

Book Review
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Christopher Coker, *The Improbable War: China, the United States and Logic of Great Power Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2015) pp.217

The book "*The Improbable War: China, the United States and Logic of Great Power Conflict*," published in 2015, is written by Christopher Coker who is a professor of international relations at London School of Economics. His earlier works include; *Can War Be Eliminated?*, *Future of War*, *Waging War without Warriors*; and *The Changing Culture of Military Conflict*. Divided into five chapters, *The Improbable War* explores the logic of conflict (potential or actual) between great powers. In order to find an answer to this perplexing question Coker analyses the existing international power structure, prevalent world views of nations, and analyses the political causes that had led to military conflicts in the past. His focus however remains on the First World War while discussing what he calls "logic of history in regard to military conflicts between dominant powers".

The author analyses the views of influential intellectuals, who shaped peoples' world view in the period preceding First World War. The prevalent view at the time was that commercial interests of the major powers will trump any desire of the military or political elites to go to war. The author also discusses naval and military buildup of Germany as a possible cause of the great war but shows with historic evidence that none of the major powers had wanted to go to war but some were "ready enough to seize the moment".

The book's themes move around a series of questions including concepts of learning lessons from history such as Thucydidean trap (security dilemma) and whether the concept is relevant to US-China future relationship. If the security dilemma can be resolved to the satisfaction of both the US and China how the two powers would adjust to increasing complexity, volatility and interconnectivity of the twenty first century world. Is national exceptionalism a driver of conflict? Whether grand strategy also involves social intelligence and if China and the United States as a factor into their strategic thinking calculus? Are some of questions explored by the author.

The author looks into probable chances of armed confrontation between China and the US. In his opinion war is not inevitable, nor is it as improbable as many thinkers suggest. He goes on to support his thesis with references to the world war in 1914. His thesis emphasizes the fact that root cause of conflict of the First World War was an ideological divergence between great powers. Furthering his argument the author adds that if a conflict breaks out between two great powers it would not be a normal confrontation under any rules of the international system. Theoretically the author relates the prevailing discourse about US-China confrontation as a precondition based on the perception of the rivalry between the declining sole superpower (US) and a rising great power (China).

Coker identifies the perception of one power of the other power as an important factor that can lead to a conflict between the two states. China at present is in the process of building the nation's identity and focusing on its economic growth. This may also give space to the Chinese leadership for strengthening their concept of nationalism. The author considers emerging Chinese nationalism a danger to world peace. Such a rigid rhetoric could lead China into a conflict with the US and/or US' regional allies for instance Taiwan, which is a symbolic and strategic possibility.

The other aspect discussed by the author relates to China-US relationship as a concept of dominant conflict in which a rising power expands its areas of activities in a manner that has the potential to transform the international system in pursuit of its own interests. He has linked this idea to America's notions of grand strategy. During the G.W. Bush administration, China was perceived as a potential threat to US national security. The US economic crisis in 2008 flipped the narrative to mutual interdependence. Afterwards, Obama administration decided to engage China, sensing China's rise and benefits of their future relationship. According to Coker, this lack of clarity in US strategic policy may connect dots to end up in a Thucydidean trap or security dilemma.

The possible war fronts between the two powers, according to the author, are unlikely to be on land, sea or air but in the cyber domain. Cyberwar could be far more lethal than the Cold War or historic conventional wars, as it can disable strategic defense systems. The author briefly discusses the proxy wars by relating it to ideological differences, political and social mindsets, democratic slogans and

authoritarian approaches. This in view of the author may be the future role of China in certain regions. As it is, currently China is not intervening or involved in a low intensity conflict anywhere in the world. But some traces of this phenomenon can be seen in China's soft power strategy. Beijing is also increasing its economic influence in European countries. Its financial engagements in areas traditionally under the US sphere of influence may become a significant cause for contention between Washington and Beijing. China's economic policies may also challenge US interests in some regions such as Africa.

The Improbable war: China, the United States and Logic of Great Power Conflict, is a significant contribution to the historic literature on war and analysis of factors that may have the potential of triggering a war between the USA and emerging power of China. The author has widely discussed economic, social and political dynamics of both these powers which may lead to future confrontation. The extensive knowledge of the author, his references from numerous authentic sources including economic studies, military planners, social and political scientists make a sound support base for his thesis. Coker's well written and well researched book adds to an informed debate on understanding of great powers' mindsets and an emerging strategic environment which may at some point make the confrontation between the US and China inevitable as Coker had concluded from his deep analysis of the great war that "the lessons of WWI had wrongly overestimated human rationality".

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