

BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Kevin Rudd's

*The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict  
between the U.S. and Xi Jinping's China*

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## U.S.-China “Extreme Competition” and the Drumbeat of War

*Susan Thornton*

As we approach the end of 2022, amid Russia’s ongoing brutality in Ukraine, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, global economic turmoil, and increasing planetary warming, a war between the world’s two biggest powers—effectively a war to end all wars—is also looming. For forty years, between 1979 and 2019, the United States and China managed their relations, to the extreme betterment of both, in accordance with an uneasy diplomatic deal: the United States would basically live with China’s Communist ideology and the more objectionable practices of the Chinese state inside its own borders for the sake of being able to work with one-fifth of humanity on shared objectives (first countering the Soviet Union, then the pursuit of mutual prosperity), whereas China would cease fomenting revolution, devote itself to its modernization, and accept U.S. de facto ambivalence regarding the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to rule China. Of course, this deal was never explicit, but each side wagered that, over time, it would become easier. The United States hoped that China’s ideology and governance practices would change (I would argue that they have, although certainly not as completely as some wished) and the CCP surmised that with China’s restoration as a great power, questions of its legitimacy would fade (as they mostly have, with less than .01% of the world’s people living in countries that do not *de jure* recognize the CCP’s legitimacy to rule China). But instead of growing more accepting of each other, the two sides have now chosen to focus on the narrow, unrealized hopes of the deal and to magnify their cries of the other side’s perfidy in causing the deal to break apart.

There will be many books written in time about the causes of the coming rupture (and indeed, many are being written already), but *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the U.S. and Xi Jinping’s China* by Kevin Rudd, former prime minister of Australia and current president of the Asia Society, wants to be proactive and provide an antidote to the unfolding downward spiral. The book seeks to explain to the unseeing on both sides in real time why the breakdown of the deal is

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not inevitable and, in general terms, how to avoid what must be avoided. As such, Rudd adroitly exercises his third-party perspective to sketch a more balanced history than one typically finds in American or Chinese popular accounts. Rudd's method is to outline how U.S. and Chinese perceptions and policies are blinkered and, if not urgently readjusted, are very likely to lead to conflict. He leads us through a museum of opposed perspectives, political narcissism, and exaggerated insecurities that future historians will likely point to as markers on the road to the unmaking of the era of prosperity, peace, and promise known as globalization. What is Rudd's bottom line? That the United States and China can and must avoid a catastrophic conflict that would usher in a new world war unlike, and worse than, the last one. But while he hopes to convince us that human agency and efforts can prevent the forces now at work from bringing us to disaster, one cannot help but come away from the read with a sense of foreboding and inevitability about the prospect of conflict.

### *How Did We Get Here?*

Rudd, who seems to subscribe to Henry Kissinger's warning about the United States and China being "in the foothills of a Cold War,"<sup>1</sup> begins his argument with a brief and accessible trip through the history of U.S.-China relations, reminding us of all the long-standing antagonisms just below the surface. Even before the Communist victory in 1949 and continuing to today, Rudd points out, the CCP has viewed the United States as "hostile to its ideological interests and a continuing challenge to its efforts to secure and sustain political power" (p. 30). His reminder of the importance of Vietnam to Richard Nixon's motivations for U.S.-China rapprochement and how it figured in China's calculus (p. 33) complicates a U.S. narrative that generally leans too heavily on the U.S. desire to counter the Soviet Union. Likewise, his description of Deng Xiaoping's determination from the outset to pursue economic modernization without political liberalization is a useful corrective to a revisionist Western narrative that envisioned an inevitable flowering of Chinese democracy that would supplant Communist rule.

But Rudd's main preoccupation in the book is offering a framework he alternately calls "Xi Jinping's worldview," "the Communist Party's worldview," or the "priorities of the Communist Party as set by Xi Jinping."

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, as quoted in Andrew Browne, "Foothills of a Cold War," Bloomberg, November 21, 2019 ~ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2019-11-21/-foothills-of-a-cold-war>.

The middle ten chapters describe Chinese activities in ten “circles,” or priority areas, with an emphasis on Xi’s thinking and recent actions in each. While one could quibble over the priorities and their ordering, the focus on securing CCP rule, state security, national unity, and territorial integrity as well as on continuing economic development and building national (including military) power are clearly consistent and prominently on display in CCP words and actions now and over the last half century. In the book, Rudd leans heavily on Xi’s “reinvigoration” of Marxism-Leninism, his “turbocharging of Chinese nationalism,” and his “sharpening of national ambitions” to explain why U.S.-China relations have so drastically deteriorated (p. 77). He also notes, however, that the ten priorities in this framework are long-standing pillars of the CCP’s strategy that have been accelerated and intensified under Xi, a statement that Xi himself would likely not dispute (p. 77).

Where I take issue with the book’s portrayal of events, though, is in the short shrift given to the role of U.S. policy and domestic politics both in China’s behavior and in the recent downturn in relations. I hoped Rudd might give a clearer portrayal of the action-reaction dynamic in U.S.-China relations in recent years and the difficulties that U.S. domestic political dysfunction have posed for managing such a sensitive but important portfolio. If war is to be avoided, it is crucial that Washington recognize that its actions have consequences, and that the United States needs to find a way through its domestic difficulties in order to undertake responsibility for its actions in foreign policy.

