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Book Review by David P. Goldman

PRISONER'S DILEMMA

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



AVOIDING WAR WITH CHINA IS THE most urgent task of our lifetime. Kevin Rudd has written the year's best China book, in the vein of Graham Allison's *Destined for War*, which I reviewed in these pages ("Must We Fight?," Fall 2017), and Rush Doshi's *The Long Game* ("If China Ran the World," Fall 2021). Rudd—who is fluent in Mandarin and personally familiar with many of the key figures in his book—is the only professionally trained sinologist to have headed a Western government, having served as Australia's prime minister (2007-10, 2013) and foreign minister (2010-12) under the Labour Party. With thoroughness and precision, Rudd has assembled a wide array of information and historical background. Specialists will find the book more congenial than the general reader—much of it reads like an edited version of ministerial briefing papers. Nonetheless, it is one of the best

single-volume surveys of the China issue available to the public.

Still, there is much to quibble with in Rudd's long and dense account, starting with the title, *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China*. A conflict may erupt, but it may not be with "Xi Jinping's China," but rather with a China led by Xi's enemies. Xi, as Rudd observes,

is acutely aware that the radical changes he has brought about in China's overall political and policy direction have earned him a powerful group of enemies.... For example, the purges within the Ministry of Public Security alone have been forensic. The MPS is just one of a number of agencies within the so-called legal and political affairs machin-

ery that became the explicit target of Xi's most recent rectification campaign.

Xi is well entrenched, Rudd argues, but an economic crisis, a natural disaster, or a military defeat might undermine him.

XI CAME TO POWER IN 2012 BY CRUSHING the "neo-Maoist" left-wing opposition around Bo Xilai and has spent most of the past decade extricating its influence, especially from the security services. His challenge, Rudd explains, is to raise China's productivity—which requires the help of high-tech entrepreneurs—while championing greater income equality. "The movement to suppress China's billionaire elite (most dramatically through his common prosperity campaign) has been popular across mainstream Chinese society," writes Rudd. "At the



same time, Xi's crackdown on wealth has sent a chilling message across China's private sector." Xi, he concludes,

believes that time and momentum are on Beijing's side, as the correlation of forces becomes increasingly advantageous to China. This means that Xi can achieve his objectives without China firing a shot. Or if military action is ultimately required, engage only when victory is assured.

Xi Jinping's reelection to a third term as China's party chief occurred after the book's publication date, leaving readers curious as to Rudd's reading of the incoming leadership. To the surprise of most Western observers, Xi selected as premier Li Qiang, a longstanding ally who supported private enterprise during his tenure as Shanghai party boss. In 2021, Li helped Elon Musk build a 350,000-car-a-year Tesla plant in Shanghai in just eight months, and earlier had sponsored Alibaba's Jack Ma. One suspects that Xi pulled off an imperial version of the Kansas City Shuffle, feinting to the left to disarm populist critics, in order to shift to the right.

HOW CAN CHINA ACHIEVE WORLD dominance with soft power? Rudd argues that China stands to win "the struggle over the future of the digital world, including the next generation of mobile telecommunications technologies, the internet, and digital payments systems." Decisive is fifth-generation (5G) telecom. "The macro-significance of 5G," Rudd points out,

is that it is set to become a major enabling platform for the deployment of AI systems globally, such as self-driving vehicles. China has become the undisputed leader in 5G technologies, infrastructure, and systems. The Chinese state is estimated to have invested some \$180 billion since 2014 in the development of 5G technologies.

That is exactly right.

If Xi believes he can achieve his objectives without war, what might provoke war? The implicit answer is that the threat of war comes not from Chinese but from American policy, specifically from policy creep in the direction of Taiwanese sovereignty.

Regional strategic motivations are asymmetric. The United States has an interest in supporting Taiwan as a friendly democracy and a critical source of advanced semiconductors; China has an existential interest in main-

taining its territorial integrity, an interest poorly understood by Western observers who see China's designs on Taiwan as an expression of aggressive nationalism. China is not and never has been a nation-state. It is a polyglot empire where Cantonese cannot understand Shanghaiese or Sichuanese, and only a minority of the population is conversant in Mandarin. Countless times in its history, China has lapsed into civil war and ruin through the combination of renegade provinces and foreign intervention. Territorial integrity is a *raison d'état* of any Chinese government. Beijing will go to war rather than accede to Taiwanese sovereignty.

