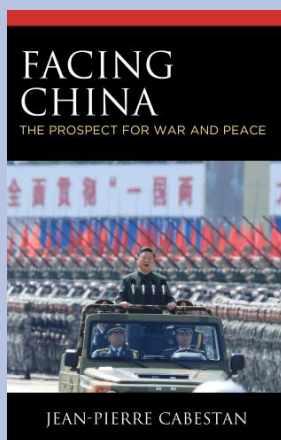

Book Reviews: pages 420-458

FACING CHINA: THE PROSPECT FOR WAR AND PEACE BY JEAN-PIERRE CABESTAN

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Jean-Pierre Cabestan (2021) *Facing China: The Prospect for War and Peace* published by Lanham/ Rowman & Littlefield, New York & London ISBN 978-1-5381-6988-9: translated by N Jayaram from the French edition (2021) published as *Demain la Chine: Guerre ou Paix?* by Editions Gallimard, Paris

Professor Jean-Pierre Cabestan's *Facing China: The Prospect for War and Peace* examines the growing tensions between the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) and the United States of America (US), providing an analysis of the strategic, political and ideological dynamics and the historical context shaping this intricate relationship. Overall, this study is a thoughtful and comprehensive examination of one of the most critical international security challenges at the present time. Its main contribution is arguably in providing a framework for understanding and managing US–PRC strategic competition which is balanced and avoids both alarmism and complacency about the risks of conflict. Professor Cabestan offers a thorough analysis of the US–China rivalry, emphasizing the impact of China's military modernization, nationalist fervour and regional aspirations. The book is structured around potential conflict settings involving China and its neighbours, and ultimately the US. The settings include Taiwan's claims to be an independent state, the South China Sea, the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands and Sino-Indian border disputes. Furthermore, the book probes internal discussions within Chinese society and its political leadership, assessing China's

internal motivations, particularly nationalism and the Communist Party's patriotic education, regarding the risks of war and the implications of grey zone warfare tactics that do not constitute traditional military conflict. While drawing on international relations theory, Cabestan grounds his arguments in realism, providing an empirical basis for evaluating potential war risks.

This book comprises seven substantive chapters, framed by an Introduction and a Conclusion. An examination of relevant international relations perspectives is offered in the Introduction. Chapter 1 then examines what the author describes as an “accumulation of passions and ammunition”—a potential pre-war scenario fuelled by China's growing nationalist fervour and military advancements, which heighten geopolitical tensions. It concludes at page 36 that “fuelled by an unquestionable rise of nationalisms, a rapid military modernization and also a deepening ideological rivalry between democracies and dictatorships, the current strategic configuration” does not bode well for the future. Chapter 2 examines the ongoing debates within China regarding the risks of war, and offers a perspective which suggests that the Chinese leadership and its military are aligned strategically more closely with Clausewitz than with Sun Zi. As a rising great power challenging the established order, China has unmistakably entered a strategic duel aimed at achieving national reunification and ultimately asserting dominance by pushing the US, the established power, out of the Western Pacific. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explore the most plausible triggers for a Beijing–Washington conflict: disputes over Taiwan, tensions in the South China Sea, and clashes concerning the Senkaku Islands. In the chapter on Taiwan, by some distance the longest in the book, Professor Cabestan takes the view that “while it has increased the prospect of an armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the Ukraine war has also shown how different the geography, context, and strategies of the three actors involved may be, compelling all of them to think twice before starting a kinetic confrontation” but also that longer term “only China's democratization can change the balance” (page 110). Chapter 4 examines conflict over the South China Sea, a complex issue involving territorial claims by six nations—China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam—as well as the strategic interests of countries including the US, Japan and Australia. The situation is further complicated by differing interpretations of international maritime law under UNCLOS (the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), with China making significant reservations upon acceding to the Convention, and the US failing to ratify the treaty. The overlapping claims, legal ambiguities and competing interests make the dispute highly intricate. While the PRC is tempted to