### *Finding a Way Forward*

The most engaging, and likely controversial, section of the book is the prescription given for avoiding war between the United States and China. Rudd’s concept of “managed strategic competition” includes the concept of “guardrails” currently promoted by the Biden administration. In a brief section on “strategic red lines” (p. 365), Rudd usefully gives examples of what such guardrails might look like in the areas most likely to touch off a war, and posits agreements or trade-offs of the kind seen in *détente* with the Soviet Union in terms of mutual arms limitations. On Taiwan, for example, he notes that Washington could return to strictly adhering to the “one China” policy, especially by ending “provocative and unnecessary high-level visits to Taipei” (p. 365). In exchange, Beijing could dial back its military exercises and deployments in and around Taiwan. In effect, this would

be an agreement to go back to the uneasy status quo before the Trump administration. In the South China Sea, Beijing could opt not to expand its footprint and instead commit to respecting full freedom of navigation in exchange for a reduction in U.S. and allied military operations in the area. In the East China Sea, for example, China and Japan could agree to mutually limit military deployments (p. 365).

Setting aside the question of whether Beijing would agree to such limitations on military deployments along its own coastline and around territories it claims, the question of U.S. ability to conduct foreign policy in Washington's current dysfunctional political environment would clearly come into play. On Taiwan, which is really the key trigger for a potential conflict, the prospect of a return to the pre-Trump status quo has, of course, been put further out of reach by the August 2022 visit of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan and the subsequent military response by Beijing. In current U.S. politics, there appears to be no scope for mutually imposed constraints, only unilateral Chinese concessions. Congress has hijacked the conduct of China policy and is likely to continue to double down on actions that will be seen as provocative by Beijing. In 2025, there is the prospect of an incoming administration overturning any agreements made by the Biden administration.

In short, to have managed strategic competition, you need to have managers. But in the case of the United States and China today, they are not in evidence. If such managers could be brought to the fore and empowered, however, Kevin Rudd's prescriptions for avoiding "the avoidable war" would certainly be worth their careful study. 

## Circles of Strategy, Circuits of Risk: Rudd's Guide to Xi's China

Rory Medcalf

Former leaders rarely hit the mark when writing books proclaiming expertise and sage advice on world affairs. In his book *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the U.S. and Xi Jinping's China*, Kevin Rudd thankfully breaks that rule. This book is largely what the title implies—an insightful overview on China's strategic goals, the danger of conflict with the United States, and ideas to reduce those risks. That makes this book particularly refreshing for what it is not.

As a former prime minister and foreign minister, and still a close confidante of many international leaders, Rudd could easily have foregrounded his own experience, accomplishments, frustrations, and conversations. As an Australian, he could have emphasized the agency of third countries, such as his own, in shaping regional security or supposedly mediating great-power differences. As a China expert—which he unquestionably is—he could have articulated Beijing's policy imperatives in ways that feigned clarity while actually signifying that nonspecialists could never hope to divine the mysteries of Chinese statecraft. And in stressing the hazards of war between the United States and China, he could have wallowed in sanctimony, blame, and doom.

Mercifully, these temptations have been resisted. Instead, this book is genuinely useful, accessible, and timely, and it deserves to be widely read by policymakers, journalists, students, businesspeople, and concerned citizens alike. The style and format suggest many years of thinking behind a compressed burst of writing. This is, therefore, not an academic tome—the text does not contain a single footnote or reference—but it should not be skimmed through as simply a long piece of opinion or journalism. *The Avoidable War* is also highly readable. As a political leader, Rudd's reputation included a tendency to the technocratic. This makes it doubly refreshing that the style of this book is largely jargon-free, engaging, and to the point.

In a sense, this book is two in one: an objective explainer of Xi Jinping's worldview and a survival (or, more precisely, coexistence) guide to the deepening U.S.-China struggle. Combining the two is logical, as the

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ruthless assertiveness—even aggression—of China under Xi is surely the great destabilizer. Accordingly, the discussion of U.S.-China coexistence, which comprises the final two chapters, looks at risk reduction in terms of shared interests while leveraging the tensions (such as internal stability versus regional dominance) with the Chinese Communist Party’s multiple priorities. But the bulk of Rudd’s book is devoted to illuminating and structuring Xi’s agenda as “ten concentric circles of interest,” and here lies its greater strength.

There may be China specialists who quibble over the precise prioritization among the ten circles. Is “making economic development environmentally sustainable” really a higher priority than military modernization? Is there actually much distinction between “managing China’s neighborhood” and “securing China’s maritime periphery?” If Beijing’s neuralgia that Washington is behind all ills is truly so pervasive, then why does the U.S. factor not warrant a high-priority circle unto itself—or is it more useful to see it as cutting across all ten? Rudd deftly identifies many of the links and tensions among the circles. However, the net effect is as much to suggest the contradictions—and potential unsustainability—of China’s grand strategy as it is to explain the strategy’s coherence and prospects for success. All the same, this book is a feat of compressed analysis, making sense out of China’s rhetoric and record in a persuasive and highly contemporary primer.

The book bridges its survey of Xi’s ten policy priority sets and its concluding section on U.S.-China coexistence with assessments of the present and the future: the politics of the Chinese Communist Party’s 20th Party Congress scheduled for late 2022 and a set of ten strategic scenarios to sharpen thinking about risk in this decade of living dangerously. The scenarios themselves will be familiar to those who already spend much time contemplating the fate of the world. However, the way Rudd presents them serves the valuable purposes of underscoring contingency and agency: trends will favor Xi’s China “if there is no *sustained* counterstrategy from the United States...that effectively rebuilds American power, reenergizes U.S. alliances, and creates a credible global economic alternative to the long-term gravitational pull of the Chinese market” (p. 353).

