

Political books

The Avoidable War — averting a conflict between the US and China

In his new book, former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd urges a policy of 'managed strategic competition'



The author lays out ten 'core priorities' that animate China's president Xi Jinping © Greg Baker/AFP/Getty Images

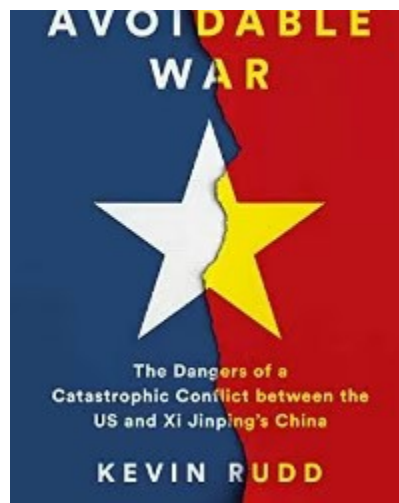
James Crabtree YESTERDAY

Few western statesmen have enjoyed much quality time with Xi Jinping, especially as China's president has of late retreated into pandemic-era seclusion. Kevin Rudd is one who did. "I spent a total of 10 hours in conversation with Xi in six separate meetings, including about three hours around a winter fire at the prime ministerial residence," he writes in *The Avoidable War*, describing a moment back in 2010, when Xi was Chinese vice-premier and Rudd was Australia's prime minister.

Rudd knows China too. He speaks Mandarin, having studied and worked there. Following his second stint as Australian leader in 2013, he now runs the Asia Society in New York. But he still found time recently to wrap up a doctorate at Oxford, on "Xi Jinping's Worldview", which now provides the underpinnings for his book.

His views on Sino-US ties are therefore notable for being both well-informed and gloomy. Beijing's reputation has clearly plunged in the west. China's leaders meanwhile view the US as "insufferably arrogant, condescending, and systemically incapable of treating China or its leaders with appropriate national respect". The outlook is thus bleak: "The world views now dominant in China and the United States are pushing the two countries toward war," he writes.





The author argues that Chinese political elites are at least well-informed about US politics, something that cannot be said of Americans who still struggle to understand “the domestic drivers of China’s international policy behaviour”. To remedy this Rudd lays out 10 “core priorities” that animate Xi, ranging from the survival of the Chinese Communist party to rewriting the existing global “rules-based” order.

Xi’s second priority is arguably the most important, namely Chinese national unity and the political future of Taiwan, where Xi is “a man in a hurry”. China’s leader intends to settle this question “in his political lifetime”, a period that may now stretch well beyond a third term this year and into the middle of the next decade.

Rudd’s book provides a rich and realistic portrayal of China’s motivations, as well as a stark warning to a world standing on the edge of a conflict potentially far more devastating than Russia’s recent [invasion of Ukraine](#). His argument contains an intriguing balance of pessimism and optimism. On the one hand, competition between the superpowers is inevitable. Rudd sketches out 10 plausible scenarios over Taiwan, half of which end in military confrontation. Yet he also suggests creative diplomacy could avert disaster, hence his title, “The Avoidable War”.

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Rudd proposes a policy of “managed strategic competition”, sketched out in just a handful of pages towards the book’s conclusion. This boils down to developing mutually respected red lines, along with plenty of high-level back-channel diplomacy to enforce them. This is not a bad idea, although it is hardly radical: US President Joe Biden is trying something similar with his notion of Sino-US “[competition with guardrails](#)”

Why might China and the US follow such a path? Mostly to buy time. With Asia's economic and military balance tipping in its favour, China may be willing to limit its ambitions over Taiwan for now, simply to avoid the short-term risks that a damaging conflict with the US could bring. In a decade or so, it is likely to be in a still better position.

Meanwhile, the US may be willing to play nice for a period as it tries to renovate its domestic economy and shift military resources to Asia. The risk, however, is that by focusing on diplomacy the US might also choose to delay the kind of costly build up in military power that would actually deter China from acting over Taiwan in the first place.

Certainly there is a risk that the west will underestimate China's resolve, just as it failed to deter Russian aggression over Ukraine. Rudd admits that he risks being accused of naivety, with proposals that seek largely to delay an inevitable confrontation, perhaps for another decade or more. "I would argue that there is nothing wrong, let alone cowardly, with kicking this particular can (ie, war) a long way down the road," he writes. The risk, as recent events in Ukraine show, is that military confrontation between the superpowers may not be avoidable indefinitely.

The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China by Kevin Rudd, PublicAffairs, \$32, 432 pages

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