Review of <u>Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China</u> by Hal Brands and Michael Beckley

Jade Goodwin

April 20th, 2025

Summary

In *Danger Zone*, authors Hal Brands and Michael Beckley argue that the United States is not on a war path with a rising China, but with one that has peaked. Their main thesis is that China is nearing the apex of its power, and during this time of decline it becomes most dangerous. History demonstrates that powers facing stagnation or reversal are more likely to act aggressively in an effort to secure long-term strategic goals. Therefore, the U.S. must urgently develop a short-term approach to navigate this "danger zone" while also preparing for an ongoing, long-term competition.

The authors begin their case in the first chapter by outlining President Xi Jinping's idea of "national rejuvenation". This idea revolves around the return of China to global dominance and hinges on maintaining strict Communist Party control. China's ambitions, in the authors' opinions, are not purely economic but are also ideological, and seek to delegitimize liberal democracy and promote autocracy as the new international standard. This sets the stage for understanding China's increasingly assertive and aggressive international behavior. In the second chapter, the authors shift to internal dynamics of the state, making the case that China's demographic and economic decline marks the peak of its power. The main problems hinting at decline are a shrinking workforce, mounting debt caused by failing investments, and a real estate bubble propped up by unsustainable lending. These factors have pressured Chinese leadership to act while it still retains significant influence.

In the third chapter, Brands and Beckley explore China's perception of growing connections with the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. China's aggressive diplomacy – particularly through economic coercion and military posturing – has alienated neighboring countries like India, the Philippines, and Australia. This diplomatic backlash has presented a strategic opportunity for the United States to solidify coalitions and counterbalance Beijing's influence. Building on this foundation, the fourth chapter discusses historical counts and parallels to declining powers such as Germany and Japan in the lead-up to World War II. The authors argue that China's ambitions, desperations, and increasing willingness to take risks mirror the same trajectory as Japan and Germany.

Chapter five narrows the focus to Taiwan, described as the most likely flashpoint for conflict. Specifically, China's military buildup, and advancements in artificial intelligence and cyber capabilities, are rapidly shrinking the gap with U.S. forces in the region. If China is able to strengthen the digital dependence of other countries, it could gain much more power. The authors

maintain that China's mishandling of regional diplomacy (most importantly with Singapore and the Philippines) has opened doors for the U.S. to enhance partnerships and strengthen its reach in Southeast Asia. The authors emphasize the costliest strategic advantage for the U.S. would be to make the war China versus democracy instead of solely versus the United States. In the sixth chapter, the authors use a historical reflection of the Cold War for lessons in managing the current rivalry. They suggest that a strategy of containment – similar to the U.S. posture toward the Soviet Union – can be successful if adapted to current conditions. While this historical lens is valuable, it fails to account for the economic interdependence between China and the West, which was not prevalent in the U.S.-Soviet rivalry.

Chapter seven turns to specific policy imperatives for navigating the danger zone. Brands and Beckley argue that the United States must simultaneously contain both China and Russia, however Europe cannot be neglected either. They recommend a "double containment" approach that includes hardening digital defenses (against Russian ransomware and Chinese spyware and disruption) and preparing ally-backed technological embargoes. If it is clear to Russia and China that aggression will be met with economic isolation, it would beneficially cause Russia to hesitate on backing China. Washington, along with its allies in Europe and Asia could easily trump Beijing and Moscow – especially since the two only account for about 20% of the world's economic production. Finally, in chapter eight, the authors pose optimism for the post-danger zone world. If the U.S. can successfully deter China through the 2020s, the demographic decline, economic stall, and global backlash will erode China's capacity for aggression. The chapter calls for a long-term strategy of carrot and stick diplomacy, similar to the Reagan and Bush administrations' handling of the late Cold War. This concludes the importance of convincing future Chinese leaders that moderation and cooperation are more beneficial to their national security than repression and aggression.

Evaluation

Danger Zone is an applicable and realistic analysis that successfully reframes the U.S.-China rivalry by emphasizing the danger posed by a peaking power. Brands and Beckley strengthen their analysis by applying historical context to the current behavior of China. Their exploration of technological warfare – particularly in artificial intelligence and digital reliance – adds important detail to the military side of the U.S.-China rivalry. They also make a persuasive argument that China's diplomatic errors, along with its internal economic and demographic issues, make the state increasingly more unstable.

However, there are notable weaknesses to the books' analysis. It tends to overstate the inevitability of Chinese decline without engaging counterarguments or alternative probabilities. Moreover, its policy recommendations fail to account for how political polarization (i.e. liberal versus conservative ideologies) of the U.S. could alter potential strategic positions against China. Additionally, the book could benefit from a more in-depth comparison of military capabilities between the two competing powers beyond a glaze-over of technological competition and individual defense spending.

Conclusion

Danger Zone makes a significant and compelling analysis of strategic discourse on U.S.-China relations. It brings urgency and discusses long-term trends while also accounting for short-term risks. Though it occasionally oversimplifies, the book's core argument that the years ahead are unusually dangerous because of China's peaking power, is provocative and insightful. For policymakers preparing to confront the complexities of the U.S.-China rivalry, *Danger Zone* provides a clear warning and a valuable framework for navigating what could prove to be a pivotal moment in international relations.