use its military strength in order to resolve issues, war risks are limited in part by Beijing's desire to cultivate its image as a responsible great power eager to find common ground, if not with Washington, at least with Southeast Asian capitals. The dispute over the Senkaku Islands, discussed in chapter 5, is both more straightforward and more recent compared to the complexities of the South China Sea issue. This conflict is primarily a bilateral matter between Japan, which annexed and has maintained control of the islands since 1895, and the PRC, which began asserting its claim in the early 1970s. The war of attrition initiated by China over these seemingly insignificant islands is seen by Professor Cabestan as serving broader objectives. First, it acts as a strategic lever to exert pressure on Japan, aiming to divide and weaken its political class. Secondly, it aids in expanding China's claimed maritime domain and air defence identification zone, aiming gradually to consolidate control. This, in turn, increases the vulnerability of Japanese and US forward military deployments in the islands, particularly in the event of armed conflict over Taiwan. Chapter 6, entitled "Border Tensions and Risks of a China-India War", provides an analysis of the Sino-Indian border standoff that reignited in 2020. It investigates the potential for these tensions to escalate into a full-scale, violent conflict. Chapter 7 argues that large-scale wars are less likely to happen than targeted, swiftly carried-out operations aimed at securing borders or protecting Chinese immediate interests and nationals. Finally, in the Conclusion, the author contends that, while scenarios of overt warfare remain unlikely in the near future, the undeclared and ongoing cyber conflict reflects the emergence of a new kind of China-US Cold War—or "Cold Peace". This evolving dynamic, the author asserts, demands global awareness and preparedness to navigate its far-reaching consequences.

Overall, this fine study adds value by offering a nuanced and historically informed examination of the strategic and ideological factors driving China's rise and its implications for global security. In mapping out specific conflict scenarios, Cabestan provides a detailed framework for understanding the realistic possibilities of future conflicts and the strategic calculations of both Chinese and US leaderships. This framework is particularly relevant for policy-makers, international relations scholars and readers interested in Asia-Pacific security dynamics. The book also provides valuable context for legal scholars and practitioners—particularly those focused on international law, national security law and US-China relations—seeking to understand the manner in which the relevant legal frameworks both shape and are shaped by US-China strategic competition. It identifies areas where existing legal mechanisms

may be insufficient to manage tensions and where new legal approaches may be needed. In more general terms, this study may be said to aid our understanding of China's efforts to reshape international norms and institutions, and of competing visions of international order as between the US and the PRC.

The book is also useful in other more specific ways for lawyers seeking insights into what has been happening in the region, including territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea, which of course involve questions of international law, particularly UNCLOS, and China's rejection of the 2016 arbitration ruling on South China Sea claims. Security Treaty Obligations with allies including Japan, South Korea and the Philippines are also analysed, as is the legal status of Taiwan and the ambiguities in US commitment to Taiwan. Professor Cabestan's analysis may also assist lawyers and legal academics working on international trade and technology transfer issues in providing the context for the use of technology export controls and restrictions and of economic decoupling and its legal implications. The study also offers insights into the legal and diplomatic channels for managing military incidents, as well as (as noted above) discussion of "Gray Zone Operations"—competitive interactions that fall between traditional war and peace and the place of international law in this difficult context. Professor Cabestan's contribution is also relevant for human rights law scholars and practitioners seeking to understand better the context of human rights issues in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and other areas, and the discussion it offers of how human rights concerns intersect with strategic competition. On the other hand, arguably, the study may seem to some readers to perhaps under-emphasize—though it does not ignore—the roles of diplomacy and economic interdependence in mitigating conflict. The book primarily focuses on conflict scenarios and could perhaps have given greater attention to diplomatic solutions and cooperative mechanisms. While it critiques China's nationalism, the China focus means that the analysis is limited in scope in respect of US policy and actions and their implications.

Cabestan's study is important for its balanced and comprehensive analysis of one of the most critical geopolitical challenges of contemporary times. While recognizing the significant risks of conflict between the PRC and the US, particularly in relation to flashpoints such as Taiwan and the South China Sea, the author delivers a nuanced assessment that neither downplays these threats nor asserts that war is inevitable. The book's rigorous exploration of various conflict scenarios, alongside its in-depth examination of China's internal dynamics and broader international relations theory, makes it an invaluable resource for scholars, policy-

makers and legal professionals focused on US–China relations. Given escalating global tensions, Cabestan’s analysis of US–China strategic competition represents a significant contribution to both academic scholarship and practical policymaking.

About the author

*For further information, see **Michael Palmer**’s [profile page](#).*

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