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China and the US are destined for war, if literary alarmists have their way

Tom Plate says the hopes among decent mankind of warmer Sino-US relations are floundering, as literary warmongers on either side predict looming conflict



Winston Churchill is said to have said: “To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” Sure, but what if too much of the wrong sort of jaw-jaw were to convert the idea of war-war to less of a no-no?

Here is what is meant.

No one quarrels with the proposition that what writers write can change our direction. Potent prose can point the way to truth, and so, precisely because we readers might actually believe what we are reading, true writers need to believe absolutely in what they are writing.

America’s own literary tradition offers exceptional examples. Half a century ago, Rachel Carlson helped give birth to the US ecology movement with her masterpiece, *Silent Spring*. Jonathan Schell’s 1982 cry from the heart – *The Fate of the Earth* – saw nuclear war as the unwanted offspring of the scrambled anarchy of our sovereign-nation system of “world order”.

Let's look at the subject of China. A book titled "50 Shades of China" might sell well, while lacking any understanding of China. So might a book titled "Why China Is Evil and Hell-Bent to Start War". Such silly notions, you say? Not quite: here are four sentences from four recent books on China, all by Americans.

One: "To put it bluntly, China cannot rise peacefully."

Two: "Sooner or later, if present trends continue, war is probable in Asia ... China today is actively seeking to scare the United States away from East Asia, rather as Germany sought to frighten Britain before World War I."

A third: "The Chinese leadership views the world in much the same way Kaiser Wilhelm II did a century ago."

A fourth: "The US is much more likely to go to war with China than it is with any other major power."

The concern here is not with the integrity of such pugilistic views – America's literary warmongers might well be as sincere as their counterpart warmongers in China.

Instead, the concern is with their sense of professional responsibility: is there no measure of moral hazard in writing a book that posits the probability/inevitability of war?

To be sure, occasionally an effort of this sort is not vile and stupid; a just-published volume by a revered professor has the title: *DESTINED FOR WAR: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?*

We emphasise the title, as does the book's jacket. "Destined for war" is a phrase arrogantly - devoid of doubt. So we queried the famous professor about whether he really believes war is - inescapable, because one notices immediately that the title has no question mark or qualification (though a lowlier question mark appears in the subtitle). The answer was as one might surmise: the publisher, dragging the author along, pushed for the sans-question-mark title as the attention-getting way to go.

Now this gets interesting. The author of the book is an extremely distinguished Harvard professor, no less than the director of the Kennedy School's Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs. And he is no warmonger.

An example of the nuanced balance he seeks, notwithstanding the morally reprehensible title, is contained in one of its first declamations: "China and the US are currently on a collision course for war," he writes with abandon, but then adds: "unless both parties take difficult and painful steps to avert it."

Even so, Graham Allison treats as near-scriptural the Peloponnesian war precedent, as famously depicted by the Greek historian Thucydides and recycled with canonical solemnity, as evidence of the near-genetic disposition of a leading power and a rising power (such as Sparta versus Athens) to have to duke it out for all they are worth.

For those not up to date with ancient history: the Peloponnesian war ran from 431–404 BC. This, of course, was rather well before the dawn of the nuclear age.

So, we must ask: if even one of our best professors finds misery in uncertainty and comfort in near-certainty, might it be that foolish “jaw-jaw”-ing might create an intellectual and public opinion atmosphere that fosters “war-war”-ing?

Consider that previous books by lesser thinkers have sported such fun titles as *America’s Coming War With China* and, by someone now gracing the Trump cabinet, *The Coming China Wars*.

In the US, the way we talk and think about China seems to be heading in a bad direction. The book titles that tend to catch the public eye are warlike in their negativity and in full salesman’s pitch for the need for US militancy and “toughness”. No doubt similar militant views from the mainland plague Chinese bookstores.

Decent mankind yearns for a level of kinship between China and America that would raise our frail world order to an unprecedented level of intelligent mutual respect and caring.

But – here we go again – last week, the administration of Donald Trump began tariff-rattling at China, and, for his part, President Xi Jinping (习近平) was campaign-thumping around Hong Kong for the two-decade anniversary of the 1997 handover.

This, of course, was his right, as are the American president’s trumped-up tariffs.

But are our leaders being wise with their decisions and their symbolic moves – or just reflecting the thoughtless mentality of bad book titles?

If Beijing is so determined to match the US Navy gunboat for gunboat, and Washington to decimate the diplomatic corps of the US State Department, do we have on our hands a historic Thucydides’ Trap – or rather just a contemporary brain drain?

And when it comes to the topic of “inevitable” war, is it too much to ask of our so-called “experts”, especially by those of us of a delicate and nervous disposition, for the minimum courtesy in their alarmist book titles of a simple question mark? Period.

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