

## A war between China and the U.S. wouldn't be an accident: H. Brands

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### Body

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(Bloomberg) -- U.S.-China relations deteriorate day by day, and the bad news is that both countries could end up fighting for the next decade. The good news is that such a war would not begin by accident.

There is a respectable argument that States may encounter a major conflict that no one really wants, and has been revived as tensions between the two powers increase. History, however, shows that great wars do not happen unintentionally.

The thesis of the accidental war was recently raised by former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Noting the many points of conflict that the interests of the U.S. and China clash, he argued that there is a growing danger of "conflict." An accidental collision between ships or planes in the South China Sea, or several other possible scenarios, could lead to a crisis, an escalation of the conflict, and a war. Just as the powers of the early 20th century fell "sleepwalking" in World War I, China and the United States could be wrong today.

World War I is often considered the classic example of unwanted warfare: a devastating conflict that neither participant would have chosen if they had known what was coming. During the Cold War, American politicians worried that crises in Berlin or Cuba could get out of hand. There is a collection of political science literature dedicated to understanding how accidental warfare can occur.

However, there is a big problem: it is difficult to identify important wars that would occur even though no one wanted it. It turns out that the conflict in July and August 1914 was not due to the uncompromising programming of military mobilizations and plans pushing political leaders into conflict. What happened was that several powers, especially, but not exclusively, the Austro-Hungarian empire and imperial Germany, insinuated the implementation of aggressive policies that knew they posed the risk of a war located at best and a continental war, at worst. Besides, almost everyone believed that if there had to be a war, it was better if it was sooner rather than later.

A generation after that, Franklin Roosevelt may not have foreseen that imposing an oil embargo on Japan would lead to the airstrike on Pearl Harbor. But he certainly understood that war was a clear possibility when the United States began to strangle the economy of a country that was already looting Asia.

Similarly, the Six-Day War of 1967 is sometimes treated as an inadvertent conflict. But, once again, Egyptian leaders were unaware of the danger of war when they mobilized forces on the Sinai Peninsula, blocked Israel's port in the Red Sea, and took other belligerent measures.

The reality, as historian Marc Trachtenberg has shown, is that countries tend to avoid war when none want it. Yes, leaders sometimes misjudge how wars will turn out and how destructive they will be. Tensions can gradually increase in a way that makes de-escalate increasingly difficult.

However, there is no more monumental decision than initiating a major conflict. So when countries really want to avoid a confrontation, they are usually willing to withdraw, even at the cost of some embarrassment.

During the Cold War, there were many risky situations of the superpowers and some spooky incidents involving the US and Soviet military forces. It was only in the Cuban missile crisis that there were several near-accidents. But in

that case and in all the others cases, the crisis subsided and the superpowers receded, precisely because they did not believe that what was at stake deserved a nuclear bloodbath.

Accidental warfare also seems unlikely today. There are many circumstances in which the U.S. and China could be involved in a crisis: a repeat of the 2001 EP-3 incident, when a collision in the air sparked a diplomatic confrontation; or an interaction between Chinese and Japanese air forces in the East China Sea that unexpectedly became deadly. But American and Chinese politicians know that a war could become an extremely serious issue. If both parties really want to avoid one, they'll probably find a way to do it.

This is not the same as saying that a Chinese-American war will not happen. Conflict tends to occur when one of the parties decides that war, or actions that create a risk, are preferable to living with the status quo or stepping back into a crisis. That could happen too easily.

If China concludes that Taiwan is distancing itself too far from mainland China as the balance of power shifts in favor of Beijing in military terms, then it could decide that war is better than letting go of the dream of reunification. If Chinese leaders are concerned that their domestic legitimacy will diminish, they could behave more belligerently in a crisis, for fear that war will be less dangerous than humiliation.

Beijing might even bet that the U.S. would stay away from a short, sharp war with Japan over the Senkaku Islands or with the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal, and that bet might not work.

But in either case, Beijing would make a deliberate decision to pursue key goals through the use of coercion or force, with the knowledge that greater conflict is a real possibility. If a war between the United States and China results from such an election, it could hardly be considered an accident.

Why does this matter? Because it's about finding the best way to avoid war in the Pacific. It would be useful to establish memorandums of understanding on how military forces operating in the vicinity should be conducted, to create mechanisms for communication in a crisis, and other measures to encourage de-escalated.

What is critical, however, is maintaining the balance of military power and the perception of U.S. commitment, which makes it less likely that Chinese leaders can imagine that a war in the region will be in their own way.

That's a huge and urgent task. It involves not only spending money, but designing operational concepts and new capabilities, such as autonomous systems and artificial intelligence, that make it extremely difficult for China to project power. This requires strengthening U.S. alliances that have been damaged during President Donald Trump's administration.

That agenda may seem daunting given how much the situation in the Western Pacific has deteriorated. But Americans should not deceive themselves into thinking that just managing crises and mitigating misperception, as important as those goals, offer a cheaper way to preserve peace.

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