RUDD ISN'T SANGUINE ABOUT AMERICA's present military position: "An American loss at present represents the most probable outcome of a full-scale U.S. conventional military intervention in support of Taiwan in the event of a Chinese armed attack on the island." A U.S.-China war game held in early 2022 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies supports Rudd's assessment. It found the most likely outcome was the loss of two American aircraft carriers and 700 warplanes, against China's loss of 150 ships. Chinese troops failed to secure Taiwan, but America ceased to be a power in the Western Pacific. Chinese critics observed that the CSIS game assumed that a Marine regiment would help hold Taiwan against the invading PLA—an unrealistic premise, because China would preempt any attempt to move American forces to the island.

China has massively invested in missiles, submarines, and interceptors to neutralize American air and sea power. Its missiles can reach our bases on Guam and Okinawa and destroy surface ships hundreds of miles from its coasts. There is some debate about the efficacy of Chinese missiles, and the viability of our anti-missile systems such as Aegis. But if Chinese ordnance is as good as the Ukrainian missile that sank the Russian cruiser Moskva in the Black Sea in April 2022, American surface ships and air bases are not defendable against a massed missile attack. Missile technology—especially hypersonics—plays the role that the torpedo plane and dive bomber played in 1940 and 1941, when the loss of the Bismarck, the Italian fleet at Taranto, the Repulse and Prince of Wales near Singapore, and the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor eliminated the battleship as a viable weapons system.

Even the American hawks are having second thoughts. Former Pentagon planner Elbridge Colby, author of the hawkish manifesto *Strategy of Denial* (2021), tweeted in November, "Senior flag officers are saying we're on a trajectory to get crushed in a war with China."

To avoid confrontation, Rudd proposes "managed strategic competition":

Some American and Chinese nationalist politicians, along with the strategic policy über-realists who advise them, might argue that all this does is kick the can down the road. There is much truth in this, but that does not make it wrong. I would argue that there is nothing wrong, let alone cowardly, with kicking this particular can (i.e., war) a long way down the road.

He might have added that further on down that road the Taiwan issue will resolve itself through demographic shrinkage. With barely more than one child per female, Taiwan has the industrial world's lowest fertility rate (after South Korea), implying that it will lose 70% of its working-age population in the present century. Taiwan, in other words, will run out of Chinese, and have nowhere to obtain them except from the mainland. South Koreans well may reunify with the North for the same reason.

BUT WHAT DO WE DO IN THE MEAN-time? Managed strategic competition, Rudd avers, "would likely mandate much greater American vigilance on long-standing Chinese political sensitivities about adherence to the One-China policy." He wants "the United States to restore the wider military balance of power with China across the East Asian theater by addressing gaps and vulnerabilities in its current force structure and capabilities. It would also require the Taiwanese to take seriously their military deficiencies, which have accumulated over several decades and which neither side of Taiwanese politics has so far demonstrated sufficient determination to resolve."

This seems like a dodge. Precisely what "gaps and vulnerabilities" does Rudd propose to address in America's present force structure? China's home advantage in land-based missiles, interceptors, and diesel-electric submarines can scale up to overwhelm additional ships, anti-missile systems, and other conventional weapons. No anti-missile system can defend against hypersonics, because anti-missile missiles can't catch up with them.

As for Taiwan, the island spent just \$11.6 billion on its military in 2019, less after inflation adjustment than the \$10.7 billion it spent in 2010. It is spending more now, mainly on fighter planes, but it can't recruit enough pilots to fly them. And it requires just four months of military service from its young men. Meanwhile, 2 million Taiwanese work on the main-



land, Taiwanese have invested nearly \$200 billion on the mainland, and Taiwan's exports to China amount to about a third of its GDP. Taiwan's young people don't want to answer to bureaucrats in Beijing, but they don't want to serve in the army either. Taiwan pretends to defend itself, and the mainland pretends to be deterred. At the same time, the mainland gets everything it wants from Taiwan, including chip fabrication technology.