And then there is the threat of major conflict, the “avoidable war” of the book’s title. The volume is briefer in its treatment of this subject and of possible measures to reduce the risk of conflict erupting and escalating. The concept of “managed strategic competition” is at the core of this final chapter and resonates with the Biden administration’s realistically stated

objective of “competitive coexistence,” or as new Australian prime minister Anthony Albanese likes to say, “competition without catastrophe.”<sup>1</sup> This concept is sensible and prudent, and Rudd underscores how this can and should be achieved without abandoning Taiwan’s self-ruled democracy or the interests and values of U.S. allies. He treads a fine line on minimizing provocation of China and recognizes the fundamental problem of how to build full-spectrum deterrence against China (including bolstering Taiwan’s economic resilience and defensive firepower) without bringing forward the very conflict such deterrence is meant to prevent. In that spirit, there follows a brief tour of various confidence-building measures—communication channels, rules of engagement, transparency, and military self-restraint—which could reduce the risk of misunderstanding, miscalculation, and incidents escalating to war. This is illuminating for those who do not normally follow such issues, but a little light on the specifics of how these mechanisms actually work. Details on which ones China has signed up to (such as the Code for Unalerted Encounters at Sea) and to which ones it has not are glaringly lacking.

Moreover, while the focus on guardrails is logical and practical, it tends to presuppose a starting point that for now seems frighteningly absent. That is the acknowledgment by China’s leadership that it has no military options to confront the United States without courting tragedy, and that it cannot be the master of infinite risk. This is underscored by Beijing’s extreme reaction to U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s Taiwan visit. China’s reaction included not only economic coercion and aggressive military exercises but also a suspension of practical military dialogue with the United States. When guardrails are being ripped away as a matter of policy, and a spiral of confrontation looks increasingly likely, the necessity of a circuit-breaker at the leadership level is all the more plain. Kevin Rudd’s book could not have been more presciently timed. ♦

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Antony J. Blinken, “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China” (speech to the Asia Society, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., May 26, 2022) ~ <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/> and Marion Rae, “Albanese Says Approach to China Should Be ‘Competition Not Catastrophe,’” Australian Associated Press, June 24, 2021, available at <https://inqld.com.au/politics/2021/06/24/albanese-says-approach-to-china-should-be-competition-not-catastrophe>.

## Is War in the Asia-Pacific Avoidable?

*Joseph Chinyong Liow*

What happens when a rising power meets an established power? This is a fundamental question that has exercised strategic thinkers for centuries, in the process producing a voluminous scholarship that can easily fill multiple libraries. Crucially, however, this is not an abstract question that merely fans the flames of intellectual curiosity. If ongoing developments on the global stage are any measure, it is the signal question of our time—and will remain so for some years to come—as the world witnesses the alarmingly steep descent of Sino-U.S. relations into the realms of great-power competition and rivalry. This being the case, how to prevent both powers from drifting into war has become of paramount importance not only for them but for the entire international community.

The main theme of *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the U.S. and Xi Jinping's China* is the management of the Sino-U.S. relationship for the purpose of avoiding open conflict in the coming decade. Few are as well-placed to write this book as its author Kevin Rudd, the Mandarin-speaking former prime minister of Australia and current president of the Asia Society. In it, Rudd brings his wealth of experience and considerable powers of analysis to bear on efforts to navigate the twists and turns of this most vital yet complex of great-power bilateral relationships, helping the reader understand not only how we came to the present state of affairs but, just as important, how both great powers can best manage their competitive relationship so as to prevent the outbreak of war.

In essence, *The Avoidable War* sets out to do three things. First, it provides a thoughtful discussion that describes how and why the bilateral relationship has arrived at this point. This discussion commands the lion's share of attention in the book. While Rudd does not attribute blame exclusively to China—indeed, he correctly highlights the dearth of understanding and familiarity in the United States with China that has led to inaccurate views and mischaracterizations—he does nevertheless draw attention to the outcome of the more assertive turn in international affairs that has taken place under the leadership of Chinese president

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Xi Jinping. As he notes, “for Americans, Xi Jinping’s leadership represents a radical change in China’s official strategic approach to the world” (p. 359). To Rudd, it is clear that China is intent on challenging the current U.S.-led international order, and that it seeks to do so while pursuing “ten concentric circles of interests” that effectively give expression to Xi’s worldview (to which Rudd devotes more than two hundred pages to unpacking). Rudd correctly points out that at the heart of the matter lies the inability, or more likely reluctance, of each side to better comprehend the other and the source of their respective anxieties. He examines this dynamic with detailed empirical precision drawing from his numerous encounters and discussions with U.S. and Chinese policymakers and officials: “the argument of this book is that our best chance of avoiding war is to better understand the other side’s strategic thinking and to conceptualize a world where both the U.S. and China are able to competitively coexist, even if in a state of continuing rivalry reinforced by mutual deterrence” (p. 18).

Aside from answering the question of how the United States and China arrived at the present state of relations, Rudd also implicitly ventures to explain why Sino-U.S. relations have turned so sour. He begins with the same structuralist explanation that many analysts and strategic thinkers have articulated, namely that, as an ascendent power dissatisfied with the present U.S.-dominated international order, China is intent on taking steps to reform, if not transform, the status quo. Consequently, what is at stake is no less than dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. As Rudd points out in his assessment of Chinese military ambitions: “While Beijing’s chief aim for the modernization and expansion of its military has been to prepare for future Taiwan contingencies, China’s growing military, naval, air, and intelligence capabilities represent, in the American view, a much broader challenge to U.S. military predominance across the wider Indo-Pacific region and beyond” (p. 8). The same can be said for various other spheres: economic, diplomatic, and technological. In doing so, Rudd has used as his point of entry the theoretical conclusions of two other extensively discussed publications, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* by Harvard scholar Graham Allison and *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* by John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago. As Rudd is a China specialist more than an international relations theorist at heart, the explanatory power of his book does not end there. Clearly, there is something about Xi and his centralization of power that has contributed to the escalation of tensions between the United States and China.

