



# Silence the drums of war: the policy implications of *The Avoidable War* for China–U.S. relations

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*The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China*, by Kevin Rudd, New York: Public Affairs, 2022, 432 pages, \$23.66

## 1 Introduction

Then U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit on August 2, 2022, to Taiwan, an island that the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) considers an inalienable part of its territory, was closely followed by unprecedentedly harsh diplomatic and military countermeasures from China. Accusing the move by the U.S. of violating the one-China principle and maliciously infringing on China's sovereignty, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated on August 3 that this once again proves "that the United States has become the 'biggest destroyer' of peace across the Taiwan Strait and for regional stability" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022). In response to Pelosi's visit, the Chinese government decided on August 5 to first adopt sanctions on the Congressional leader and her immediate family members, and then subsequently announced a series of countermeasures against America. Meanwhile, the Eastern Theater Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted a 9-day joint military operation around Taiwan island from the evening of August 2 to 10 for the sake of "stern deterrence against the major escalation of the US' negative moves on the Taiwan question" and to give a "grave warning on against the separatist actions of the 'Taiwan independence' forces" (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China 2022).

China's seldom seen live-firing military drills encircling Taiwan led to what some scholars termed the "fourth Taiwan Strait crisis," heightening the world's concerns about an armed conflict scenario in the Taiwan Strait involving Beijing, Taipei

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and Washington (Fravel et al. 2022). Indeed, the Taiwan question has long been a flash point in bilateral relations between China and America. It goes without saying that Pelosi's Taiwan visit merely added more fuel to the increasingly conflictual China–U.S. relations. As China–U.S. ties have now entered the “decisive decade” defined in U.S. *National Security Strategy* of 2022 (The White House 2022, 24), it is expected that Washington will increasingly use the Taiwan issue as a strategic tool against Beijing amid escalating competition between the two sides. In other words, American politicians are more likely to provoke Beijing on the Taiwan question as Pelosi did, sharply increasing the possibility of a war with China. It is in this context that a growing number of scholars have been debating whether a China–U.S. war is avoidable (Allison 2017; Nye 2023; Werner and Hartung 2023; Brands and Beckley 2024).

Kevin Rudd, former Australian Prime Minister and current Australian Ambassador to the United States, is one of the scholars joining the debate. In his latest volume *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China* (referred to hereafter as *The Avoidable War*) published in March 2022, Rudd provides his insights into the prospect of a China–U.S. war. It analyzes the nature of relations between China, the rising power, and the United States, the hegemon or *status quo* power. It investigates the possibility—or, the inevitability—of China–U.S. war, echoing some key arguments proposed in another influential book *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides' trap?* by Graham Allison (2017). More critically, as the title of the book shows, *The Avoidable War* argues that a war between China and America is avoidable despite sharply rising war risks. To achieve this goal, it provides some positive yet roughly practical policy suggestions for the world's two largest economies. Among them, the most important piece of advice for Beijing and Washington is to find a way to coexist without betraying their core interests through what Rudd calls “managed strategic competition.” *The Avoidable War* under review is valuable in the sense that it conveys a positive message and proposes pragmatic advice for the most important bilateral ties in a world fraught with uncertainties.

## 2 *The Avoidable War's* critical analysis of China–U.S. relations

The reasons why the book was entitled *The Avoidable War* are threefold, as Rudd (2022, 398) writes, and they are: “to explain, for a mainly American audience, how the worldviews now dominant in China and the United States are pushing the two countries toward war; to outline how such a war could be sparked, what it could actually look like, and what unintended world-changing consequences could flow from it; and to consider what could be done, in realistic terms, to prevent it.” Put differently, the book aims to address three key questions: why China and America are moving towards war, how the war could be forged and, most importantly, how to prevent it, and what the potential consequences of such a war could be.

The 400-plus-page book is divided into 17 chapters, excluding the Introduction and Epilogue. Rudd embarks on the survey of China–U.S. relations with his warning in the Introduction that “the 2020s will be the decade of living dangerously” in

view of the growing risks of war between China and the U.S. The world will be better for it, however, “Should these two giants find a way to coexist without betraying their core interests” through what Rudd calls “managed strategic competition.” The author warns, on the other hand, that if China and America fail to do so, “down the other path lies the possibility of a war that could rewrite the future of both countries and the world in a way we can barely imagine” (Rudd 2022, 1–2). In the remainder of the Introduction, the author outlines the dynamics of China–U.S. relations, delves into the factors that have led to their current relationship (with an emphasis on Xi Jinping’s rise and his view of America), and offers a remedy that could potentially avert a catastrophic conflict.

