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## Danger Zone – a terrifying scenario of China on the road to war

US academics Hal Brands and Michael Beckley paint a worryingly plausible picture of superpower conflict



Personnel aboard a Chinese aircraft carrier take part in a military exercise in the South China Sea in August 2022 © Eyepress/Reuters Connect

**James Kyngge** YESTERDAY

“It is January 18, 2025, and a war is about to start,” runs the provocative first line of *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*.

It goes on to sketch out a blood-curdling sequence of events. The inauguration of the US president is only days away. But both the Democratic and Republican candidates are still claiming victory in the election. Their rival supporters are clashing in the streets. With America thus distracted, China decides to invade Taiwan. US spy satellites detect Chinese military mobilisations, but Washington dismisses them as just another round of sabre-rattling.

Then at 10.01pm EST, Chinese forces attack. Missiles pound airfields, government buildings and military installations all over Taiwan, as well as America’s air bases in Okinawa and Guam. The USS Ronald Reagan, the Pentagon’s sole aircraft carrier in the region, is hit by an anti-ship ballistic missile. Chinese special forces try to kill Taiwan’s top leaders while cyber warriors take down the island’s power grid. Then an amphibious assault begins.

Even as recently as five years ago, such a scenario might have been seen as sensationalism. But in the aftermath of China’s recent military exercises around Taiwan, along with a [warning](#) from Taiwan’s defence minister that China will be ready to mount a full-scale invasion by 2025, the storyline feels at least plausible — though

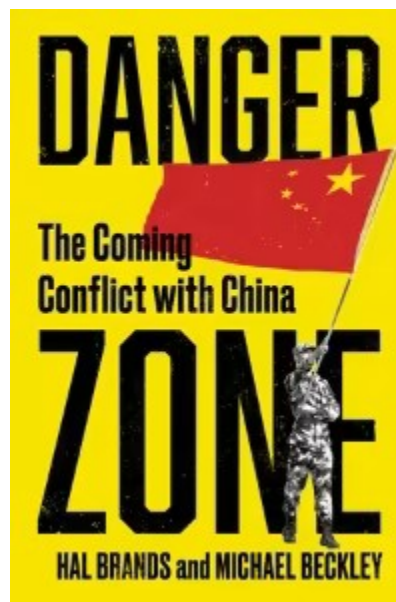
no less terrifying.

**Both history and China’s current trajectory suggest the Sino-American competition will hit its moment of maximum danger in the 2020s’**

Perhaps conscious of the weight of their topic, Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, two well-regarded American academics, are meticulous about their sourcing. A glance at the notes in the back of the book shows that much of the imagined detail set forth in the opening sequence actually comes from Chinese sources, the US military or reputable commentators.

But it is the cogently argued remaining 200-odd pages that make this excellent book really worth reading. The authors diverge from the conventional wisdom that China’s territorial assertiveness is a by-product of its inexorable rise to superpower status. In fact, they say, it is China’s vulnerability as a “peaking power” that makes it so dangerous.

“Both history and China’s current trajectory suggest that the Sino-American competition will hit its moment of maximum danger during this decade, the 2020s,” they write. “The reason for this is China has reached the most treacherous stage in the life cycle of a rising power — the point where it is strong enough to aggressively disrupt the existing order but is losing confidence that time is on its side.”



There is much in this argument that appears persuasive. Neither Germany in 1914 nor Japan in 1941 were self-assured rising powers confident of their own futures, as Brands and Beckley point out. The insecurities of Vladimir Putin — who rails against

the “absolutely unacceptable threat” posed to Russia by Nato’s eastward expansion — are also evident.

China’s own insecurity, Brands and Beckley argue, stems from its declining economic performance. They present a litany of ills that coalesce to form an “economic quagmire”: the misallocation of capital on a massive scale, a vastly overbuilt property sector, spiralling debts, a nosedive in productivity reminiscent of that of the former Soviet Union, a bloated state sector, and others.

Such weaknesses are often cited as factors behind China’s slowing GDP growth rate. However, the authors’ argument is on thinner ground when it comes to the all-important topic of technology.

They acknowledge that Chinese companies have made impressive strides in developing many cutting-edge technologies, but add that “so far. . . these measures have failed to boost flagging productivity”. But perhaps it is this very evidence of rapid technological progress that could persuade Beijing to stay its hand — leaving thoughts of any military adventure to such time in the distant future when its economic might and technological prowess are unassailable.

**Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China** by Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *WW Norton* £22, 304 pages

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