Second, the book outlines possible scenarios—ten, to be precise—for Sino-U.S. relations in the present “decade of living dangerously.” Those who follow developments in the Asia-Pacific region closely will not be surprised that the majority of these scenarios involve cross-strait affairs, with informed speculation about how such affairs might evolve and the potential consequences of those outcomes.

Finally, in keeping with his objective to identify contours of managed strategic competition, Rudd identifies four “critical security domains” in the bilateral relationship and suggests guardrails and “rules of the road” for both powers to navigate attendant challenges while reshaping their interactions in ways that would minimize the potential for differences to spill into open conflict. The balance that both must strike is that “each would then have to accept that the other will still try to maximize its advantages while stopping short of breaching the agreed strategic guardrails” (p. 365).

Although the book is a fine, thoughtful study predicated on his extensive experience and familiarity with both the United States and China as a career diplomat, foreign minister, and prime minister, the sound thesis in Rudd’s *The Avoidable War* nevertheless provokes several questions that may be worth pondering in the context of unfolding events in the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, three would seem to me to warrant consideration. First, tensions over the resolution of the Taiwan issue, the “core strategic tension” according to the book, show no sign of abating. If anything, tensions are deepening as the Biden administration appears intent on scaling up the pressure on Beijing. Already, U.S. president Joe Biden has gone on record on at least three occasions to declare that in the event China initiates hostilities, the United States is committed to coming to the defense of Taiwan militarily. Meanwhile, weapons sales under the Taiwan Relations Act have increased in terms of both quantity and quality, and visits by U.S. elected and policy officials continue to inflame the leadership in Beijing. These statements and actions risk emboldening pro-independence advocates and activists in Taiwan, which in turn raises the risk of Chinese preemption. While guardrails will doubtless be crucial to managing the bilateral relationship, it is unclear how they can manage the growing pro-independence voices in Taiwan’s constellation of politics as well. At the same time, China has increased the frequency and size of its sorties across the median line of the Taiwan Strait, probing Taiwanese air defense systems. More fundamentally, while it is arguably most urgent, it is equally most difficult to imagine how Beijing would accede to having

its “internal affairs” placed on the table for any discussion on how best to manage rising tensions in Sino-U.S. relations.

This leads to a second issue: it is difficult to see how jingoistic nationalism, which Rudd rightly identifies as a cause of the existing state of affairs, can be dialed back in the present climate. Defense and foreign policymakers in both Washington and Beijing are eager to find off-ramps, but domestic political constituencies are marching to a different drumbeat. In Kissinger-esque fashion, Rudd proposes that a diplomatic machinery comprising trusted officials (that is, trusted by their own respective leaders) be given the responsibility to oversee the implementation of the guardrails and management of bilateral affairs. Quite apart from the fact that in many ways that is already happening, while such seasoned veterans of security and international affairs will be well-equipped to speak the same language and work with each other, it remains to be seen if such a mechanism can avoid being overwhelmed by nationalistic impulses of the respective populations (and in the case of China, a leader who has quite effectively centralized power in himself as well).

Finally, there is the matter of the current and future state of Sino-Russian relations. This bilateral relationship receives passing mention in the book, but given the Russian invasion of Ukraine and how China has positioned itself in relation to that turn of events, it is certainly a topic that calls for greater attention—even though, to be fair, *The Avoidable War* was published before this conflict broke out. As the Ukraine war rages, China finds itself in an increasingly difficult position. Rudd correctly points out that the “strategic comfort” that Xi enjoys in interactions with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin is “unique for China’s Communist Party leadership” (p. 182). Of course, this then raises the question: while all indicators are that Xi remains committed to the “no limits” relationship with Moscow, it is unclear how much traction this position has in the Chinese party establishment. Indeed, it is known that some in senior party circles and the People’s Liberation Army nurse deep discomfort about how Xi has taken China’s policy on Russia far afield from Beijing’s traditional position that kept Moscow at a safe enough remove even while entertaining prospects of a marriage of convenience in shared opposition to the United States’ global dominance. To be sure, in the context of present-day geopolitics, Russia and China will continue to see themselves as necessary strategic partners, and hence, it is unlikely that Beijing’s rhetorical support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine will diminish anytime soon. The question rather is whether this marks a fundamental turn in Sino-Russian relations.

Ties between the United States and China have never been as fraught as they are today. Rudd, one of the most astute contemporary watchers of China, has written an indispensable tome that provides a sober, well-informed analysis on how Washington and Beijing got to where they are now in their relationship and what the road ahead conceivably looks like. Time will tell which of the book's scenarios will eventually materialize, and whether the suggested guardrails will be implemented and have their desired effect. Still, *The Avoidable War* provides its readers with thoughtful consideration of all the attendant issues in the U.S.-China relationship. It is, thence, essential reading for everyone who shares Rudd's concern about where this bilateral relationship is headed. 

