

Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China

Hal Brands & Michael Beckley, 'Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China', New York: (W.W. Norton & Company, 2022); 242

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"History's most perilous moments often arrive not when a power is strongest, but when it begins to fear decline." That sentiment captures the spirit of *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*, by Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, a book that forcefully argues that China is not a juggernaut destined to dominate the 21st century, but a power entering its peak and, therefore, becoming more aggressive as it senses time running out.

The myth of a forever-rising China produced confidence in some quarters and fatalism in others. Brands and Beckley challenge that narrative with sharp urgency, insisting that the most dangerous decade is not the indefinite future but the present. Chinese leaders may lash out before structural problems erode their capacity to do so. Hal Brands, a historian of grand strategy and professor at Johns Hopkins, has established himself as one of the leading voices on US foreign policy and global security. Michael Beckley, a political scientist at Tufts, has built a reputation for empirically grounded research on power transitions and Chinese capabilities. Together, they bring a mixture of historical analogy and contemporary analysis, crafting an argument that is explicit in its purpose to persuade readers that China's rise is entering a period of stagnation, and that this

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“peaking power” is more likely to take risks than a steadily ascending one.

The central claim is straightforward but unsettling. China is not simply a rising power. It is a power that has risen, reached or nearly reached its maximum influence, and is now staring at economic slowdowns, demographic decline, environmental crises, and political bottlenecks. The authors contend that such circumstances lead to desperation. According to history, nations that are approaching their zenith frequently try to preserve their gains before a decline occurs. Using examples like Imperial Japan prior to World War II and Imperial Germany prior to World War I, the book places China within this historical trend.

Brands and Beckley suggest that China today sits in a similar Danger Zone. The book’s thematic focus is wide but coherent. It discusses domestic governance, foreign policy conduct, military modernisation, and economic trends. Whereas the implications are global, the geographical focus is the Asia-Pacific, specifically the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea. The timeline is deliberately limited: the 2020s and early years of the 2030s are depicted as the watershed years when China is most likely to challenge American hegemony and test the established World Order.

Chapters move from explaining why China’s growth story is faltering, to describing how its leadership might behave under pressure, to outlining flashpoints where crises could erupt. The evidence marshaled is persuasive: declining birth rates and an aging workforce, mounting debt and overcapacity in infrastructure, slowing productivity, and authoritarian system that stifles political reforms and growth.

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A striking aspect of the book, which stayed with me after reading, is its inversion of conventional wisdom. We are used to thinking of rising powers as hegemons eager to dominate others. Brands and Beckley flip this, insisting that the greater danger comes when a state feels its window of opportunity is closing. This claim resonated because it fits with the psychological dimension of power politics: ambition collides with insecurity, producing volatility. The combination of confidence in current strength and fear of future weakness makes for combustible decision-making.

The uniqueness of this viewpoint is emphasised by the comparison with other works. Graham Allison's "Destined for War" popularised the notion of the "Thucydides Trap," where a rising power threatens a ruling power, producing war through fear and miscalculation. Brands and Beckley diverge: they argue not that China's rise threatens the US, but that China's peak creates the danger. The logic is different. Where Allison stresses the risks of continued growth, *Danger Zone* stresses the perils of slowdown.

Still, the book is not without shortcomings. It exaggerates how conflict is sometimes unavoidable. By depicting China as a desperate power, the authors create an almost deterministic sense of aggression. This could undervalue the possibility of alternative futures, where China might be more internally motivated than externally, or where risk-taking might be curbed by diplomacy and interdependence. A large portion of the book is written from an American perspective.

Apart from these lapses, the strengths prevail. The prose is clear and easy to read, avoiding excessive jargon yet employing careful strategic terminology. Phrases such as "danger zone," "peaking power," and "shrinking window" transform complicated ideas into

digestible, lasting expressions. The structure of the book maintains urgency without becoming incoherent.

In my opinion, the book is both illuminating and provocative. It succeeds in forcing a rethinking of assumptions. The idea that China is most dangerous not when it is strong, but when it begins to feel weak, shifts how one interprets events and policy. It felt at times too alarmist, as though the authors feared under estimating risk more than over estimating it. Yet that very alarm is perhaps the point to jolt readers into vigilance. It was similar to coming across a fire bell when reading *Danger Zone*; it might not foretell the exact spark, but it makes sure that you are aware of the possibility.

The book converts scholarly insights into strategic warning, and its main target is policymakers. Because it places China within broader theories of power shifts and decline, academics and students studying political science, security studies, and international relations will also gain from it. The book achieves a balance between style and vocabulary. It is both complex enough to interest academics and simple enough for general readers to understand.

Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China reinterprets the most important geopolitical struggle of our era. It debunks myths, integrates historical and contemporary analysis, and gives a stern warning about the next decade. Its sense of urgency, sharpness, and novelty in presenting China as a prevailing power instead of an ascending one are its best attributes. Its intermittent determinism and its limited incorporation of counterarguments are its worst. As one reviewer noted in another context, it may be “an unsophisticated treatise enriching the ‘getting China wrong’ genre,” but it is precisely this bluntness that makes it effective.■