The Improbable War: China, the United States, and the Logic of Great Power Conflict by Christopher Coker
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The central point of this book is NOT that there will be war between the U.S. and China. Rather, the author utilises historical examples and theoretical constructs of international relations to examine how and why great powers have gone to war in the past, and then shows how such past events could have relevance to a conflict between China and the U.S. in the near future. While specifically noting that he does not expect a war, Coker does remind the reader of other authors such as Kagan and Luttwak who decry the widespread academic opinion that warfare is on the wane as a tool of policy.

Coker focuses on what can happen when a newly rising power challenges a status quo power for dominance of the international order. The example of the rise of Imperial Germany and its eventual challenge to the United Kingdom for the mastery of Europe, and the world is the primary prism through which he looks at these problems. One of the key lessons of the work is that, while stacking up all of the reasons why there should not be a war between the U.S. and China, policy makers and academics must not allow these trends to turn into exactly the kind of complacency which was shattered in August 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War.

Like Germany, China has developed a view of its own history, and its rise, that verges on the dystopian, and is significantly out of step both with the prevailing world view, and more specifically that of the status quo power, the U.S., just as Germany had done with the UK a century ago. To Coker, it is this selective manipulation of historical facts to fit a government desired narrative which makes China potentially just as dangerous as Germany was. The narrative in question is, of course, what he calls China's "near pathological need" to overtake the west in terms of economics and power. This is in response to what he demonstrates to be a significantly fallacious view of its own relative standing through world history.

The culmination to this is the sense of humiliation which China felt as a result of the western imperial and colonial expansion, particularly in the 19th century. Indeed, Beijing still harbors a deep seated grudge against the UK in particular for the destruction caused by the Opium Wars, while failing to remember that western intervention was only possible because of centuries of political corruption and dissention in what was more an agglomeration of constantly warring subunits than a legitimate, unitary state. Similarly, China bears a grudge against the U.S. for its

support of Taiwan, its alliance with Japan, and its presence in the Western Pacific. In part this is because its history can not acknowledge that the overwhelming effort against the Japanese was undertaken by the Nationalist Chinese with massive support from the UK and the U.S. All of this leads to what the author calls "Strategic Autism." For China, this means that it has great difficulty generating allies and sharing with them, since it has never had to do so before. In spite of overt efforts such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes around the world, China also lags considerably in soft power and influence.

This work draws openly and heavily on the broad array of security scholarship, with particular focus on the writers, such as Norman Angell, who saw their claims that war was not in the world's enlightened self interest, shattered by the "Guns of August," 1914. Coker chronicles briefly exactly how the First World War broke out as a cautionary tale, noting the steady breakdown of liberal thinking in Germany, and how that thought process was replaced by zero sum thinking. This erosion of thought led to a situation where rationality as it is generally understood no longer applied, culminating in a series of miscalculations which led to war.

The point here is that China may become increasingly susceptible to the type of miscalculations which led Germany to war as it gets closer and closer to the U.S. in military capability. Examples such as the economic crisis of 2008 are used as further examples of the diminished presence of rational thinking, with Coker noting that economists showed a stronger tendency to try to force new situations and examples into their pre-existing set of explanations that to truly open up to the type of new thinking which might have averted the crisis.

In terms of what might trigger conflict between the U.S. and China, Coker expounds on well known flashpoints, particularly crises which could erupt on the Korean peninsula, in the straits of Taiwan, and in the sea passages to China's east and south, passageways which it has demonstrated a desire to control, but which are ringed by smaller regional powers and one very large and powerful regional actor, Japan. In any of these three cases, China might feel that they are strong enough and that the U.S. is weak enough to try to force a military solution. This is predicated on a perception that the U.S. has lost the zeal for world leadership which has driven it since the end of the Second World War. As Coker repeatedly notes, this lack of zeal is already perceived by Chinese military planners as a lack of capability on behalf of the U.S. to do what it says it wants to in the world, in spite of the fact that it refuses to step down from its place as leader of the international system.

So on one hand we have status quo power, potentially losing its way and its will to lead, while on the other hand the rising power has a list of grievances which are apparent primarily to itself, but which has growing contempt for the capability of the status quo power. This model could

lead to war. The closing chapter's of Coker's work focus on what a war between China and the U.S. might actually look like. The main point here is that it will not look much like the great power wars of the last century. This is for several reasons, most notably the differing warfare interpretations and traditions of the two countries, and the impact of technological advancement.

The spiritual difference between Tzu-ian and Clausewitzian warfare is discussed in some detail, with the author noting how each country might be influenced to act based on those styles. The U.S., which Coker describes as being confrontational by nature, stands in sharp contrast to China, which follows a Tzu and Confucian inspired model by which power is defined as the ability to manage or foresee world events in such a way as to profit from them. China would therefore attempt to take steps that would ensure victory without a shot being fired, but would most likely not gamble on failure through direct action, particularly in a region in which it has few, if any, reliable allies.

A conflict between the two countries might look like a series of cyber or space attacks, while the U.S. would attempt a naval blockade of China. China will have prepared the groundwork for this by doing what it could to separate Washington' allies from it, and to convince the White House of the futility of conflict. Potential escalation points involve Chinese dual use assets, such as the command and control nodes for its sea denial missile systems, which fall under the same network as that country's nuclear deterrent, such that an attack on the former might be interpreted as an effort to disrupt the latter.

What then might keep a war between China and the U.S. from happening? According to Coker, there are many reasons to suppose that a conflict will not take place. A laundry list of the ideas presented includes: The real possibility that China might have peaked in the last half decade and may actually diminish as a challenge; the concurrent possibility that the U.S., through shale technology, an increase in the marketability of American labour, and other factors, might recover both the fundament and the zeal to use its power, in other words, that it might once again renew itself. The growth of internal democracy in China might relieve tension, or increase it, while the U.S. might begin to actively work to subvert China's rise rather than hedging against it as it has done heretorfore. The so called "Thucydidean Trap," also known as the security dilemma, will have to be successfully avoided, or navigated, to prevent outbreaks of conflict. This means that China and the U.S. must take pains that each other's preventive or mitigative actions against each other not be seen as provocative.

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