

Book Reviews



CABESTAN, Jean-Pierre. 2021.
Demain la Chine: guerre ou paix?
Paris: Gallimard.

MARC JULIENNE

Three years after *Demain la Chine: démocratie ou dictature?* (China tomorrow: democracy or dictatorship?), a work that analysed the developments in Chinese domestic policy, Jean-Pierre Cabestan returns with a new essay that tackles the hypothesis of a war with China.

From the very outset, the author takes up one of the principal current debates amongst theorists and practitioners of international relations, “Thucydides Trap,” as formulated by Graham Allison in his book *Destined for War* (2017). In this often highly polarised debate centring on the risk of war between an established dominant power (the United States) and a rising competitive power (China), Jean-Pierre Cabestan reminds us that Thucydides Trap is not a prophecy but a warning, and therefore war is not a fatality.

Adopting an approach that is both realistic and constructivist and takes account of the perception of the players and possible accidents or errors in calculation, he proceeds to methodically dissect various trouble spots in Chinese foreign policy – Taiwan (Chapter Three), the South China Sea (Chapter Four), the Senkaku Islands, known in China as the Diaoyutai Islands (釣魚臺) (Chapter Five), and the Sino-Indian border dispute (Chapter Six) – integrating into the analysis historical heritages, the multiple interests (economic, domestic, foreign, etc.) of each leader, the capacity of each player to act, and the risks inherent in their actions.

The author begins his demonstration by analysing the rising tensions between the United States and China, as well as between China and Japan, India and Australia, to which, by expanding the geographical focus, one might almost add Europe. He describes the breeding grounds that have allowed “the accumulation of passions and powder” (Chapter One) by the players, particularly in the China of Xi Jinping where “incandescent nationalism” (p. 31)

is fed by the state propaganda whilst the rise in quantitative and qualitative power of the People’s Liberation Army testifies to global ambitions.

Amongst the areas most at risk, the most determinant and the most urgent is undoubtedly Taiwan, on which the author lays particular emphasis. With the rise in tensions in the Strait in 2020 and 2021, the probability of war has returned to the heart of current affairs and debates. The great contribution of this work to this question is that far from vainly attempting to settle it, it brings all the subtlety and complexity needed to understand the challenges and thus avoids the shortcuts that would prevent a far-reaching and unbiased analysis. Step by step, Jean-Pierre Cabestan takes us through the development of the official doctrines prevalent in China and the United States concerning Taiwan. He then describes the Chinese military machine that is taking shape in view of an offensive against the island.

The examination of the debates in mainland China on the risk of war (Chapter Two) represents another significant contribution both for the specialist reader and the uninitiated. The author continues his analysis with the specific case of Taiwan in Chapter Three. The options available to each player in terms of military capability in the context of a war are also reviewed, and the author does not hesitate to enter into the details of such capacity, indispensable to any credible strategic analysis.

An implicit dimension of Chinese strategy that appears throughout the book is the exploitation by Beijing of the “grey zones,” that is to say the “operational space(s) between war and peace where coercive actions likely to modify the *status quo* are deployed but which remain below the threshold that (...) would provoke a conventional military reaction” (p. 22). In fact, China uses a range of “grey” tactics that lie at the frontier between civil and military (maritime militia and coastguard), legal and illegal (territorial claims) and official and clandestine (cyberattacks, strategy of influence, and information wars). China’s approach to the grey zones is vital to understand how Beijing is seeking to push back the different *status quo* in the zones under study and to assess the risk factors for the future.

One would have appreciated to take discussion further regarding the role of nuclear weapons that are a major factor in the equation of war between China and the United States. Similarly, the comparison the author makes between cyber weapons and the nuclear deterrent, even with a “new form of mutually assured destruction” (p. 264) seems overestimated. One could argue, on the contrary, that nuclear weapons are the opposite of cyber and space weapons: while the former are visible, demonstrative, and ultra-destructive, the latter are invisible, most often non-attributable, and non-kinetic. Besides, no malware would ever have the same effect as the electromagnetic pulse of a nuclear bomb.

