

FT Books Essay Political books

Give war a chance – the new global balance of power



Three books give their views on rising tensions between east and west, the theatres of battle and what must be done to gain ascendancy

James Crabtree 9 HOURS AGO

Back in August, China tested a new hypersonic missile. The weapon, which could be adapted to carry a nuclear warhead, [circled the globe](#) via the South Pole before detonating close to its intended target. Beijing's move caught analysts and US military leaders by surprise, rekindling talk of a newly accelerating arms race in Asia.

That prospect then raises more fundamental questions. What might a coming era of ever more intense competition between the two superpowers look like? And is actual armed conflict between them, once viewed as unthinkable, now more likely than not? Three new books examine these issues from different perspectives, providing sharply differing accounts of the [end of an earlier era](#) of peaceful globalisation, and the struggles that might replace it.

Elbridge Colby's work is the most blunt. "This is a book about war," he writes in *The Strategy of Denial*. "But it is about fighting a war to prevent China or anyone else from dominating a key region of the world."



US warships, including the USS Carl Vinson, joined Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force for manoeuvres along maritime routes challenged by China in September © Haydn N Smith/US Navy via AP

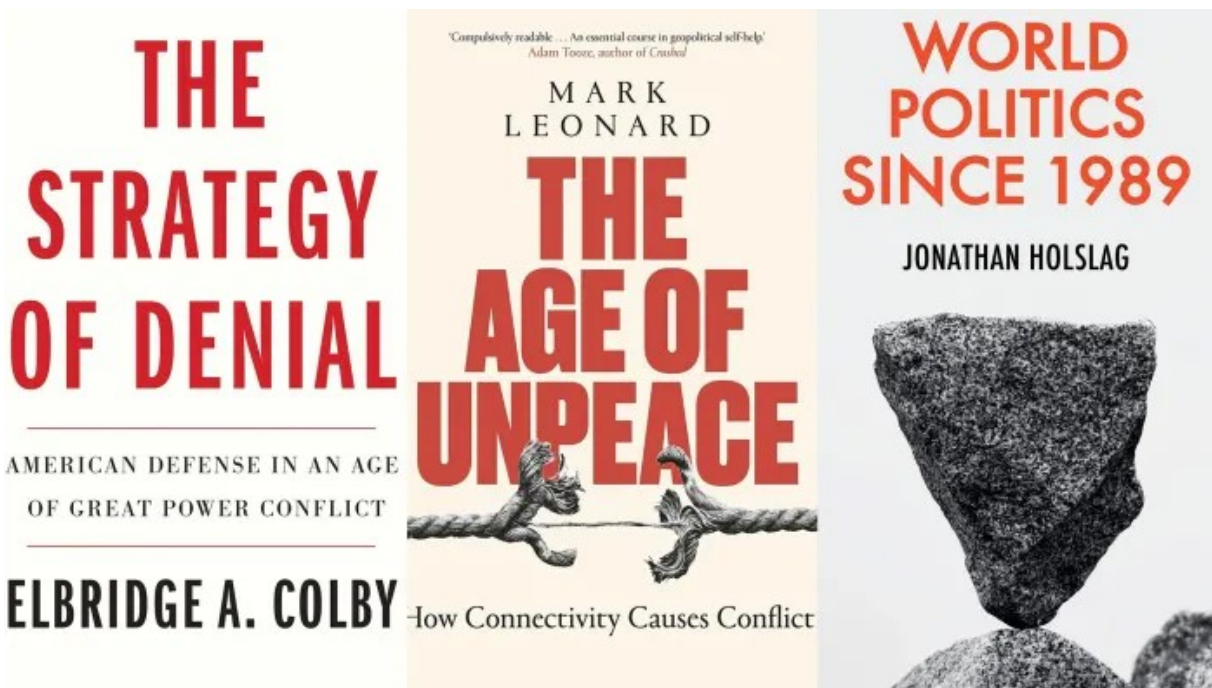
Even at a time of growing hawkishness in Washington. Colby is something of an uber-

power competition with [China and Russia](#).

His book follows a careful, logical argument, beginning with the entirely reasonable claim that China aims to become a dominant or “hegemonic” power, at first in its own back yard in East Asia, and then perhaps elsewhere too. Given Asia’s critical economic and geopolitical position, the US’s primary strategic goal is to stop this by building a new “anti-hegemonic coalition” to balance China’s rise.

