

BOOK REVIEW

THE CONTEST OF THE CENTURY – GEOFF DYER

Reviewed by

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“Let China sleep”, Napoleon has said “because when she awakens the world will be sorry”. Now China has long since awakened and the world is now beginning to experience its effects, manifestly in the global economy but palpably in political and military terms as well. As the process gathers strength, twenty first century is already witnessing a new era of competition between the reigning superpower, the US albeit in decline, and the rising great power that is China with many things going for it. How that competition will pan out and what are America’s options in managing it is the theme of this timely book.

According to the author, Geoff Dyer, this contest of the century between the US and China revolves round three central facts. The first is that as an ambitious and self-conscious great power that is in the ascendant, China has begun to make the crucial shift from rule taker to rule giver in the global order. The second, much as China in the pursuit of its goals is inextricably drawn into a geopolitical competition with the US, “the country in whose image much of the global order is fashioned”, the prospect is not a cold war redux but a more fluid form of rivalry that is based on balance of power and building coalitions of support. Thirdly, and this is the conclusion of the book, the US is in a strong position to deflect the new Chinese challenge to its position in the world if it avoids the temptation of either confrontation or isolation. “The roots of the American power”, says Dyer, “are deeper than they seem and hard to overturn”.

According to the author, today’s China is acting under much the same powerful impulses for global influence that goaded the US from the 1890s when it announced itself to the world. Ironically it is this very fact that also brings the two countries

into the emerging contest in the western Pacific where their naval forces confront each other: the US as the dominant presence and China the challenger, as borne out by the statement of President Hu Jintao in 2006 that development of Chinese naval power was “a glorious task”. Underlying this ambition is a Chinese sense, particularly on the part of the military, of being under siege by the superior might of the US navy. The reactive Chinese naval build up, according to the author may be directed at the US but in lots of ways it has also been modelled on that of the US. The American evangelist of naval power, Alfred Mahan, is hugely popular over the last decade in Chinese intellectual circles to the extent that he has inspired a whole generation of Chinese navalists. China’s quest for a substantial enhancement of its naval power in the western Pacific is to be seen against the background of a broader political strategy designed to exert more control over its maritime reaches, with the South China Sea most of which it claims as part of its exclusive economic zone as the centrepiece. China’s naval push strikes to the core of how America understands both its security and its prosperity as the leading Pacific Ocean power. On China’s part, its newfound instinct to challenge the US in what it calls the “Near Seas”, the coastal waters that include the Yellow, East China and South China seas, is rooted in its history, its expanding economic interests and the restlessness of some of its military officer corps. And sustaining China’s drive to assert its naval power in the western Pacific is the second largest defence budget in the world after the US. The author believes that, in sum, the goal of the Chinese military build-up is to target the US navy in an asymmetric manner and to dissuade it from considering operations anywhere near China’s coast and to push it slowly farther into the Pacific.

Dyer argues that how the US-China military contest in the western Pacific plays out will depend on three factors: how the rest of Asia reacts to China’s new ambitions, on how America responds to the challenge and on how China decides to approach the Indian Ocean, the one area far away from its coastal waters where China feels she can play an active role.

Needless to say it is the last that would be of concern to India. Despite China’s activism in the Indian Ocean area, as manifested in different ways that he describes, it is the author’s view that for the next couple of decades China would hardly have

the skills or money to project the kind of naval power required to pose a serious challenge to the US in the Indian Ocean. This is despite the prospects of China setting up naval bases in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan and the putative Chinese attempt to establish a “string of pearls” across the Indian Ocean. Notably, the author also points out that possible confrontation with India is another constraint on China’s ambitions of a dominant presence in the Indian Ocean. His assessment that all things considered China is likely to collaborate more with the US Navy in the Indian Ocean appears plausible.