## The Challenge of Avoiding War

Carla P. Freeman

For scholars and practitioners alike, few tasks are more important than understanding why wars happen. Wars, to paraphrase Martin Luther or Benito Mussolini, turn the wheels of history—they can catapult states to power or topple them into the ash heap of history. But as long as there have been wars, there have been disagreements over their causes. To quote the writer Svetlana Alexievich, “War remains, as it always has been, one of the chief human mysteries.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the unpredictability, complexity, and occasional inscrutability of wars’ origins make structuralist explanations for them so appealing. The roots of realism lie in the contemplation of warfare. Thucydides, that Greek font of classical realism, reacted to the Peloponnesian War; Machiavelli to the Italian wars of the Renaissance; E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, and other foundational scholars of “modern” realism to the horrors of World Wars I and II. Through the wide aperture of systemic international political theory, wars are the consequence of disruptive shifts in the distribution of international power. This is a simple and powerful idea—but it is not entirely persuasive, as evidenced by the enduring debates within realism and between realism and other schools of international relations theory, to say nothing of the gap between the worlds of academia and policymaking. After all, conflict has not accompanied all power shifts. This suggests that power shifts and wars do not have to go hand in hand. War, in other words, is avoidable.

For experts who watch changes to the relative distribution of international power, it has been apparent for decades that a power shift is underway. However, it was not until around the 2008 global financial crisis that this shift became undeniable—the People’s Republic of China had emerged as a serious rival to the United States. An idea which had quietly percolated within both states for years, that they were on an ineluctable

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<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 139.

collision course, began to boil over into the public debate. In 2012, Harvard professor Graham Allison placed this idea on a realist theoretical footing by characterizing U.S.-China strategic competition as the manifestation of a “Thucydides trap,” similar in its structural dynamics to the fifth-century rise of Athens relative to Sparta that, in Thucydides’ account, had “made war inevitable.” Several years later, Allison authored a book buttressing his theory with a set of historical cases. He showed provocatively, if not entirely satisfactorily, that when a hegemonic power is threatened by an emerging power, violent conflict is typically the rule rather than the exception.<sup>2</sup> Allison has pushed back against those who question the fatalistic implications of his study for the trajectory of U.S.-China relations, contending that his study’s goal is to provoke answers to the “defining question about global order for this generation”—can China and the United States escape the Thucydides trap and avoid war?

### *The Agency of Leadership and the Promise of Policy*

In *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the U.S. and Xi Jinping’s China*, Kevin Rudd tackles this crucial question. As the first part of the title suggests, his answer is relatively optimistic: there is nothing inevitable about war between the United States and China. Unlike many others who reject the deterministic logic of the Thucydides trap, however, Rudd forgoes quibbling over Allison’s case selections and interpretation of data. Indeed, he concedes there is something to his “good friend” Allison’s Thucydidean model of dynamics between incumbent and rising powers (p. 7). Rudd takes seriously Allison’s warning that Beijing’s relative gains on Washington diplomatically, militarily, and economically, and the mutual mistrust between the two states that these gains have generated, are too similar for comfort to the factors that Thucydides identified as the Peloponnesian War’s *causa belli*—the rise of Athenian political, military, and economic power and the fear this rise caused in Sparta.

However, Rudd cautions that a structural tendency toward conflict is not equivalent to an inevitability. Instead, he argues there are “tipping points,” critical junctures or sweet spots during which wars can be avoided, even in the depths of a Thucydides trap. Policymakers interested in avoiding war must identify and exploit these tipping points “before it’s too late” (p. 7). Rudd therefore concludes that, although it requires little imagination to see

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<sup>2</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), xv–xvi.

the U.S.-China relationship deteriorating into a Cold War 2.0 or triggering a hot war, the two powers also have opportunities to break from the perilous pattern of the Thucydides trap, avoiding conflict through the “agency of leadership” (p. 17) and engaging in “managed strategic competition” (p. 16).

It is hardly surprising that Rudd rejects Allison’s structural proposition. A two-time prime minister of Australia and longtime diplomat with outstanding Chinese-language skills dating to his undergraduate days studying China, and a scholar who has recently written an Oxford thesis on Xi Jinping, Rudd’s unique combination of experience and expertise gives him confidence in the impact policymakers can have on the direction of policy. His background likely also persuades him that a “fundamental” requirement for avoiding war with China is a better understanding by U.S. decision-makers of the leader who sits at the apex of China’s political system (p. 12). In Rudd’s view, it is “mutually assured noncomprehension and mirror imaging” that make the U.S.-China relationship fraught with the risk of conflict (p. 14). He prescribes “mutual strategic literacy” as a way of mitigating this risk (p. 14) and makes the case that, if so enlightened, senior negotiators from both sides, with their respective national leaders’ support, could build a strategic framework that manages red lines, normalizes competition in some nonlethal areas of national security, and defines areas where strategic cooperation is possible (p. 15). Rudd therefore appears to envisage managed strategic competition that goes beyond “commonsense guardrails,”<sup>3</sup> as President Joe Biden proposed to his Chinese counterpart, although such guardrails would be essential for keeping a “joint strategic narrative” on track (p. 14).

Rudd’s vision for managed strategic competition also establishes conditions for the Chinese side. For example, it requires China to put aside principles that it has used to conceptualize its relationship with the United States that, like “win-win,” have desiccated into meaningless tropes. Beijing must also agree to a jointly negotiated framework to govern its relationship with the United States (p. 375). For such an agreement to be successful, Rudd argues, it must establish hard “limits on each country’s security policies” (p. 364), recognize that both sides will seek to maximize their advantages within these limits, and welcome if not encourage areas of collaboration that is potentially in both countries’ national interests (p. 393).