RUDD IS MORE CONVINCING IN GENERALITIES. China and the U.S. "must both develop a clear understanding of the other's irreducible strategic redlines in order to help prevent conflict through miscalculation." More importantly, "the two sides would then channel the burden of strategic rivalry into a competitive race to enhance their military, economic and technological capabilities. Properly constrained, such competition aims to deter armed conflict rather than tempt either side to risk all by prosecuting what would become a dangerous and bloody war with deeply unpredictable results."

"The history of the twentieth century tells us that once awakened, American power, fully harnessed, can be as formidable as any great power in ages past," Rudd observes elsewhere. This was

manifest in America's response to the Soviet Union's 1957 launch of Sputnik, the world's first satellite. And with John F. Kennedy's declaration that the

United States would land a man on the moon by 1970—an audacious oath that America then spectacularly fulfilled. Finally, we also saw it in Ronald Reagan's determination to crush the Soviet Union economically through a massive arms race barely a decade after America's ignominious defeat in Vietnam.

"The key question today," he adds, "is whether the United States is sufficiently conscious of the dimensions of China's rise and whether it is still possessed of sufficient political resolve and strategic acumen to deal with this formidable challenge to American regional and global power."

There is no way for the United States to project power on China's coast with our existing array of military technologies. China has the industrial resources, technology, and home field advantage to overwhelm whatever the United States might deploy 7,000 miles from San Diego. An attempt to restore America's position in the Western Pacific through conventional means invites Chinese preemption.

When President John F. Kennedy pointed to the moon in 1962 at Rice University, federal research and development spending exceeded 2% of GDP, or close to \$500 billion in today's dollars. Development spending was 1.5% of GDP at the Kennedy Administration's peak and remained above 1% of GDP during the Reagan years. It's fallen to roughly 0.3% of GDP during the past several years. The

United States didn't simply build up its military—it invented the digital age, as a byproduct of its successful efforts to leapfrog Russian advances in surface-to-air missiles and other military technologies. In 1973, after Russian missiles and anti-aircraft artillery downed nearly 100 Israeli-flown U.S. airframes, the United States created modern avionics. Jimmy Carter's Defense Secretary Harold Brown was one of the country's best physicists; under his guidance, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) funded every important invention of the digital age from optical networks to CMOS chip manufacturing.

REAGAN'S STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE address in March 1983 persuaded Moscow that it could not keep up with the American effort in quantity and quality and marked the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. It was an ingenious stroke of war avoidance, championed by physicist Edward Teller but opposed by most of the American defense establishment. American strategic doctrine in the face of massive Russian superiority in Europe's central front called for the use of nuclear weapons against Russian conventional forces. We know from Soviet archives that Russian doctrine called for nuclear bombardment of western Europe to clear the way for its conventional forces. By contrast, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) focused on defensive systems and changed the character of strategic competition. What we require today is a return to SDI, including space-based missile defense, directed energy weapons, A.I.-directed drone swarms, and other technologies that eventually may neutralize China's enormous investment in conventional military technology—presuming that China does not develop SDI first.

The danger of war with China is acute—far more so than the public understands. Kevin Rudd wants to avoid war but fails to delineate a way to deter China from seizing Taiwan by force, which would trigger war. The problem is a variant of the Prisoner's Dilemma: If Taiwan, with U.S. support, attempts to raise the cost of the mainland's aggression above Beijing's threshold of pain, Beijing's logical response is to attack before Taiwan's plans are complete. If war comes, it may be the greatest calamity ever to befall humanity, and surely the worst military calamity ever to befall the United States.

David P. Goldman is deputy editor of Asia Times, a Washington Fellow of the Claremont Institute's Center for the American Way of Life, and author, most recently, of You Will Be Assimilated: China's Plan to Sino-Form the World (Bombardier Books).