Following the Introduction, Chapter 1 reviews the short history of China–U.S. ties, making plain that the current state of the bilateral ties is a product of a long, complex, and contested history. But the author also highlights the critical role of the paramount leader of China, who is described as Marxist-Nationalist, in redefining the China–U.S. relationship. Chapter 2 articulates the problem of distrust between Beijing and Washington. Based on the presumption that perceptions are important in developing a common strategic narrative, Rudd first examines the view on distrust of America from Beijing and then the view on distrust of China from Washington. For Rudd, one way to better understand China’s perceptions is to grasp the outlook of the Chinese top leader through what he calls ten “concentric circles of interest,” starting from the most important and proximate to the Chinese leader and expanding outward (Chapter 3).

Rudd goes on to explore the ten concentric circles of interest one by one from Chapter 4 to Chapter 13. He first analyzes the overriding circle of interest, i.e., the centrality of the top leader of China and the party and the hard business of staying in power (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 discusses Xi’s second interest—to maintain and secure national unity, in which the “return” of Taiwan is even more fundamental. The next three chapters elaborate his third, fourth and fifth circle, respectively. These circles are ensuring economic prosperity (Chapter 6), making economic development environmentally sustainable (Chapter 7), and modernizing the military (Chapter 8). The five remaining circles of interest concern Chinese foreign policy, more or less. The sixth circle is to manage China’s 14 neighboring states, with which Beijing aims to secure positive, accommodating, and possibly compliant ties (Chapter 9). The seventh circle is to secure China’s maritime periphery in East Asia, the West Pacific, and the Quad (Chapter 10). The eighth circle is to secure China’s western continental periphery by “going west” with the Belt and Road Initiative (Chapter 11). The ninth circle is to increase Chinese leverage across the developing world, ranging from Europe, Africa, Latin America, to Arctic (Chapter 12). The top leader’s tenth circle of interest, as argued by Rudd, is to rewrite the global rules-based order and replace it with one that is more conducive to China’s political, ideological, and economic interests (Chapter 13).

Chapter 14 investigates America’s strategic response to Xi’s China, which remains amorphous in many ways. However, Rudd praises Washington for its flexible response to China over the past few years, which can be characterized as emerging, cohering and gradually gathering momentum. Chapter 15 takes stoke of where Chinese politics stands right now by looking into the politics of the 20th Party

Congress in late 2022 (before the publication of *The Avoidable War* in March 2022), which the author argues that China–U.S. ties through the 2020s are very likely to be living in the shadow of the current leader of China. Chapter 16 presents the next ten years by 2030 as “the decade of living dangerously” with 10 potential scenarios based on different assumptions of military contingency outcomes. Five scenarios concern the Taiwan question, and the other five are supposed to be triggered by conflicts in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, North Korea, Xi’s regional and global strategy (two outcomes).

The last chapter, i.e., Chapter 17, proposes the concept of “managed strategic competition” with a view to navigate an uncertain future of the China–U.S. relationship. Praising himself as “an honest, forthright, and constructive interlocutor” in both China and America, Rudd identifies difficult policy choices faced by both countries and calls for them to construct a framework of managed strategic competition. Such a framework, as the author contends, would obviously involve establishing certain hard limits on one another’s security policies, which allow Beijing and Washington to compete fully and openly on one hand, and make it possible for both to cooperate in certain areas on the other. In the Epilogue, Rudd warns of the real possibility of an armed conflict between China and America that could be caused by three factors. The first factor is the rapidly changing balance of power between the two countries. The second factor is the current Chinese leadership’s decision in 2014 to shift China’s grand strategy from a primarily defensive stance to a more activist policy. The third factor is America’s adoption of an entirely new China strategy in 2017 called strategic competition by both the Donald Trump and Joe Biden administrations. This third factor is largely in response to China’s newfound national power and policy assertiveness (Rudd 2022, 397–400).

### 3 A critical review of *The Avoidable War*

A critical review of *The Avoidable War* could begin by acknowledging some of its merits. In general, the book is well organized. As the previous section mentions, the main body of the book contains 17 chapters, with each focusing on one main topic. The first three chapters (Chapter 1–3) introduce fundamental information about China–U.S. ties and summarize 10 concentric circles of interest to understand Xi’s worldview, whereas the next 10 chapters (Chapter 4–13) successively illustrate these circles of interest and the rest 4 chapters (Chapter 14–17) articulate U.S. response to China, influence of Chinese politics, 10 scenarios of China–U.S. relations in the coming decade, and policy suggestions to avert a highly possible armed conflict, respectively. In addition to the clear arrangement of the chapters, the language of the book is by and large precise, reader-friendly, and to the point.

