

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

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since the end of World War II and a host of new technologies waiting to be proved in combat. The particular means of applying sea power have changed dramatically since the dawn of the twentieth century, but the underlying principles that Mahan and Corbett put forward remain sound. Examining and understanding how these theorists approached the naval problems of their day still can offer valid lessons to the modern reader. *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought* provides an excellent accompaniment to such an effort.

MICHAEL ROMERO



*The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China*, by Kevin Rudd. New York: PublicAffairs, 2022. 420 pages. \$32.

Books by high-level former government officials can provide insights into strategic thinking and insider tidbits on policy decision-making. This book delivers that. Although the author is a former Australian prime minister and foreign minister, here Rudd focuses his attention on U.S.–People's Republic of China relations, providing his exceptionally experienced and keen perspective on these two powerful states and their leaders. It is a volume that anyone interested in understanding U.S.-China relations will want to read.

One of the most challenging aspects of writing on contemporary China, however, is that by the time any book on the subject is published much of it is already out of date. Rudd's volume indeed is subject to this challenge, given that much of the statistical and anecdotal

substance soon will seem dated to future readers. The book, published in March 2022, also does not address the Russian invasion of Ukraine just a month earlier, although that event is an essential factor in assessing modern China's foreign policy and future international relations. Yet the book contributes to our understanding by putting current data and trends into historical context, ably knitting together near- and long-term dynamics to explain China's current and potential future trajectories. Rudd is able to assess Sino-Russian relations clearly, concluding that "Xi and Putin have transformed what had been a bitter rivalry into a de facto political, economic, and strategic alliance—withstanding frequent official protestations to the contrary" (p. 182). He thereby anticipates aptly what the world has observed in the Xi-Putin relationship since Russia's invasion and the support thereof by the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as explaining why Beijing sees Putin's more-aggressive actions as a strategic asset for China's own ambitions.

As an experienced scholar and politician, Rudd avoids the mistake of making bold declarations about China's future, yet he also is clear about the challenges he believes China faces under the leadership of Xi, of whom he is quite critical. Fluent in Mandarin and having met Xi in person, Rudd adds rare and valuable insights on Xi the man, politician, and leader, helping to bring into focus the still-murky picture of the person at the head of the world's second-most-powerful state.

Rudd's book makes it easy to understand an impressively wide range of critical issues driving China's current decision-making, explaining these from Beijing's perspective, as well as

the logic underlying U.S. strategic and policy responses. He clearly lays out what China's leader sees as concerns and opportunities, relating what this means for other global players. Rudd is proud of not using a single footnote in weaving his extensive narrative, which is laudable for the ease of reading but disappointing for those wishing to dig deeper into the sources of Rudd's insights and information.

The book is clear-eyed in explaining China's ambitions and recent shifts in policy under Xi's leadership, hewing neither to hawkish nor to dovish arguments but simply analyzing PRC strategy and policy aims in the context of demonstrated and documented Chinese interests and behavior over time. This is as refreshing as it is uncommon and should prove particularly useful for strategists and policy makers needing to decide how to address Xi's more aggressive posture. Rudd applies a novel approach to making sense of a topic as grand as the rapidly changing modern China. He identifies a series of issues and interests and arranges them in concentric circles. While one could quibble with his ordering, the approach generally helps to organize and prioritize key issues worth exploring and understanding, from the PRC's point of view.

A hallmark of good scholarship is simplifying what is highly complex—in this case, an understanding of modern China and U.S.-China relations. Rudd succeeds in doing so, providing a useful and easily digestible capsule of where China and its most critical relationship stand at present and why. Few authors are able to take on such a complicated and wide-ranging topic with such ease. The book, therefore, serves its purpose and will prove useful to academics,

students, policy makers, historians, and anyone else seeking to understand better modern China and U.S.-China relations.

Amid a cacophony of opinions about China and what to do about it, Rudd's volume provides something rare: a thoroughly reasoned, well-articulated, easy-to-read, and reasonably comprehensive assessment of China and its leader, Xi Jinping, in the twenty-first century. And, as the book's title makes clear, understanding modern China and its leader is essential to avoiding catastrophic conflict. This reality is emphasized in the book's introduction, which includes the observation that "for policy makers in Beijing and Washington, as well as in other capitals, the 2020s will be the decade of living dangerously" (p. 2). Rudd's volume ably explains how we got here, in what ways the 2020s are a "decisive decade," and why U.S.-China relations likely are headed for rocky shores.

KATHLEEN "KATE" WALSH



*On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea*, by Gregory B. Poling. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2022. 336 pages. \$39.95.

The South China Sea (SCS) is one of the main theaters of current U.S.-China security competition, and correspondingly is the subject of an ocean of commentary spewing from Washington and Beijing. *On Dangerous Ground* offers a valuable and timely corrective to the common tendency to view strife in this vital waterway solely in terms of the great powers. Greg Poling's deep expertise as an analyst of Southeast Asia pays major dividends in his