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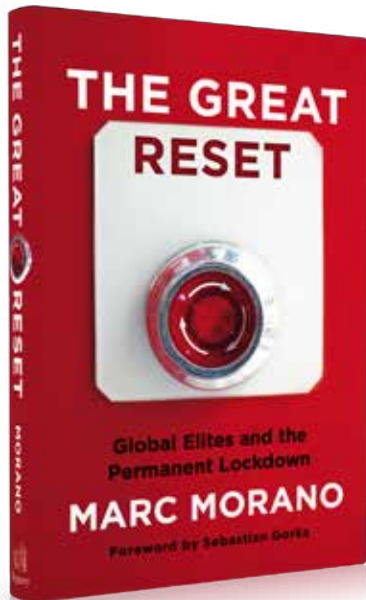


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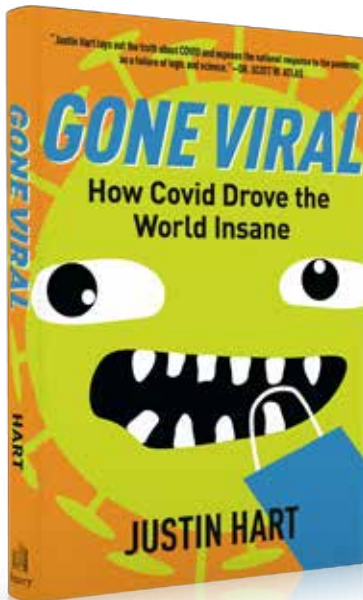


THE GREAT RESET Global Elites and the Permanent Lockdown

By Marc Morano

Here is the antidote to the left's sinister push to use a worldwide crisis to infuse our lives with statism, all accelerated by the duplicitous manipulation of the recent pandemic. Armed with statistics and revealing quotes, Marc Morano, founder of Climate Depot and bestselling author of *Green Fraud* and *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Climate Change*, unveils the origins of "the Great Reset,"—the new liberal order that envisions tyrannical government control over everyday life. Morano shows who is behind this view for the future, how it is being implemented, and how an alleged "climate emergency" and COVID-19 have accelerated its imposition in the United States. This book is an essential tool for the public, the media, and patriots on how to critically analyze and expose the tyrannical policies eroding liberty today.

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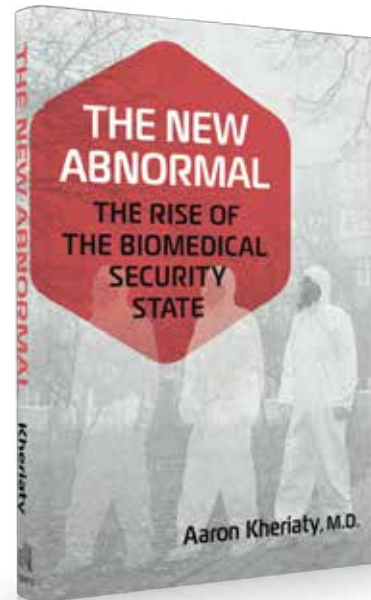


GONE VIRAL How Covid Drove the World Insane

By Justin Hart

Everything we knew about COVID-19 was wrong. Fauci is retiring and the American people are still left with uncertainty about what really happened. We have seen how COVID-19's greatest threat turned out to be mental. The very idea of the virus weakened the immune system of America and revealed a decaying underbelly of confusion, panic, unease, and fear-mongering by those in power. Justin Hart catalogs in a terrifying-but-sprightly manner the folly and psychosis produced by the pandemic. *Gone Viral: How Covid Drove the World Insane* diagnoses the societal destruction that the massive over response to the COVID virus has wreaked, and what can be done to stop the madness and bring the world back to a degree of rationality.

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THE NEW ABNORMAL The Rise of the Biomedical Security State

By Aaron Kheriaty, MD

In the space of a few weeks in early 2020, Americans witnessed the imposition of previously unimagined social controls by the biomedical security state—the unelected technocrats who suddenly enjoyed nearly absolute power to incarcerate, isolate, and medicate the entire population. They have no intention of giving that power up. Now it's time for all of us to fight back. The deadly and arrogant misrule of the biomedical security state must not become the "new normal."

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