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<sup>3</sup> “Remarks by President Biden and President Xi of the People’s Republic of China before Virtual Meeting,” White House, November 15, 2021 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/11/15/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-xi-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-before-virtual-meeting>.

*What Is to Be Done?*

Managed strategic cooperation sounds like something worth trying, but, as Rudd knows from experience, the proof is in the practice. In answering Lenin's question—"What is to be done?"—Rudd's "vanguard" comprises strategically literate negotiators from both China and the United States. But how can both sides create them?

This book provides a roadmap. The first step is to better understand the history of the U.S.-China relationship from the nineteenth century onward and its impact on each side's approach to the other. Rudd presents an elegant and digestible synopsis of this history that gives readers a clear sense of the relationship's many ups and downs, with a particular highlight being its appreciation for the ways that this history has informed China's modern political evolution (and revolution). Second, both China and the United States must develop greater strategic empathy: a sensitivity to how each is seen by the other, and an appreciation for why this is the case. Rudd considers the United States' and China's mutual perceptions and their sources. Despite current misunderstandings and mistrust, he argues that, through a process of sustained strategic dialogue and the transparent presentation of objective evidence, "some of these calcified perceptions and misperceptions can change over time." (p. 74). The outcome can be a more nuanced and granular grasp by each side of how the other thinks about the world, which, in turn, can inform a workable joint strategic framework.

*Politicians and Strategists*

Having presented this basic recipe, the book itself leans heavily toward edifying the U.S. negotiator. Underlying this turn is Rudd's belief that the U.S. side knows much less about China than the Chinese side knows about the United States. As a result, Rudd devotes just one chapter to the Trump and Biden administrations' approaches to China in contrast to a dozen chapters devoted to Chinese policy in general and Xi Jinping's priorities in particular. That Xi will likely continue as China's paramount leader for years to come helps justify this focus (chap. 4). Rudd describes the "strategic prism" (p. 83) through which China under Xi's leadership interacts with the world as a series of concentric circles. From keeping the Chinese Communist Party in power at the core, these circles emanate outward to the more recent objective of changing the rules-based order. Rudd offers a particularly useful *tour d'horizon* for U.S. negotiations in his identification of ten conflict scenarios that could unfold in the U.S.-China relationship.

But the book's analysis gives the reader some cause to question the feasibility of the policy recommendations it makes. Rudd identifies some core U.S. and Chinese interests as fundamentally in conflict. Moreover, he paints a picture of Xi as a leader who is unlikely to encourage senior Chinese diplomats to pursue a joint framework for managing China-U.S. strategic competition. Rather, Xi emerges as a politician who is increasingly deft at wielding rising nationalism to achieve an ambitious near-term domestic and international policy agenda. If overall trends favor the continued growth of China's power relative to the United States, as Rudd argues, then it seems even less likely that Xi would agree to any framework that could significantly constrain China's freedom of action, especially given the enduring dearth of strategic trust.

On the U.S. side, Rudd appears to assume there is the capacity for strategic leadership in Washington of the kind that allowed Washington and Moscow to agree about red lines during the Cold War. But, as the book describes the Trump and Biden administrations' China policies, they derive more from domestic politics than from strategic thinking. The feasibility of Rudd's approach would be strengthened if he offered his readers reasons to be confident that the U.S. political system can adopt a different approach toward U.S.-China relations. Rudd's suggestions may make a great deal of sense in theory—indeed, they may be essential elements in any approach to U.S.-China competition that avoids war—but this does not mean that they will necessarily work in the messy practice that is politics, particularly if U.S. political dysfunction deepens.

The discord engendered by Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 trip to Taiwan is an example of what can happen when strategic empathy is lacking and there is no workable framework between the two sides. The case highlights the value of Rudd's recommendations, but it also suggests how hard it might be to implement them.

Indeed, this implementation problem is the central weakness of the book. Given Rudd's warnings about the structural drivers of conflict in U.S.-China relations, it is also a reason to question his belief that war is avoidable. His optimism is only justified to the extent that leaders on both sides believe that they can escape the Thucydides trap and see the value in doing so. In this sense, Rudd's book emerges as a *cri de coeur* for peace as much as a roadmap for peacemakers. In the inevitable crises to come, we can only hope that both sides listen. ◆

**Author's Response:**  
**Walking China and the United States Back from the Abyss**

*Kevin Rudd*

**A**s global events unfold rapidly in days, weeks, and months, books on foreign policy are increasingly consigned to short shelf lives, and solution-oriented books even more so. My book *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the U.S. and Xi Jinping's China* falls into both categories. It provides analysis, as of early 2022, on where things stand in U.S.-China relations and how we got there and charts a recommended way forward for both sides, not just the United States, if in fact the common objective is to reduce the risk of triggering dangerous incidents, escalation, crisis, conflict, and war. The book is therefore vulnerable to a wide array of criticisms as events continue to unfold, although such criticism is always welcome.

Some evaluations of the book have fallen outside my primary objective, which was to lay out one possible exit ramp from an avoidable war between the United States and China. Others have suggested that my proposed framework for avoiding war may not be the best way forward or the most workable one. But in this perilous moment of what I call “the decade of living dangerously” (p. 2), I repeat the challenge I laid out in the book: for those who critique my recommended course of “managed strategic competition” to come up with a better alternative or to supplement it as appropriate. But time is running out. Strategic drift is well underway. The drums of war are beating louder. We no longer have the luxury of treating U.S.-China relations like the subject of an ongoing academic seminar.