Dyer’s narration of the way China’s ill-considered actions over its territorial dispute with Japan [Senkaku], its partisanship with North Korea in the latter’s feuds with South Korea and above all, the strong adverse reactions in southeast Asia created by China’s ‘nine-dash line’ of territorial claims that all but embrace most of the South China Sea as a Chinese inland sea, is an important part of the book as it underlines the opposition that China has aroused from both the east Asian region and the US to its assertive policies and postures. To a large extent these actions by the Chinese have facilitated the US diplomacy of countering the rising Chinese influence in the Asia Pacific region. It is to the credit of the author that he is able to make the argument that China’s approach to the South China Sea, a “core interest” as the Chinese term it, has been one of the clearest examples of how competing vested interests are helping to drive parts of China’s foreign policy. That point must arguably apply to the happenings across India-China border as well, as Tibet is another ‘core interest’ for China.

Dyer believes that the Asian backlash against China that started to take shape in 2010 represented a long-term realignment in Asian politics with many governments concluding that their interests overlapped with those of Washington. This point is elaborated and refined with a reference at length to the shared policy responses of Australia and Vietnam to China’s pursuit of regional dominance in Asia Pacific. “For both Vietnam and Australiamilitary cooperation with the US is not a new exercise in containment; it is a way of feeling comfortable about getting closer to China”.

Besides an expose of the strong and complex nationalistic roots of China's foreign policy, a good part of the book is devoted to a lengthy analysis of America's policy choices in the emerging competition with China. To summarise the author's views: a strategy to contain China or a quest for continued military dominance could not work. Nor could a policy of accommodation in the sense of a premature search for a formula for sharing power between the two countries, something like a G-2, as the early years of the first Obama administration were tempted to attempt for a while. The right approach would be to orient its policy towards Asia as a whole because the ideas that the US wants to promote in Asia – free trade, open navigation, legal protections for investment, economic integration across the Pacific and an emphasis on human rights – are all things that most Asian governments also support. Militarily, the US objective should be to deter China in a credible and realistic way, not to provoke its hardliners. Diplomatically, the eventual US goal will be to help fashion a loose, informal web of collaboration across the region based on shared interests in view of the fact that America's potential partners range from a treaty ally like Japan to a country like India which would never countenance anything like a formal alliance. The way to an eventual US-China accommodation lies through "a mundane and long-term set of conversations about establishing rules of the road" allowing co-existence. In the sphere of trade diplomacy, the US

"Over time, the U.S. and China will eventually have to find a way to live together in the western Pacific, to establish a middle ground that respects each other's security interests. Before then, there is likely to be a lot of tension, and potentially some brinkmanship. But if Washington is successful in demonstrating staying power and in finding new sources of support, it will be in a much stronger position to influence China's choices and to steer Beijing away from a broader confrontation".

would need to supplement its current pursuit of Trans-Pacific Partnership [TPP] with an extension of the trade agenda so as to promote trade integration between the US and countries like India and, for that matter, China itself. If TPP does not progress as against the Chinese initiative of a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership [RCEP] it would be a heavy setback to the US' efforts to demonstrate

that “it has more to offer Asia than just its navy”. Among the important variables on the Chinese side in this competition is the possible evolution of the Chinese Community Party as the ruling elite, one dire possibility being a weakening of their grip on power which could give rise to an embattled Chinese leader placing an anti-America or anti-Japan cause at the centre of his agenda. At another level, weaknesses in China’s soft power as against America’s will always figure as a point of advantage for the US. In an interesting chapter on China’s ambitions to enhance financial and monetary power through the promotion of renminbi as a global currency the author makes some notable points on the future evolution of China’s economy, a development of great moment in the US-China competition with stakes that are fundamental more to the Chinese than to the American system. And he breaks new ground with his thesis that China is being tempted by the idea of post-American globalization that includes within its purview the setting up of the BRICS New Development Bank, among other things. The right response from the US to the Chinese pro-activism in the global economy is to build strong coalitions of support on specific issues with a view to shaping Chinese behaviour. On the other hand, the Chinese perception that the US is trying to re-write rules such as in global trade has to be addressed through a process of reaching out to China and by using opportunities to build up the US’s own lobby of supporters within the Chinese system such as its growing body of investors in the US economy.

The obvious merit of this book is that it avoids extremes and treads a middle path between confrontation and accommodation in dealing with China as a great power with the will and capability to write its own rules for the global order as it is seeking to do. In doing so, the author brings a great deal of well researched and detailed information into his scholarly endeavour. The book is to be welcomed as a most thoughtful exploration of one of the governing themes of our time.

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