Christopher Coker, The Improbable War – China, the United States & the logic of great power conflict


Reviewed by Pierre Sel
Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l’Ecole Militaire (IRSEM)

The prospect of a great power struggle between China & the United States has become a recurring theme in International Relations. In the last few years, books like Graham Allison’s “Destined for War, Can America & China escape the Thucydides Trap” garnered international attention and triggered heated debate among scholars. Christopher Coker’s book “The improbable war, China, the United States & the Logic of Great Power conflict” also contributes to the debate, albeit in more subtle way. The title of the book describes quite effectively the contents and intents of his work: reflecting on conflicts between superpowers, the eventual deterioration of the US-China relationship, or the eventual escalation of US-China tensions. Coker draws from an analogy between the pre-world war I relationship between Imperial Germany and Britain, and the contemporary US-China relation to support his claim that a conflict between superpowers cannot be ruled out.

The main argument of the book is that a conflict between China & the United is neither improbable nor inevitable. Christopher Coker himself states it quite clearly, with a quote from Mark Twain, who “wrote that history never repeats, it only rhymes, and that is the entire point of this book” (p. 3). While this book “explores a number of premises with regard to great power competition from which war should logically follow” (p. 4), Coker, “as political scientist, not a sinologist, examines the prevailing discourse about a possible US-China conflict from the perspective of a phenomenologist of war” (p. 5). Coker speaks out against narratives and theories that would downplay the risks of war, especially that of the rational actor model, the “belief that war is increasingly unlikely due to the ever-growing complexity of the world” (p. 13). In order to give an honest review of Coker’s book, it should be taken into account that it seeks to warn against what he sees as a “dangerous liberal misconception” of the US-China relationship, and to reflect on the main theoretical narratives around great power conflicts, the rational actor model and the logic behind wars and strategy.

To support his two-fold argument, Coker first draws from Historical Analogies and the Logic of History (pp. 11–37). While warning that analogies are “paradoxical and dangerous instruments” (p. 30), Coker argues that the false optimism of European elites, driven by passion and belief, influenced by social Darwinist ideas, also contributed to the 1st World War. Economic interdependencies did not prevent
war, and while going to war was certainly “unreasonable, it wasn’t irrational” (p. 31). Coker goes on to attribute the prevailing complacency regarding another great power war to “the emphasis placed on the rational choice model and the assumption that people consistently behave in a rational way” (p. 32), warning that war is unpredictable precisely because reason has little to do with it (p. 33).

Secondly, Coker draws on an analysis of ‘Dominant Conflicts’ and the Logic of Great Power Conflicts (pp. 37–89). Dominant conflicts is described by George Liska as “one in which a rising power intends to transform the international system in pursuit of its own interest”. In this chapter, he points out that conflict would arise around the definition of the “rules of the road, the rules and protocols of the international order” (p. 38), as was the “real conflict” between Britain and Germany in 1914. The differences in values between Britain and Germany, not between the UK and the US, which made transition easier. Therefore, is China willing to change its political system to assimilate the “rules of the road”, or does it wish to transform them? Questioning both US exceptionalism & Chinese historical resentment, Coker argues that given the differences in values and culture it is unlikely that the two can engage in cooperation, and as 1914’s war erupted from contradictions inherent to the international system, a war between the US and China could very well follow a similar pattern.

Chapter 3 deals with strategic narratives and the logic behind strategy (pp. 89–141). In this chapter Coker attempts to underline “another aspect of the logic of great power conflicts; the need to weave strategic narratives that are believable” (p. 91). Indeed, he stresses the role of stories and narrative that states and societies tell themselves and others in the outbreak of conflicts. Strategic narratives, Coker argues, “is merely a grand term to social intelligence – the capacity to devise a set of options that take into account the opponent’s view of the world.” (p. 91) In this regard, the strategic narratives of both China and the United States are, from Coker’s perspective, on a collision course: The United States’ incoherent grand strategy, its relative decline, and the fact that it is unlikely to surrender its position fuels China’s wounded pride and resentment, while the latter’s lack of social intelligence and the increasing aggressiveness of the People’s Liberation Army seem to outline a more offensive strategy. Moreover, Coker admits that there is a Thucydides’ Trap waiting to happen, but not the one Graham Allison has described. It is not about the fear of China’s rise festering in the United States, but rather the risks that either the People’s Republic or the US might be drawn into a conflict because of their allies. (p. 109).

Finally, in his last chapter, War (and its Protean Logic) (pp. 141–173) Coker tries to depict a potential war between China and the United States. Such a war might happen both at sea, in outer space, or cyberspace. However, he states that whatever shape the war might take, it will not change its nature nor its essence. “The essence of any war is to destroy not the capability but the will of the opponent . . . War is always ‘an affair of the heart’” (p. 172). Commentators have argued that Coker’s book defends two related claims: a war between China and the United States is neither improbable nor inevitable; and the logic behind history, strategic, and great power relationships should warn scholars and readers that the prevailing “optimism” might be misplaced.

The author also attempts to integrate and analyse the role of emotions. He argues that while states think and attempt to rationalise their choices and actions, these are framed by narratives that differ from one to another. In this sense, Coker singles out
both US exceptionalism (p. 53), and China’s historical entitlement (p. 60), as forms of nationalism and potential sources of conflict. He further explains that: “it is the stories that states and societies tells themselves and others that lead to conflict, or which allow a different, more peaceful path to be pursued” (p. 90).

Yet, “The Improbable War” isn’t exempt of shortcomings. Rosemary Foot, in a 2014 article published in “Political Science”1 argued that in addition to constraints like conventional and nuclear deterrence, other factors limit the possible outbreak of conflicts; in particular she cites “evidence of historical learning at the decision-making level, state agency at the regional level designed to shape and subdue major-power rivalries, new forms of economic interdependence, and the domestic political-economic priorities of the two main protagonists [China and the United States]”. Moreover, with regard to the 1914 analogy, Ja Ian Chong and Todd H. Hall note that important differences exist between the two eras. China isn’t faced with the “same threat of invasion like czarist Russia did to Imperial Germany”, and current tensions aren’t matters of national survival for the US or for China.2

As for Power Transition Theory, which include the now famous “Thucydides’ Trap”, Foot argues that such a theory is often taken too far, and neglects “some of the consequences of a world and regional order that render discussions of power in a hybrid global system somewhat more complex”.3 Moreover, as historian Pierre Grosser thoroughly explained in a 2011 paper, the power transition between Britain and the United States in the early 20th century was weak, Germany only subsequently became a challenger, and the war was not a direct consequence of this rivalry.4

To sum up, Christopher Coker’s work is a well argued, well structured, somewhat dense yet straightforward book. The author draws substantially from literature, in particular from contemporary scholars, novelist or philosophers, as diverse as Robert Musil, Franz Kafka or John Stuart Mill, or Thucydides. Such literature makes the book dense, with paragraphs sometimes made up solely of quotes. Yet, this is also part of the reason that makes Coker’s volume compelling: his thesis is supported not only by an academic literature review, but also by references and cross-references from novelists or historians. Such dense and rich literature serves the purpose of the book well: to warn against false optimism, “liberal misconception”, and the underlying trends of the international system which might lead to war.

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