Are we on the brink of war then? Jean-Pierre Cabestan adopts the most reasonable position, which is that “war is likely not imminent but the risks of incidents and military crises (...) have significantly increased” (p. 262). In fact, from a rational point of view, one that is supported by the many arguments developed in the book, the cost of war would seem to outweigh its benefits for China, the United States, and the other players. However, the multiplication of the fronts opened up by China in its neighbourhood and the increase in conflict in the region mean that the hypothesis of a non-desired war cannot be excluded.

Jean-Pierre Cabestan thus considers a “new asymmetrical bipolarity” (p. 272) in favour of the United States for many years to come. As he points out, Raymond Aron’s well-known phrase, despite being pronounced at the dawn of the Cold War, is still relevant today: “peace impossible, war unlikely” (1948).

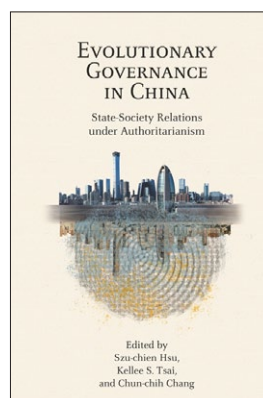
Beyond the question asked in the title, to which only the future holds the answer, this essay gives an excellent account of the major questions of our time and of the terms of the strategic equation being played out in these early years of the 2020s. In addition, it provides an excellent handbook to students, researchers, and decision-makers seeking to understand, in a comprehensive and detailed manner, China’s rise and the areas of crisis that might one day erupt into conflict.

■ Translated by Elizabeth Guill.

■ Marc Julienne is Head of China research at the Centre for Asian Studies, Ifri (French Institute for International Relations), 27 rue de la Procession, 75015 Paris (julienne@ifri.org).

References

- ALLISON, Graham. 2017. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- ARON, Raymond. 1948. *Le grand schisme* (The big split). Paris: Gallimard.



HSU, Szu-chien, Kellee S. TSAI, and Chun-chih CHANG (eds.). 2021. *Evolutionary Governance in China: State-society Relations under Authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

RUNYA QIAOAN

In the book *Evolutionary Governance in China: State-society Relations under Authoritarianism*, the authors address the question of the sources of authoritarian resilience in China by examining the (co-)evolutionary state-society relations. This evolutionary framework holds that interactions between the state and societal actors are dynamic rather than static – they change over time, vary across issue areas, and shift with the strategies taken. Although there have been works recognising the dynamism of state-society interactions in China (Zhang and Barr 2013; Qiaoan 2020), this volume offers the most systematic analysis of the topic.

As Kellee S. Tsai’s introduction incisively points out, the existing scholarship on state-society relations in contemporary China has recently extended into an “authoritarian with adjectives” literature (p. 5). Although this research agenda has produced fruitful research results that offer valuable insight into the nature of governance in China, the discrepancies indicate the lack of a more integrated typology in the literature. Instead of providing another ostensibly conclusive conceptual term on state-society relations, this volume synthesises various observations into a broader framework that yields a stylised 2x2 typology of dyadic interactions: hard state/hard society, hard state/soft society, soft state/hard society, and soft state/soft society (p. 21).

In Chapter Two, Szu-chien Hsu and Chun-chih Chang employ a quantitative case survey to investigate state-society interactions. This method is refreshing in a study field dominated by a qualitative approach. Hsu and Chang coded 125 cases of state-society interactions published from 2005 to 2015 in leading social science journals focusing on China, according to issue areas, state strategies, societal strategies, and political outcomes. They identified a pattern in the regime’s pursuit of authoritarian resilience, namely that while repressive strategies enable the state to maintain political power, softer strategies help the state enhance its quality of governance. The rest of the book shows how this tension is baked into each case.

The 11 empirical chapters that follow are divided into four parts based on their issue areas: community governance, environmental and public health governance, economic and labour governance, and social and religious governance. In Chapter Three, Yousun Chung focuses on the private property rights issue. Through longitudinal