In this *Asia Policy* roundtable, I have had the honor of receiving book reviews from four distinguished scholars and practitioners in the field: Susan Thornton, Rory Medcalf, Joseph Chinyong Liow, and Carla Freeman. I thank each of them for taking the time to read the text, for their astute analyses of the argument, and their focus on what the book adds to the evolving policy discourse on managing the U.S.-China relationship.

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Susan Thornton's review centers on the unequal attention the book pays to the United States' contribution to the current dysfunctionality in the bilateral relationship. In part, the reason for this is simple: the book focuses on Xi Jinping's ideological worldview and its impact on Chinese politics rather than those of the U.S. side because my assumption is that most readers will be more familiar with the United States' internalities than China's. However, she is correct to point out that the consequences of U.S. policy and posture toward China could have been more thoroughly explored. In the overall trajectory of U.S.-China relations, until 2017 the principal "change dynamic" was Xi and the radically new approach he brought to Chinese policy. Since then, it has been the interaction of both Xi, on the one hand, and the unfolding U.S. strategic response to Xi, on the other.

As a former State Department official, Thornton fittingly frames the relationship's historical status quo in directly diplomatic terms: "For forty years, between 1979 and 2019, the United States and China managed their relations, to the extreme betterment of both, in accordance with an uneasy diplomatic deal: the United States would basically live with China's Communist ideology and the more objectionable practices of the Chinese state inside its own borders for the sake of being able to work with one-fifth of humanity on shared objectives." She correctly articulates that my book in part explains why the undoing of this deal is by no means inevitable, even if we are currently on a trajectory—if not necessarily a permanent course—of diplomatic implosion. In this context, Thornton's point that Congress has hijacked U.S. China policy, making management of the relationship difficult, is well-taken. Of itself, this subject is worthy of further research and discussion. While congressional politics are not the only factor driving the redefinition of the United States' China strategy, they are nonetheless a very real factor in the overall policy equation. Under President Biden, Congress has helped push the executive branch toward a hawkishness on China that is unparalleled in recent history. In fact, China policy is now one of few areas of bipartisan consensus in U.S. foreign and domestic politics. This is highly consequential for the future trajectory of the relationship in terms of both the likelihood of long-term policy continuity under future administrations and the ongoing policy impact of the bidding war between Democrats and Republicans (and especially among Republican primary candidates) to secure the political high ground on who can be the most hairy-chested on China.

Rory Medcalf's point on whether China's view of the United States cuts across all ten circles of China's strategic interest that I outline in the book

is also important. I argue that it does, although it may not be the dominant driver of each of them. Nonetheless, Xi seems to be increasingly obsessed with “struggle” with the United States, and it is this ideological mindset and mantra that has continued to color most aspects of China’s overall geopolitical strategy. Medcalf also questions whether building strategic guardrails into the relationship will be especially difficult now that U.S.-China dialogue has been canceled in the aftermath of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022. This may be true in the near term, but neither long-term Chinese nor U.S. strategy will be determined by a single visit or event. It is the accumulation thereof.

Indeed, Pelosi’s visit offered a strong signal that the relationship is heading in the wrong direction, thereby underlining all the more the need to find an exit ramp from the current downward spiral before it is too late. That is why it is interesting to note that despite the Sturm und Drang in the public rhetoric of the relationship in recent months, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Foreign Minister Wang Yi still met in New York in late September to begin the preparatory work for a likely Biden-Xi Summit at the G-20 in Bali in November. I suspect that strategic guardrails of one form or another are still on the agenda, as both sides have stared into the abyss in recent months and have not liked what they have seen. Ukraine is also a salutary reminder to all that war does not always go to plan.

Joseph Chinyong Liow observes that Taiwan is the core area in the relationship in need of resolution—or at least functional management—to avoid conflict. This of course has become increasingly urgent since the book was first published. The importance of “managed strategic competition” over Taiwan has only continued to grow. Liow argues, however, that significant progress is becoming less and less feasible. He may be right, but because Taiwan is at the geopolitical fulcrum of U.S.-China relations and raises great questions of war and peace, we cannot stop trying. War over the Taiwan Strait may be becoming increasingly probable, but it is by no means inevitable. It would involve an enormous roll of the dice by both Beijing and Washington where, as in 1914, the strategic and political outcome would be entirely unpredictable. This is why I argue that, beneath the surface, both sides have a baseline interest in stabilizing (although not normalizing) their relationship, at the least for the decade ahead. The risks of possible loss are seen as too great. Nonetheless, there is a danger that domestic political momentum and the denuding of the relationship of most of its diplomatic insulation end up driving the relationship toward a crisis point—even when neither country at this stage wants a war.

Liow is right to be concerned that both sides apparently see compromise on Taiwan as next to impossible, with the United States ratcheting up its increasingly unambiguous expressions of support for Taipei under Biden, and China launching unprecedented attacks (or threats of attacks) in the military, digital, and civil society spheres. “While it is arguably most urgent, it is equally most difficult to imagine how Beijing would accede to having its ‘internal affairs’ placed on the table for any discussion on how best to manage rising tensions in Sino-U.S. relations,” he writes. This is true, but at the same time neither side has an interest in spilling the other’s blood. Once again, that is why on this most difficult and dangerous of issues, managed strategic competition can help define clearer red lines and real guardrails that turn tensions down rather than up.

