

**Title:            The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China****Author:         Kevin Rudd****Publisher:      Public Affairs, New York, 2022, 432.**

**T**he strategists and policymakers predict that the 2020s will be “the decade of living dangerously” due to the unfolding crisis in the relationship between the United States (US) and China. The former Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd (2007-2010 and 2013), in his book *“The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping’s China”* terms it a “decisive decade” in the dynamics of changing balance of power between China and the US. Kevin Rudd is an admirer of Chinese classical civilization, economic achievements of the post-Mao era, and policies for lifting its population out of poverty. His writings simultaneously show deep affection for the American people. While admiring the US’s unique culture of innovation, Rudd criticizes its domestic politics over voter suppression, unrestricted campaign financing, and corruption of the electoral redistricting system.

The book consists of seventeen chapters. It begins with an introductory section, *“On the Danger of War,”* which raises the question: Should the US and China find a way to coexist through a managed strategic competition? The modern bilateral relationship between China and the US is based on common economic self-interest. The human rights issue is a point of friction in their relationship. In this context, the author shares his personal experiences and explains how he raised human rights issues during his official visit to China while delivering a public lecture in the Chinese language at Peking University.

This book provides a history of mutual distrust between the two big powers. It explains Thucydides’s Trap and its relevance to the US-China relationship, the rise of President Xi Jinping, and his views about the United States. Their political and strategic perceptions fuel the deepening distrust between Beijing and Washington. The US does not believe in China’s self-proclaimed “peaceful rise,” while China does not buy Washington’s pretensions that it has no interest in containing China’s rise. The US occupies a central position in the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) strategic thinking as the only country that is capable of fundamentally disrupting China’s national and global ambitions, including President Xi’s dream of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. The American strategic community believes that armed conflict or confrontation is inevitable between the US and China unless the latter changes its strategic direction.

Rudd claims that with the rapid modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), China’s traditional belief that it is too weak to engage militarily against the US is fading away. Contemporary China is testing the limits of the US’s defense commitments to its Asian allies,

including Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan. The influential leader Xi Jinping — who sits at the apex of the Chinese political system — has consigned the old Chinese maxim “*Hide your strength; bide your time; never take the lead*” to oblivion. As a result of changing character of its leadership, China is removing the mask of modesty and restraint.

The author further argues that President Xi Jinping’s worldview is based on the following ten concentric circles of interest: (i) The centrality of Xi and CCP and the politics of staying permanently in power; (ii) Maintaining and securing national unity; (iii) Ensuring China’s economic prosperity; (iv) Environmental sustainability; (v) Modernizing the Chinese military to project power throughout the world; (vi) Managing China’s neighbouring states; (vii) Maximizing China’s strategic depth in the Pacific; (viii) Projecting China’s strategic, economic and diplomatic power westward across the Eurasian continent and the Indian Ocean through Belt and Road Initiative; (ix) Increasing influence across the developing world; and (x) Changing the global US-dominated rules-based order. Beijing will seek an international order more conducive to China’s ideological, political, and economic interests.

Kevin Rudd identifies the following three approaches that China has followed to change the nature of international order: (i) Growing its support across the developing world. (ii) Installing China-friendly candidates in international institutions. And (iii) Creating a network of multilateral institutions outside the United Nations (UN) and Bretton Woods system.

The US military looked at China as a regional strategic adversary in the 1950s-1960s, a strategic collaborator against the Soviet Union in the 1970s-1980s, an emerging strategic competitor in the 2000s, and an adversary in the 2020s. Washington formally assesses PLA as a “peer competitor” in the East Asia region and a “long-term strategic competitor” around the world.

The author has noted the following areas of military competition between the two great powers: (i) Taiwan (ii) The South China Sea (iii) The East China Sea (iv) New security threats (Artificial Intelligence, space, and cyberspace). In the chapter *The Decade of Living Dangerously*, Kevin Rudd outlines ten potential scenarios based on different hypothetical assumptions regarding what is likely to happen in the US-China relationship in the future. One important scenario is presented as “America’s Munich moment,” in which China takes Taiwan by force amid a nominal US military response.

*The Avoidable War* encourages policymakers in the two countries to devise a joint strategic framework, i.e., “managed strategic competition” between US and China to avoid war. It is difficult but possible. The core prepositions of “managed strategic competition” outlined by the author are: (i) China and the US must develop irreducible strategic redlines to avoid miscalculation; (ii) Both countries should divert the burden of

strategic rivalry into a competition that aims to deter armed conflict; and (iii) Washington and Beijing should continue to engage in strategic cooperation to achieve their national and global interests. Kevin Rudd suggests that both great powers need to consider similar procedures and mechanisms that the Soviet Union and the US established and followed after the Cuban Missile Crisis.

*The Avoidable War* focuses excessively on President Xi Jinping's strategic thinking and core priorities. The book presents him as a "calculated risk taker" who seeks to fracture US alliances. However, as Rudd has not cited references in the book, the readers may face difficulties verifying his claims about Chinese President Xi Jinping and China's national and global ambitions.

***Reviewed by Anwer Ali, Research Officer, Center for International Strategic Studies Sindh (CISSS), Karachi.***