What’s more important are the arguments the book proposes, most of which could be categorized as “mainstream” in terms of the degree of acceptance or popularity among governments and media in western countries. For example, the arguments made in the book are in line with the complaints that Washington has previously stated, that China is committed to changing the global rules-based order (see Doshi 2021). It recognizes the danger of an armed conflict and appeals

to Beijing and Washington to compete without causing catastrophic consequences (Kurt and Sullivan 2019). It also correctly points out the problem of distrust between the two countries. According to the author, the gulf between Chinese and American worldviews, which influence their perceptions of each other's strategic intention, would only contribute to worsening mutual distrust. With this consideration, Rudd begins to analyze China–U.S. ties through the lens of the worldview of Xi and then makes an attempt to overcome the problem of distrust, paving the way to navigate the uncertain future under the guidance of the framework of managed strategic competition he proposes. One may realize, albeit vaguely, that the much greater attention the author, intentionally or unintentionally, gives to China seemingly reflects the fact that the blame has been placed on China for the currently deteriorating China–U.S. relations. It is difficult to deny that such arguments are gaining popularity in western societies, particularly in Washington, D.C.

Based on these mainstream arguments, Rudd introduces some roughly practical policy suggestions in the book. The essential problem *The Avoidable War* attempts to address is how to avert a China–U.S. armed conflict with catastrophic consequences that the author believes is very likely to emerge in the coming decade. Unlike some policy analysts (see, for example, Mearsheimer 2001; Allison 2017) overstating the gloomy prospect of the inevitability of a China–U.S. war, Rudd—despite his recognition of the rising war risks emerging in the two capitals—contends that such a war is still avoidable if both powers could coexist without betraying their core interests through a framework of managed strategic competition. As strategic competition between China and the United States increasingly intensifies, viewpoints and policy suggestions voiced by Rudd, an important figure from a third party, are of great significance per se. Regardless of the extent to which his policy suggestions are feasible, Rudd's optimistic attitude toward China–U.S. ties and his efforts to silence the drums of war matter most. Personally speaking, this is most valuable part of the book.

With that being said, *The Avoidable War* is not without demerits.

First and foremost, just because these arguments proposed in the book are popular in the West, does not mean they hold water. In fact, many of these arguments are questionable. For example, Rudd's analysis of the nature of China–U.S. relations by concentrating on the role of Xi's worldview, treating him as an unchallengeable paramount leader and seeing the CPC as a monolithic “Inc.” It might be right theoretically; realistically, it might just be another story. As some Chinese research shows (Tao 2016), the China–U.S. relationship and its evolution may be far more complex than *The Avoidable War* portrays. If the paramount leader of China was to be challenged in the next decade particularly when making hard decisions, say, on the Taiwan issue, some scenarios conceived by Rudd might not be viable. Washington's arming of Taiwan to the teeth on the heels of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its *unknown* impact on the CPC elites and the populace further complicate any decision concerning the Taiwan Strait affairs. What is worse, some arguments presented in the book are not new, including even the key concept “managed strategic competition.” It should be noted that some prestigious scholars, from both China and America, have made efforts to manage China–U.S. strategic competition even before

the term was officially used by the Trump administration in 2017 (see esp. Cui 2016; see also Heath and Thompson 2018; Hass 2018; Wu 2020).

Another main drawback is that, because much ink has been spilled about Xi and China in the book, it fails to pay equal attention to the U.S. role in shaping current China–U.S. ties. Rudd’s choice of the top Chinese leader’s ideological worldview is based on his criticism on American political elites that “there is little sense of urgency to understand the domestic drivers of China’s international policy behavior” (Rudd 2022, 19). Given that “It is fundamental to any analysis of the likelihood of war and how we might avoid it” (Rudd 2022, 12), the author devotes the vast majority of his attention to understanding Xi’s worldview. His assertions are partially correct, or at least somewhat acceptable, as many of his counterparts in America are paying much attention to China’s internal politics, especially the CPC leadership, when doing research on China’s U.S. policy. This, however, returns to the first demerit of *The Avoidable War* discussed above—the author should take into account more factors rather than merely focusing on leadership. Moreover, it takes two to tango. The book appears to exaggerate the role of the current Chinese leader and China while neglecting that of the United States in the bilateral ties. But readers interested in Chinese politics might find Rudd’s story-telling style of detailed analysis of Xi intriguing.

