

The Coming Storm: Power, Conflict, and Warnings from History by Odd Arne Westad (Penguin Book, UK, 2026) 256

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The writer Odd Arne Westad is one of the most distinguished historians of international relations and global politics, and is widely recognized for his seminal scholarship on China and the history of great power competition. In his book, *'The Coming Storm: Power, Conflict, and Warnings from History,'* Westad draws on extensive historical research to address one of the most persistent questions of the contemporary era, i.e., whether the world is moving toward a new era of great power competition. He argues that the emerging international order resonates a striking resemblance to the geopolitical environment that preceded World War I, warning that the failure of policy makers to draw on the lessons of history. It would also allow increasing competition among major powers to end once again in catastrophic consequences.

The central theme of the book suggests that the world is transitioning from a stable unipolar order, which is dominated by the United States (US), to a complex multipolar order characterised by strategic competition among major powers, including China, Russia and India. The author draws a compelling similarity between this transition and the transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the interplay of declining British hegemony, the rise of new powers, growing nationalism, alliance politics, and economic rivalries culminated in World War I. By tracing these historical patterns, the author restrains the international community against the perils of arms race, protectionism, geopolitical mistrust, and unresolved territorial disputes that risk replicating the conditions that once propelled the world toward catastrophic conflict.

The most impressive aspect of this book is the author's ability to use historical analogy to great effect. He traces the devastating impact of World War I and emphasizes how political leaders have been involved in some of the worst events in history. Moreover, he identifies several factors, including fear, miscalculation, nationalism, and strategic competition, as the underlying drivers of the conflict, and contends that these factors remain discernibly present in contemporary international politics. By exploring

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these historical patterns, he illuminates the deep structural rifts in contemporary global order, particularly between the US and China, convincing the readers to acknowledge that the conflicts of the present are firmly rooted in the unresolved dynamics of the past.

A substantial portion of the book focuses on examining the rise of China, presenting a good comparison to Germany in the decades before 1914. The author explains the remarkable evolution of China from an impoverished and isolated state to a global economic and military power, through a wide range of reforms, including industrial policies and economic reforms, as well as successful integration of the Chinese economy into the global order. He further argues that the growing pre-eminence of China has raised considerable unease among the US and other major powers, much as did the rise of Germany unsettle Russia, Britain, and France in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In this regard, Westad contends that the rise of China is driven by a combination of factors, including nationalism, ambition, insecurity, and historical memory, rather than describing Beijing as an inherently aggressive or revisionist power. Through this balanced and nuanced analysis, the author clarifies the motivations behind Beijing's actions while simultaneously recognizing the reciprocal concerns that these actions generate among its competitors and neighbouring states.

In addition to the rise of China, the author examines the changing role of the US in contemporary world politics. He argues that the US is in a relative power decline, despite its immense economic and military power, on the eve of WWI in Britain. He also argues that the view of decline influences foreign policy behaviour, fuels protectionist sentiments, and deepens strategic competition. The recent trajectory of US-China competition, recurring trade disputes, and the broader debate surrounding the future of the international liberal order collectively testify to the enduring relevance of his analysis. In addition to the US-China relationship, Westad explores the evolving roles of other major powers, including Russia and India, whose foreign policies are influenced by their unique historical experiences and aspirations for greater global influence. A multipolar order in which several states are engaged in interaction, cooperation, and competition at the same time, is the form in which the author deliberately offers an image of the international order, rather than a bipolar contest between China and the US.

The rise of nationalism and developing mistrust among the major powers have increasingly damaged public opinion and political discourse, eroding

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the foundations of cooperative international engagement. This trust deficit among rival states undermines diplomatic efforts and increases the risks of escalation during periods of crisis. If contemporary flashpoints, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the China-India border dispute, are not managed through sustained diplomatic engagement and peaceful conflict resolution, they could significantly increase the likelihood of wider regional or even global confrontation.

In discussing the role of technology and military competition, Westad draws a parallel with the pre-1914 era, cautioning the international community against the destabilizing perils of unchecked technological advancement in the context of contemporary conflicts. He posits that rather than guaranteeing security, these advancements risk exacerbating existing tensions and further eroding the stability of the international order. By directing the attention of readers to the implications regarding artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and emerging technologies, the author lends a compelling contemporary perspective to traditional debates on deterrence and strategic stability. In doing so, the author challenges the prevailing notion that states can guarantee peace solely by possessing nuclear weapons.

Nonetheless, the book is not without its limitations. The extent to which the author has depended on historical analogies could well lead to the impression that he is too deterministic, and critics might well argue that there were greater differences between the contemporary world and the pre-1914 era. The considerable reliance of the author on historical analogies risks appearing overly deterministic, and critics may reasonably object that stark differences exist. Moreover, factors like economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, and global communication networks substantially diminish the resemblance between the contemporary global order and that of the pre-1914 era. Furthermore, the establishment of institutions like the United Nations has also fundamentally transformed the contours of international politics, creating direct comparisons with the politics of the early twentieth century. The author has also overlooked the role and significance of non-state actors and middle powers in the present international order, emphasizing the great powers. Additionally, it is often overemphasizing great power dynamics at the expense of other significant actors, where the role of non-state actors, middle powers, regional organizations, and multinational corporations receives insufficient attention, and the risks posed by transnational challenges are largely ignored.

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Despite these limitations, the author delivers a convincing and intellectually rigorous account of the contemporary debate regarding the future of great power competition, interrogating whether states can evolve toward peaceful coexistence or systemic rivalry will ultimately lead to war. The author has offered well-researched and balanced analysis of historical and contemporary international order, urging students, scholars, and policy makers to recognize the permanent importance of diplomacy and strategic restraint by reflecting on the lessons of history, making this book an essential read for all those concerned with the subject of geopolitics and the future of the international order.