Carignan on Wang and Tanner, 'Avoiding the 'Thucydides Trap': U.S.-China Relations in Strategic Domains'

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Conflict resulting from a rising power challenging a ruling one is common enough in international affairs to merit its own term: the “Thucydides Trap.” In Avoiding the ‘Thucydides Trap,’ Dong Wang and Travis Tanner edit a unique volume where scholars from Chinese and American universities, militaries, and think tanks collaborate to analyze areas of strategic importance for the US-China relationship. Authors examine maritime, nuclear, cyberspace, and space domains to find areas for cooperation in the face of conflict; discuss each nation’s perspective of the other’s actions; and consider how interpersonal and military interaction between the nations can help avoid conflict and manage tensions. Wang and Tiffany Ma are hopeful, concluding that a “new Cold War” is not inevitable if both sides adopt “a rational and pragmatic attitude ... from a positive-sum rather than from a zero-sum perspective” (p. 167).

The benefits and drawbacks of such a collaborative approach appear most clearly in the discussions of maritime challenges and military exchange. In the maritime domain—the area most likely to result in war between the US and China—Wang and Christopher Yung argue that the frequency of maritime interaction and mature processes for managing those interactions make conceptualizing areas of agreement and disagreement straightforward, but the problem of real disagreement (not just miscommunication) on critical areas of interest for both sides remains. The structure of their essay helps clarify the issues facing the US and China, recognizing both nations’ vital maritime interests and then summarizing the Chinese perception of US maritime interests and the US perception of Chinese interests. Wang and Yung are clear and accurate in describing Taiwan, the South China Sea, and East China Sea sovereignty claims as critical issues where “there is no consensus ... that any of these hot spots can be easily resolved by the two sides talking to one another” (p. 19). They then accurately describe areas where cooperation is still possible: anti-pollution efforts, illegal fishing, and sea lane security.

Essays on military cooperation and conflict management complete the collection, with Roy D. Kamphausen (with Jessica Drun) offering basic steps both nations can take to create stability in their military interactions and Xu Hui (with Yu Ying) providing a Chinese perspective on the problem. Here, even sincere attempts of the editors to find areas for cooperation founder; Xu’s criticism of US behavior regarding Taiwan (couched in the language of international law) turns polemical, and Kamphausen can find little evidence to support a practical desire for cooperation beyond statements
by President Barack Obama and Chairman Xi Jinping.

Wang and Tanner make their case that conflict and war are not inevitable, and there remain many areas where US and Chinese interests are aligned even as differences create incentives for conflict. However, the time between the essays’ completion and the book’s publication leads the reader to question to what extent both China and the US desire to avoid conflict in the future. For example, Wang and Yung correctly argue that international law and particularly international arbitration could serve as a peaceful way to resolve conflicts in the maritime domain, but with the Philippines pursuing precisely this approach and China ignoring the adjudicated result, it is now difficult to see international institutions for conflict management in as favorable a light. The reader will find few references to events later than the beginning of the Donald Trump presidency, and with China’s increasingly aggressive behavior matched by the US focus on checking that behavior, paths to peaceful resolution of disagreement are fewer than they were five years ago. The recommendations throughout these essays have merit, but only if a desire for peaceful management of the US-China relationship is greater than the gains Chinese leaders perceive they will achieve from revisionist behavior.

Avoiding the ‘Thucydides Trap’ benefits the discussion about US-China relations in three ways. First, its analysis and identification of foundational areas for cooperation across strategically important domains remains valid and should be the starting point for preserving cooperation at a time when conflict seems likely. Second, it reminds the reader that a “new Cold War,” were such a thing desirable, will be far more complicated than the relationship between the USSR and the US. Both nations remain integrated economically, both have legitimate interests in the global commons, and both risk exceptional harm if they allow competition to escalate to direct military conflict. It remains in both nations’ interest to resolve their disputes peacefully for the good of the region and the world. Finally, the essays provide exceptionally clear descriptions of the problems themselves in strategically important domains, and progress is impossible without a shared understanding of the problems.

Thus, the collection brings admirable clarity to the problems between China and the US and the ways the parties might manage them. The larger problem remains the political will of China and the US to choose the path outlined in these essays. Wang and Ma are correct that war is not inevitable but incorrect to say adopting a rational attitude will avoid it; conflict can be the rational action, particularly if leaders think only in a zero-sum and short-term context. It will require domestic political risk and strategic risk on both sides to avoid following a path to conflict that rising and entrenched powers have created and recreated many times before.


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