they jockey for advantage over competitors. The doctrine explains why the competition between China and the US is so dangerous, and how diplomacy and human judgment can be overwhelmed by the powerful forces of nationalism—even more so when exacerbated by historical grievances and rapid weapons innovation.

World War I is the classic example of how nations move from competition to miscalculation to war, even though it results in mutual catastrophe. In his 2012 book *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, the historian Christopher Clark diagnoses self-reinforcing "processes of interaction" that led to the unforeseen and unwanted war, inducing each state to repeatedly react to the other in an attempt to gain an advantage.[2] So it could be, too, with respect to the current "great power competition" between the US and China. Few want war, but highly competitive actions are fostering increasingly hostile perceptions based on profoundly different histories and social systems.

Compounding the danger is a long history of self-assured but mistaken—even delusional—thinking in Washington. More than sixty years ago, the sociologist C. Wright Mills coined the phrase "crackpot realism," referring to leaders who he believed were making incredibly reckless decisions with little understanding of the consequences, while believing themselves to be exceptionally rational.[3] In *The Hell of Good Intentions* (2018), Stephen Walt describes countless blunders made by the foreign policy elites in the Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations. He convincingly demonstrates that very bright people with the best of intentions, no matter their party or ideology, get caught up in "rational" processes that lead to disastrous outcomes.

This is what makes current groupthink on China, based almost exclusively on zero-sum assumptions, so alarming. General Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described China's recent testing of a hypersonic missile as "very close" to a "Sputnik moment," referencing the technological advantage that US planners perceived the Soviet Union to have achieved with its satellite launch in 1957. Such statements reinforce the notion that China or America must subordinate the other and engage in a new cold war, rivaling the contest between the US and the USSR. But this one would be, in many ways, far different.

First, China, unlike the USSR, has an enormous and growing economy. Second, it is a major trading partner with neighboring countries and is tightly integrated with the rest of the world, including the US. Third, it is making huge investments in research and development and driving technological innovations of all kinds. Finally, China is intensifying its nationalistic fervor with repeated invocations of its victimhood during a "century of national humiliation."

This nationalistic fervor is on display in China's efforts to threaten and pressure even ordinary people if they dare to criticize Chinese policies. In *China Unbound: A New World Disorder*, Joanna Chiu, a reporter for the *Toronto Star*, provides a powerful, heartfelt account of Chinese immigrants and their fraught encounters with Beijing's United Front Work Department, a lavishly funded government agency that works with the Ministry of State Security. Chiu tells gripping stories of influence operations in such disparate places as Australia, Canada, the US, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Russia. Chinese agents are sent throughout the world to intimidate international students and others of the far-flung Chinese diaspora. Chiu's stories demonstrate in human terms just how formidable a task it will be to put the US and China on any kind of cooperative path.

The most telling example of China's nationalism is its deep and pervasive conviction that Taiwan is a part of China. This is an area where compromise seems inconceivable. I can't imagine China accepting defeat, ever, in a conflict with the US over Taiwan.

Kevin Rudd, a former prime minister of Australia and a Mandarin speaker, recognizes this stark reality in *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict Between the US and Xi Jinping's China*. Rudd directly confronts the growing possibility of war and offers well-thought-out proposals to prevent that catastrophic outcome and the "global carnage" it would cause.

Rudd is undaunted by the fact that, in his view, for both Washington and Beijing, "the question is no longer whether such confrontation can be avoided, but when it will occur and under what circumstances," and he rejects "decoupling, containment, confrontation, and perhaps ultimately the unthinkable itself." Instead, he sketches out "a joint strategic framework" that would allow China and America to (1) agree on procedures for navigating each other's strategic red lines, which if inadvertently crossed would lead to military escalation; (2) identify acceptable areas of "nonlethal" but "full-blown strategic competition"; and (3) define those areas where cooperation would be recognized and encouraged, such as on climate change. All of this would be anchored in negotiation, verification, deterrence, and mutual respect. Rudd calls this "managed strategic competition." He sees a military conflict between China and the US as a catastrophe "beyond imagining" and therefore makes the case for "all necessary precautionary measures" to reduce the risk of war.

Like Rudd, several leading scholars envision a future where both China and the US, despite their radically different systems, learn to coexist and even cooperate without waging a new cold war. In *Limit, Leverage, and Compete: A New Strategy on China*, a 2019 report from the Center for American Progress, Melanie Hart and Kelly Magsamen (who now hold senior positions at the US Departments of State and Defense, respectively) detail a "new strategic framework" for the US–China competition, which they call the "central contest of this century." Hart and Magsamen grant that China is "actively undermining US interests around the world," but they diverge from the more hawkish China hands in their strong emphasis on policies that would rejuvenate and strengthen America, "regardless of how China acts."

