

Review - The Improbable War

Written by Milos Popovic

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MILOS POPOVIC, SEP 30 2015

The Improbable War: China, The United States and Logic of Great Power Conflict

By Christopher Coker

New York: Oxford University Press

In a 2000 piece, Aaron Friedberg drew a parallel between the rise of Imperial Germany and modern China to ask whether Europe's past will become Asia's future. Fifteen years later, Christopher Coker addresses this question in his new book *The Improbable War: China, The United States and Logic of Great Power Conflict*. Coker's argument is straightforward: armed confrontation between China and the US "is not inevitable, but nor is it as improbable as many experts suggest." Coker suggests that if a conflict breaks out it would be "over the norms and rules of the international system" (p. 125). Theoretically, the precondition for such a showdown would originate in the rivalry between the declining hegemon (US) and the rising power (China) in which the former refuses to yield its dominance to the latter. Coker argues that "it is unclear whether the United States will willingly adjust and adapt" (p. 99) to its own decline and China's rise given that they lack such common values as democracy, open society and free-market economy. The lack of normative ties is likely to breed mistrust and antagonism between the two powers. Consequently, the US would "have no real incentive" to accept a power transition. While Coker stops short of predicting a war, he persuasively suggests that the rise of China will be as disruptive to US global leadership as the rise of Germany was for the British-dominated system of the 19th century. In sum, China may face challenges of coping with its growing power, whereas US may be unable to accept its own decline (p. 72).

Coker identifies China's self-perception and US perception of China as two major drivers of potential confrontation between Beijing and Washington. At present, Chinese leadership is in the process of adjusting the nation's identity to its rapid economic growth. This gap serves as a fertile soil for Chinese politicians to become more assertive by mobilizing the population around nationalism. For Coker, the danger of Chinese nationalism lies in exploiting the narrative of national humiliation which is embedded in the memory of the unequal treaties following the Chinese defeat in the two Opium wars. Conflict is at the core of this narrative. Such a belligerent rhetoric could push China into a conflict with the US and/or its regional allies. Coker identifies Taiwan as the most likely bone of contention between Beijing and Washington given its symbolic and strategic significance. Surprisingly, the author argues that other US allies (Japan, South Korea) and would-be allies (India) are more likely to appease than confront the rising China despite their long-term territorial disputes with Beijing.

The second driver of a potential Sino-American confrontation is, according to Coker, America's incoherent grand strategy (p. 104). During the G.W. Bush administration, China was perceived as a threat to US national security. With the ascendance of the financial crisis in 2008, this narrative changed from confrontational to stressing mutual interdependence ("Chinamerica"). Finally, the Obama administration decided to "hedge its bets" against China's rise by issuing rather vague expectations of their future relationship. For Coker, this lack of clear US policy means that it would be very hard to avoid "Thucydidean trap" (or security dilemma) – as China's economic and military grows, US is likely to become increasingly nervous to preemptively strike against its rival.

What are the possible battlefronts between the two powers? Coker argues that a potential war with China is unlikely to be fought on land, sea or air. Instead, it will likely be a cyberwar in which Chinese and American hackers would attempt to block or disable each other's defense systems. Coker reasonably suggests that a cyberwar could be far

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more dangerous than the Cold War because it “permits states to do things to each other online that they would consider far too provocative offline” (p. 161). A non-exhaustive list of such attacks includes disabling satellites, personal computers, networks and the media. More importantly, cyber-attacks could easily spiral into an armed conflict if their effects are perceived as too provocative for any side. At the same time, Coker notes that cyber warfare could also prevent (or delay) an escalation as effective attacks would cripple the defense system of the target country.

While the author notes that a direct confrontation between China and US may be the least likely scenario, he ignores the possibility of proxy warfare. Proxy wars were quite common during the Cold War. Short of direct confrontation, the Soviet Union and US challenged each other by providing covert support to the ideological friendly regimes or opposition in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Coker himself suggests that the seed of future conflict may be planted in mutually exclusive ideologies of the two sides (i.e. democracy vs. authoritarianism). In theory, China could support an embattled authoritarian regime against the opposition group(s) backed by the US (e.g. Syria). For now, China stays away from military interference in civil conflicts. But given that proxy wars are a cheap way of asserting influence, as realists would argue, the question is for how long China’s sitting on a fence will last. Recent unconfirmed reports indicate that Beijing is sending its warships to Syria’s waters in a preparation for a direct military intervention against the Islamic State.

Whether this scenario unravels or not does not overshadow the fact that China is already challenging US influence through the use of “soft power”. In Africa, Chinese companies have established a strong foothold in resource-rich countries from Nigeria to Sudan. While US is setting the respect for democracy and human rights as a precondition for economic cooperation with authoritarian regimes, China is offering cooperation with no strings attached. Now, Beijing is also encroaching upon US “neighborhood” by offering loans to cash-strapped European countries, often under much better conditions than the US-led IMF and World Bank. Globally, China has established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, to provide loans for infrastructural projects, despite the vivid US opposition. UK, one of the closest US allies, has joined the China-led Bank and other US allies are expected to follow suit in the near future. *The Improbable War* stops short of analyzing whether the emerging China-led financial institutions may become a bone of contention between Washington and Beijing.

Finally, Beijing is asserting its global influence through culture. Since 2004, China has established nearly 1500 Confucius Institutes (450 in US alone) to spread its culture and ideology. Some eminent US universities, such as the University of Chicago, have voiced their concerns over the spread of “Chinese propaganda” and ordered the shutdown of Confucius Institutes. Coker’s book does not examine this latent battlefield even though the author is fond of cultural/ideological theories of great power conflict.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Improbable War* is likely to contribute to debates on great power conflict, and play an important role in shaping debates on US response to rising China in the coming years.

About the author:

Milos Popovic completed a PhD from the CEU Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations, International Relations track. He received his BA from Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, and his MA degree from Central European University, International Relations and European Studies department. In his PhD dissertation, Milos examines the conditions under which externally supported rebels turn against their state sponsors by unpacking the notion of rebel ‘defection’ into defiance, desertion, and assault.