Lastly, the book dismisses all footnotes and a bibliography, making it seem more like a work of non-fiction rather than policy research, let alone a rigid academic book. It does not list sources even at places where some statistic data and anecdotes are cited. It quotes remarks by some key figures largely on private occasions. When explaining the George W. Bush administration’s derailment of its stated resolve to harden U.S. China strategy, for instance, Rudd recalls that Bush “told me that ... China had been helpful in building a united front against Al Qaeda’s global operations” (Rudd 2022, 44). Citations without footnotes like this could be found in almost every page of the book. This very way of handling materials—without listing dates, places among other details—should have been a privilege due to the author’s capacity as Australian prime minister. It is also entirely plausible that the private information he has access to is meant to be kept secret. It could be a flaw, though, if the author tries to persuade readers of the truthfulness of the book’s content. However, he tries to make up for this deficiency by revealing his access to or discussions with Chinese friends and senior Chinese officials on some occasions (for example, he shares the list of ten circles of interest with his Chinese colleagues and friends to show that his categorization is “relatively objective”). It may also be confusing for readers to differentiate between opinions and facts. In addition, a lack of explicit sourcing makes it impossible for readers or scholars to further explore relevant data or facts.

#### 4 Implications of *The Avoidable War* for China–U.S. relations

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, *The Avoidable War* remains a valuable book providing new insights into the development of China–U.S. relations. Rudd emphasizes the real possibility of a war between China and America, warning the

catastrophic consequences such a war would probably bring to both countries, the Asia Pacific region and the world at large. This observation is increasingly shared not only in Washington, but also in Beijing, Tokyo, and Taipei. As recent military simulations indicate, a conflict over Taiwan may quickly lead to consequences far beyond the intentions of China and America, as both countries are highly likely to cross red lines (Pettyjohn et al. 2022). Indeed, consequences following any armed conflict between the two largest economies are much more disastrous than anyone could begin to imagine given that both are equipped with nukes.

Believing that a war with China is inevitable, however, more American lawmakers on Capitol Hill, high-ranking officials from the Pentagon, and policy analysts are beating the drums of war much louder. In their view, an aggressive (rather than a defensive) strategy aimed at winning (rather than resisting) a war with China appears to be the proper way of effectively dealing with Beijing. To that end, more voices in Washington are advocating for increased military spending to invest and develop lethal weapons, to strengthen defense partnerships with regional allies (esp. Japan, South Korea, and Australia), and to arm Taiwan at an unprecedented rate and scale (Zhou and Chen 2023). This is how the alleged integrated deterrence comes into being. However, there is a likelihood that Beijing will become increasingly infuriated, particularly by America's growing "interference" in the Taiwan issue. As some American scholars warn, "a dramatic expansion of the US military presence near Chinese shores and an arms race backed by aggressive rhetoric ... in Washington would increase the risks of war" (Werner and Hartung 2023).

It is for this very reason that *The Avoidable War* deserves readers' attention and time. Against the backdrop of the increasingly competitive China–U.S. relations, the book does not follow the prevailing trend of advocating the inevitability of a China–U.S. war in western societies. Nor is it confined to historical determinism. Analysis in the book is based on historical facts. But it is not enmeshed merely with simplistic historic analogies, which is quite popular in the western academic world. Rather, this solution-oriented book takes a broad horizon, going far beyond historical determinism. It conveys a positive signal 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 US and China are able to competitively coexist, even if in a state of continuing rivalry reinforced by mutual deterrence." This should be fully affirmed particularly in the context where the author recognizes that everyone "may not prevail over the drumbeats of war" (Rudd 2022, 18). His endeavors to silence the drums of war should be well recognized.

*The Avoidable War* has already sounded the alarm of the real possibility of a China–U.S. war and warned of disastrous consequences such a war would generate. It also proposes some seemingly practical policy suggestions to avert that catastrophic conflict. However, what is even more crucial is to act promptly. As put by then U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1976, 10) during the Cold War, "We know what we must do. We also know what we can do. It only remains to do it." We are now not living in the Cold War era. Nonetheless, both China and America are unfortunately confronted with a new, increasingly worse situation that some may coin the term "Cold War 2.0" or "new Cold War." Leaders, scholars and the public from both countries, as

well as those from the third party, should work hand in hand to do what “remains to do it” before it is too late.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that there is no competing interests regarding the publication of this article.

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