In plain language, the writers explain what America must do to reassert global leadership and rectify a "pattern of serious missteps" and "decades of strategic inertia." Hart and Magsamen emphasize the dramatic investments needed to transform American education, specifically calling for debt-free undergraduate education for all students; tuition assistance for postgraduate science, technology, engineering, and math degrees; federal funding for state and local colleges; a redesigned workforce development system; and a substantial commitment to research and development, and public infrastructure. It all sounds plausible, but the politics of getting it done seem remote. The unrecoverable trillions spent on fighting terrorism could have paid the bill; alas, this is not how official Washington sees America's challenges.

Looking outward, Hart and Magsamen are concerned about China's efforts to obtain sensitive US technology. They recommend a variety of preventive measures aimed at curbing "operations that threaten US prosperity or national security," though the consequences of these measures remain unclear. They also suggest finding ways to "leverage" Chinese investments in development projects, such as those in its Belt and Road Initiative. The idea here is for America to invest, along with others, to make development projects more transparent and sustainable. This will require the US to work with countries in the Belt and Road target areas and provide competitive financing so that recipient countries are not solely dependent on China. Additionally, they call for partnering with China on such public goods as disaster relief, ocean protection, climate initiatives, and combating pandemics.

Focusing on global economic and financial structures, *The United States vs. China: The Quest for Global Economic Leadership* by C. Fred Bergsten makes an even more urgent case for US–China cooperation: work together to stabilize the world economy or risk a disaster on par with the Great Depression of the 1930s. Bergsten doesn't ignore the deep differences between our political systems, but he says that the world economy will encounter dangerous disruptions unless the US and China ensure orderly functioning of trade, currencies, lending, and investment. He categorically rejects decoupling the two economies and asserts that if America follows this path, China will just continue to rise and America will falter. He notes that the tariffs imposed by Trump failed to slow China's growth and adds that most other countries will not follow America if it goes its own way.

Bergsten calls for "conditional competitive cooperation," with both strenuous competition and substantive cooperation on global economic issues that are vitally important to both countries—and to the world. He acknowledges that China has

engaged in currency manipulation, theft of intellectual property, and forced transfer of technologies, but he argues that these problems are best confronted through global institutions and skillful diplomacy. Like Hart and Magsamen, Bergsten sees the absolute need for America to straighten out its own economy; make serious investments in research and development, and infrastructure of all kinds; and enact policies that reduce its gross inequalities and wage stagnation.

Framing the China threat as irredeemably antagonistic, as many "political realists" are currently doing, misses the reality that both countries—to prosper and even to survive—must cooperate as well as compete. While competition is inevitable, the US and China do share common interests, which could help form the basis of what I would call "planetary realism." This is an informed realism that faces up to the unprecedented global dangers caused by carbon emissions, nuclear weapons, viruses, and new disruptive technologies, all of which cannot be addressed by one country alone. Both America and China recognized such planetary realism when they pledged, albeit loosely, at the Glasgow climate summit in late 2021 to work together to cut greenhouse gas emissions. The stakes for the world have never been higher, and there has never been a greater need to see the world as profoundly interdependent.

It would be foolish to minimize the military dangers that China poses, but it would be even more foolish to act in ways that actually exacerbate them. The better path —in fact, the only path that avoids the horror of war—is to accept that China's system is different from ours, get our own house in order, and seek a decent *modus vivendi*. Given America's recent history of ill-conceived and disastrous wars, we should be skeptical of any other course—especially of loud calls for potentially catastrophic confrontations. Rather than *thumos* and *grand strategies*, America desperately needs clarity about the perilous predicament in which it now finds itself, and the courage to think and act anew. ■

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These figures are drawn from Brown University's Costs of War Project, a scholarly effort to catalog the human and budgetary costs of the US-led war on terror during the past two decades. ↩

2. Harper, p. 560. See R.J.W. Evans's review in these pages, February 6, 2014 ↩

3. Proving the point, only a couple of years after Mills wrote about "crackpot realism," the Joint Chiefs of Staff met and formally approved a plan to launch more than three thousand nuclear weapons if the US was attacked by the USSR—a strike that could have killed 600 million people. ↩