What, if any, compromises might Beijing, Washington, and Taipei be willing to make to preserve the integrity of the “one China” policy, on the one hand, while continuing the status quo for the people of Taiwan, on the other? This is a question I would encourage Chinese, American, and Taiwanese officials to consider as a matter of urgency. China should radically ratchet down its military tempo around the island. The United States should rediscover the long-standing, stabilizing virtue of the language of the one-China policy, which, as of the time of writing, threatens to be fundamentally derailed by the provisions of the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022. Meanwhile, Taipei should apply some fresh creativity to the question of the 1992 Consensus as a means of reopening a political negotiation channel with Beijing, rather than simply consigning all activity to the military lane, which by extension means the U.S. military lane. All three could be part of a broader framework of guardrails around managing the Taiwan question.

Liow also critiques the recommended political mechanism for giving effect to managed strategic competition: “In Kissinger-esque fashion, Rudd proposes that a diplomatic machinery comprising trusted officials...be given the responsibility to oversee the implementation of the guardrails and management of bilateral affairs.” Whether either side can pull this off without succumbing to what Liow calls “nationalistic impulses” remains to be seen. But once again I would argue that a realist calculation of each side’s core national interests (i.e., not risking a war it might lose) could well propel them toward the machinery that I recommend.

Finally, Liow’s point that more attention should be paid to the relationship between China and Russia is right. More could have been said, although the book went to publication before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, the underlying, driving dynamics of Xi’s geopolitical and

geo-economic interest in bringing Russia into China's strategic orbit as its junior partner were made reasonably plain in the chapter of the book dealing with China's neighboring state diplomacy (chap. 12). Russia's invasion may also have accelerated the division of the world into the binary military and economic camps that I warned of. In particular, the war has helped alienate Europe from China and hardened European conclusions about the emerging shape of a China-Russia strategic condominium across the vast Eurasian continent and the world at large.

Carla Freeman's review pushes us to look forward. Her idea that Xi may have no interest in pursuing a joint strategic framework with the United States is of course fundamental to my argument in the book. In fact, her challenge is perhaps the single-most critical question for the future. If Xi is not interested, then we are all in trouble. We are, in that case, effectively on railroad tracks heading toward war. But, as I have argued in the concluding chapters of my book, Xi may also have a range of incentives to at least "kick the can down the road" on the threshold question of taking the fatal decision to bring on a real-world great-power military conflict.<sup>1</sup> These include China's growing domestic economic problems, the continuing potency of U.S. military deterrence in any future battlespace, and increasing indications that the United States is not interested in deterrence alone but would actually be prepared to commit U.S. forces to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack. For its part, the United States also has incentives to push any military crisis over Taiwan into the longer-term future.

Therefore, I suggest as a first step that we reduce the risk of conflict by delaying it rather than seeking to prevent conflict altogether, which, under the present strategic and political circumstances, is unrealistic. Kicking the can down the road might not solve the problem. But 1914 reminds us that once mobilization starts and even a "low level" shooting match gets underway, all efforts overnight swing from diplomacy to the military and the desperate need to win. Our task is to prevent us from reaching that point. Any option that creates time and space for further political and diplomatic problem-solving is to be encouraged. That is why I support managed strategic competition.

Like others, Freeman also touches on U.S. political dysfunction and how this may make coherent China policy impossible. I take her point that the viability of my suggested approach would be strengthened if I had "offered readers reasons to be confident that the U.S. political system can adopt a

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<sup>1</sup> For an updated take on this argument, see Kevin Rudd, "Rivals Within Reason? U.S.-Chinese Competition Is Getting Sharper—but Doesn't Necessarily Have to Get More Dangerous," *Foreign Affairs*, July 20, 2022.

different approach toward U.S.-China relations.” Of course the book could have touched more on the reasons behind the current state of American political disarray and perhaps offered more domestically targeted pathways out of it. But, as an Australian, I can hardly claim this to be among my core areas of expertise. Moreover, as a professional Sinologist, rather than as an amateur U.S. political psychologist, I thought it best to focus this book on Xi’s ideological priorities, the political obstacles he faces, and the policy opportunities that are afforded by China’s authoritarian political system.

I would, however, offer two additions to Freeman’s admonition about the state of the U.S. political system compared with its Chinese counterpart. First, we should not assume that the Chinese decision-making process is the apogee of public-policy professionalism and political predictability. It too is hostage to multiple competing forces from ideologists, the military, and among its own divided foreign policy and official think tank community. Second, despite the rolling sound and light show that is U.S. politics, the broad political consensus emerging on China may in fact provide the basis on which a credible, long-term, militarily hard-line, foreign policy-wise, and economically literate national strategy on China emerges that is able to survive changes in administration. In fact, as recent gatherings of the bipartisan Aspen Strategy Group have demonstrated, there is now much less dividing the Republican and Democrat national security policy communities on China strategy than many outsiders may assume. Indeed, when George Kennan’s containment strategy against the Soviet Union was first launched during the Truman administration, it did not enjoy immediate bipartisan support. It took time.

In conclusion, this book has benefited greatly from professional and scholarly responses from around the world, including those brought together here in the important work of *Asia Policy* and the National Bureau of Asian Research. None of us are blessed with perfect wisdom on these questions. We are all, to some extent, looking through a glass dimly, particularly given the opacity of the Chinese political system. But let us not allow the perfect to stand in the way of the good as we search for urgent solutions to avoid World War III. Not only should we strive to preserve the peace for us all (beyond the United States, China, and Taiwan); through a form of managed strategic competition, we also should provide the political and diplomatic space for these two great powers—the world’s two largest greenhouse gas emitters—to collaborate on saving the planet from another disaster on the horizon of a different making: climate change. The clock is already ticking on both. ◆