

Opinion – US-China Rivalry: Moving Closer to the Brink

Written by William Briggs

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WILLIAM BRIGGS, AUG 16 2020

Former Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd's most recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, warns us to 'beware the guns of August.' His allusion to the early days of WWI is apt, but the world is by no means 'sleepwalking' to war but rather rushing, with eyes wide open, toward the precipice. Rudd portrays the USA and China as belligerent parties playing a dangerous game. They both rely on nationalist appeals to maintain support and legitimacy at home. Economic considerations are driving political responses and international politics are being used to serve domestic ends. Rudd presents the actions of the two states as opposite sides of a coin; on one side is the 'wolf warrior' and on the other are calls by US leaders to effectively 'overthrow' the Chinese Communist Party. He is right, up to a point and is right to ask, "where will this end?" Where it might end is in some form of armed confrontation that could easily lead to open war. Why this is so, is quite another question.

While the two sides express similar nationalist attitudes and appear to enjoy a shared intransigence, it would be a mistake to ascribe equal responsibility to China and the United States. It is a fact that China's rise as an economic power threatens the hegemony that America has so long enjoyed. One side is pursuing a careful campaign of economic growth and expansion. This has been met with threat and militarisation. The two approaches are not equal in the threat perception stakes. China's rise can only come at the cost of America's demise and yet, it must be remembered, US foreign and economic policy served to create the conditions for the current crisis.

China, in the 1970s was preparing the way to break out of its Maoist isolation. The global economic crisis of the 1970s required the west to begin to rapidly globalise. These two factors met, and the United States began its policy of engagement with China. Foreign enterprises beat a path to China's door. The period of China being the 'workshop' for the world served both sides well but inevitably meant that the Chinese economy grew rapidly. When Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, China's economy was on the rise, but as far as the USA was concerned this was a minor issue. Hong Kong's economy at that time represented 23 per cent of the total economic power of China. By 2020 that figure had shrunk to just 3 per cent.

Engagement, as a foreign policy and economic doctrine, had clearly outlived its usefulness. Containment became the order of the day and with it the militarisation of the region. What is presented to us today is inevitably described as a threat from an assertive or aggressive China, but how much of this, seen from China's perspective, is a response to perceived threats? But even the more 'muscular' containment approach is now being seen by Washington to be insufficient. US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo has shifted policy to what is effectively one of 'roll-back.' While many see domestic politics being played out in this, as Trump ramps up anti-China rhetoric as an electoral strategy, the fact is that Biden has a commitment equal to or greater than Trump's in upping the ante in relation to China. Biden has goaded Trump for being 'too soft' on China. Whichever way the wind blows, the prospects look grim.

The USA and its loyal allies point to a range of 'proofs' that China presents a threat. Almost all of these are, as the Chinese foreign ministry repeat, 'internal' issues. Hong Kong, Taiwan, the South China Sea, Human Rights and Uyghurs are never far from the consciousness of the western political leadership or the media. Few of these issues reflect terribly well on China, but just how the USA can link these to aggressive intent on the part of China defies all logic.

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The Chinese have certainly exhibited a degree of expansionism in recent years. The expansion has been economic and not military. The fact that its economic successes stem from the post-Mao opening to the west and of the west's engagement with China, needs to be borne in mind. American capitalism acted as a teacher and China proved to be a most able student.

The result of all this has been economic rivalry, militarisation and virtual encirclement by the US and its allies. It has been a one-way street. The United States regularly engages in provocative military manoeuvres that are barely outside China's territorial waters and yet China is presented as aggressive. If the situation were to be reversed and China staged war games off Florida, then ... we can only imagine the response.

Kevin Rudd's article leaves us with an oft-repeated argument that a series of mishaps, of wrong turns and minor incidents can lead to cataclysmic results. He leaves us with the image of 'sleepwalking' to war. His response to this is to call for a 'managed' strategic competition that recognises the various limits, beyond which neither party must cross. In the best of all possible worlds he might be right, but our world is far from the best of all possible worlds. What we see is a capitalist titan upon which the sun is setting and another whose moment in the sun appears to be at hand. To imagine, even for a second, that the USA will allow a changing of the guard is ludicrous. It is equally ludicrous to suggest that China will settle for some economic power sharing with its rival. The future is fraught with danger. America's militarisation of the region in order to first contain and now to roll-back China's progress, represents a clear and calculated political doctrine. It is not the stuff of sleepwalkers.

About the author:

Dr William Briggs is a political economist affiliated to Deakin University whose special areas of interest lies in Marxist political theory. He writes for *Pearls and Irritations on International Politics*. His latest book, *China, the USA, and Capitalism's Last Crusade*, is due for publication in early 2021 with Zero Books. He is the author of *Classical Marxism in an Age of Capitalist Crisis*, *Removing the Stalin Stain*, and *A Cauldron of Anxiety: Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century*.