So far, so conventional. This is already mostly US policy in Asia, with its focus on the “Quad” quasi-alliance with Australia, India and Japan, as well as the more recent [Aukus](#) security pact with Australia and the UK. But Colby then takes things a stage further, arguing that war with China is not only likely but, in some scenarios, the best course of action for the US.

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Beijing has a strong incentive to pick away at weaker members of this US coalition, he suggests, which includes formal treaty allies such as the Philippines and Thailand. The nub of this is [Taiwan](#), however, which Colby argues China is eventually likely to try to retake by force, both for reasons of national reunification but also to destroy US credibility with its other allies.

“America’s best military strategy is a denial defence, or a strategy that seeks to deny China’s ability to use military force to achieve its political objectives,” he writes, hence



A Chinook helicopter carries a giant Taiwanese flag in preparation for national day celebrations on October 10 © Daniel Ceng Shou-Yi/Zuma/Shutterstock

This is both radical and risky, to put it mildly. War between two nuclear-armed states would be unprecedented. Colby expends much effort to claim that such a “limited” war could be contained, arguing that neither side would have an incentive to escalate. But this is not an argument many would be terribly keen to test in practice.

Given the grim record of recent US military adventures in Iraq and [Afghanistan](#), the bar for considering such a strategy must also be extremely high. Much of Colby’s argument rests on the importance of US credibility with its allies. Yet this leads to the somewhat peculiar conclusion that Taiwan should be defended as if it were an ally, even though it does not enjoy that status.

Building a new balancing coalition in Asia is now the central task of US statecraft

How all this might look from Asia is another problem. The idea of fighting pre-emptive wars will clearly divide America’s partners in the region, even putting to one side the fact that it would be viewed as escalatory in Beijing. Colby also suggests at various points

rather than simply pretending it can't happen because both have nuclear weapons. "Peace . . . does not come from some unfocused readiness to be unpeaceful but only from a willingness to imagine and consider what a war would actually be like," he suggests.



Satellite image of a missile silo being constructed near Jilantai, China, 2019 © Maxar Technologies/DigitalGlobe/Getty Images

That unusual word then also forms the heart of Mark Leonard's *The Age of Unpeace*, a starkly different view of future conflict. Where Colby is a realist focused on military power, Leonard, who runs the European Council on Foreign Relations think-tank, focuses on what he dubs an era of new "connectivity wars".

fall of globalisation since the cold war by Jonathan Holslag, a professor at the Free University of Brussels. “It was the rise of China and the uncertainty it instilled . . . that made conflict unavoidable,” Holslag writes in *World Politics Since 1989*. But behind this he details more than half a dozen other shifts destabilising world politics, from western hubris to the way technological change has worked to weaken the fabric of western societies, just as they were being challenged from Beijing, Moscow and elsewhere.

These changes mean future conflict is likely to feature more of what is often known as a hybrid of “grey zone” tactics, meaning those that fall below the threshold of actual warfare, ranging from [cyber attacks](#) and economic coercion to the kind of deniable military incursions that marked Russia’s deployment of “[little green men](#)” in Ukraine. “Because of technology, the possibilities of information warfare explode,” Holslag suggests.

What might then be done to guard against such gloomy predictions? Holslag favours an approach of internal rebuilding in western nations, not dissimilar to that taken by US President Joe Biden under his “build back better” mantra. By contrast, attempts to push back militarily against China are likely to end badly. “Such hard balancing is unlikely to lead to a new equilibrium,” he suggests. “Rising powers become dangerous when they suddenly falter. Consider it the cornered cat syndrome,” adds Holslag.



namely that a much less entangled world may also be more stable and peaceful. Instead, he nods to a future of “selective decoupling”, backing partial separation of areas such as cloud computing or 5G telecoms, but not in others, such as agriculture or steel.

He suggests that ‘a decent peace’ is possible only if the US and its allies can deter and in effect contain China

Colby would say these measures are beside the point, given that no amount of decoupling will stop China wanting to be the dominant power in its own region, an aim that America itself pursued successfully at an earlier point in its own history. Instead, he suggests that “a decent peace” is possible only if the US and its allies can deter and in effect contain China — even if he sketches out

this conclusion in only a few brief concluding pages, following an otherwise long and rather more bellicose analysis.

Ultimately Colby is likely to be right — if the US and its allies do nothing, China’s growing military and economic might will see its influence increase across Asia. Some kind of new balance of power is also likely to be needed, to provide any hope of



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NATO TO EXPAND FOCUS TO COUNTER RISING CHINA



