

## BOOK REVIEW

**2034: A Novel of the Next World War**, by Elliot Ackerman and James Stavridis. New York: Penguin Press, 2021. 320 pp. ISBN: 9780593298688.

The issue of China's rise has become a mainstream issue over the last few years with many players seizing the topic to advance their chosen narrative. Here Elliot Ackerman and retired Admiral James Stavridis present a novel of a possible future in which China's rise was not handled well and resulted in the next world war. Both are concerned about a rising China and American plans for responding and managing the relationship. *2034* is the pair's possible future scenario of what the future may look like just over a decade from now and how various competing factors could result in inadvertent escalation and eventual war.

The book begins by painting a realistic, if dark, interpretation of America's politics over the next decade while introducing the main characters in the story. The crisis begins in a plausible manner with a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) by the US Navy in the South China Sea (SCS). The Navy vessel receives a distress call from an apparent Chinese fishing boat that was on fire. Once the fire is out, the Navy captain in charge discovers a Chinese technical communications equipment we later learn is sensitive and intended to lure the US Navy in and seize the ship. The Navy captain does exactly that and in turn, thousands of miles away and through some sort of cyber magic, a US F-35 is taken over and landed in Iran despite the desperate attempts by the pilot to fly his aircraft back to his ship.

With the crisis in full swing a Chinese military attaché contacts the US presidential staffer to offer a swap of the fishing boat for the F-35. After failing to agree to the swap China responds by shutting down all US communications and internet connectivity and destroying the Navy fleet that took custody of the Chinese fishing boat with the US Navy unable to defend themselves. Soon after Chinese navy vessels surround Taiwan and issue a demand of acquiescence to annexation. The United States is eventually able to overcome China's cyber dominance and responds by using nuclear weapons on the Chinese Navy's SCS headquarters. China counterattacks San Diego and Galveston with nuclear weapons, killing millions of people, while the cycle of escalation continues with the United States dispatching nuclear forces to strike three Chinese cities. These only succeed in striking Shanghai after India intervenes in an attempt to stop the war. With Shanghai destroyed, millions dead in the United States, and tens of millions dead in China, negotiations finally begin to stop the conflict.

In my view, the novelization of the book represents the original sin of the authors. By novelizing real-world issues between the United States and China the

book falls into the trap of sounding like a Tom Clancy novel while obscuring whatever point the authors were trying to make. I'm not sure if the authors wanted to warn of an ascendant China, or how China may try to overturn the current world order, or what steps (or missteps) the United States should make in response. Throughout the book there is a constant theme best called "cyber magic." This magic is necessary to move the plot forward and force the conflict beyond the realm of possible while also creating significant problems with real-world nuclear strategy in the plot.

After the initial seizure of the fishing boat and F-35, the cyberattack against the United States should have prompted a nuclear response. Any US administration since the 1960s would have viewed the elimination of communications with its nuclear forces as a first strike (or an attempt to disable our ability to respond) and would have responded with massive retaliation. For some reason here, the authors leave this fact out and use cyber magic to prevent retaliation from occurring. Moreover, the failure of the United States to return even a sensitive Chinese fishing boat is not a proportional response likely to be undertaken by China. History has seen numerous incidents where sensitive technology was seized by an adversary, such as several defections of Soviet pilots flying advanced aircraft to the West. These incidents were resolved without kinetic escalation yet for some reason Chinese leaders thought this refusal, without bringing up the plot hole of being unable to comply given the cyber magic at work, was a cause for dramatic escalation and the destruction of a US Navy flotilla.

The implication here, not stated in the book, is that China set up the fishing boat incident to start a war it thought it could win. Yet, through some American "can do" attitude similar to that exhibited in the *Independence Day* movie, the United States overcomes Chinese cyber magic and conducts a nuclear strike against China killing 10 million people despite US policy of not striking populated cities. This novelization, especially at the end of the book, clouds whatever point the authors were trying to make regarding escalation cycles or responses to Chinese actions. The authors paint the United States as almost unable to act, certainly in the beginning stages, so it is unclear if the authors have a prescribed answer for dealing with China. The escalation cycle itself is also wildly unrealistic since it excluded numerous nuclear capabilities on both sides. The philosophical question of how to stop escalation goes unanswered since the book chooses to deal with that question through magical third-party intervention rather than an American or Chinese answer.

Overall, the story, and its authors, fail to set an objective for itself, paints China as a Bond villain, creates an absurd conflict scenario, and fails to deliver any helpful insights into managing, or countering, China's rise should it feel capable of

upending the current order and asserting its dominance. The book may succeed as a thriller to some, but as serious China geopolitical analysis, it is a flop.

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