**BOOK REVIEW**


As many warn of China’s impending economic and military supremacy over the United States, foreign policy experts Hal Brands and Michael Beckley adopt a refreshingly counterintuitive approach in *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*. They argue that China is not a rising power but rather a peaking one and is therefore inherently more dangerous and unpredictable. Contributing to the “rise-and-fall” narrative surrounding great powers, Brands and Beckley assert that peaking powers about to fall are liable to act aggressively.¹

Since the mid-1970s, China witnessed unrivaled economic growth and nationalist fervor, but with a rapidly aging population, declining economy, eroding allies, and a shrinking amount of working-age adults who have only seen China’s rise, we can expect to see a belligerent China that attempts to deliver on promises the Chinese Communist Party has made over the past four decades. Revisionist states rarely cope well when a long ascent in power is met with the prospect of a sharp decline.²

Brands and Beckley assert that China’s military buildup, pervasive search for spheres of influence, and desire to control critical technologies and resources despite a prolonged economic slowdown and a growing coalition of rivals mirror the conditions of peaking powers that have lashed out militarily in the past. Both authors point to Imperial Germany prior to World War I and Imperial Japan prior to World War II as examples. Germany and Japan believed that acting aggressively was preferable to economic suffocation or destruction from a “ring of powers” who sought to blunt their rise. Brands and Beckley argue that a peaking China is not only desperate to score quick geopolitical wins that satisfy domestic audiences and warn potential adversaries but also primed for strategic blunders and overreaction.³

Beckley and Brands offer a playbook for outcompeting China and navigating the “danger zone” that is to come over the next decade. First, the United States must be willing to take calculated risks—to “anger China, bait it into strategic

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² Brands and Beckley, 84–104.
³ Brands and Beckley, 89–107.
blunders,” and allow China to become the architect of its own undoing.\textsuperscript{4} Second, history has shown that whoever dominates era-defining critical technologies typically leads that era. Deepening ties with allies and partners across the globe to form economic and security-based coalitions that outcompete and exclude China from preeminence in artificial intelligence, telecommunications, and quantum computing will slow Beijing’s momentum.\textsuperscript{5} Brands and Beckley suggest such partnerships will likely trigger “wolf-warrior outbursts” from China and prompt Beijing to show its ugly capacity for retaliation, neither of which are diplomatically endearing.\textsuperscript{6}

Brands and Beckley also offer recommendations for defending Taiwan. Procurement and positioning of asymmetric weapons over the Taiwan Strait, spurring domestic Chinese discontent and instability, training Taiwanese forces in cyberdefense and unconventional warfare, disrupting China’s military communication systems, and employing calculated deception efforts are all mechanisms of disrupting a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, or deterring one from even starting through strategies of denial, comprehensive defense, and cost imposition.\textsuperscript{7}

However, the authors’ claim that competition on China’s periphery or in locations of strategic value—such as in central Asia and Africa—“are not worth the reward” is misguided. While prioritization of resources is important, striking at the flanks and periphery of an adversary disruptively imposes costs and dilemmas. Forging partnerships across Asia and Africa and executing irregular warfare against Beijing are not only dictated by the National Defense Strategy but vitally contribute to outcompeting China and defending the world from authoritarian regimes in today’s increasingly interconnected world.\textsuperscript{8}

Nonetheless, Danger Zone provides an accessible and thought-provoking examination on the nature of peaking powers, offers a discerning view of China’s recent actions, and imparts valuable recommendations of how to approach the People’s Republic of China in this era of strategic competition. Military officers, US policy makers, diplomats, business leaders, economists, academics, and foreign policy analysts alike who seek to defend democratic ideals and prevent Beijing from imposing its autocratic will upon the world will benefit from absorbing Brands and Beckley’s latest work.

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\textsuperscript{4} Brands and Beckley, 162.
\textsuperscript{5} Brands and Beckley, 163–64.
\textsuperscript{6} Brands and Beckley, 166–67.
\textsuperscript{7} Brands and Beckley, 179–82.