

Q & A

Hal Brands On Navigating America's "Danger Zone" With China

The scholar talks about his new book; why China's best days are behind it, both strategically and economically; how that could lead to China lashing out; and why he fears U.S. strategy isn't coming together quickly enough.

BY BRENT CRANE — SEPTEMBER 11, 2022

Hal Brands is the Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the [Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies](#) and a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. From 2015 to 2016, he served as special assistant to the secretary of defense for strategic planning. He has consulted for a number of government agencies. At 39 years old, he has also published nine books on American foreign policy, including [American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump](#) (2018), [Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order](#) (2016) and [What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush](#) (2014). His latest book, co-authored with Michael Beckley, an associate professor at Tufts, is [Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict With China](#). Brands spoke to The Wire about the new book, why he thinks that China is in decline and why that makes it a more dangerous adversary for the U.S.



Hal Brands.

Illustration by Kate Copeland

Q: Your book rests upon this idea that we've reached "peak China." What is that and what does it look like in practice?

A: A 'peak China' looks like a China whose best days are behind it, both strategically and economically. Strategically in the sense that China is going to encounter more and more resistance to its ambitions in coming years. In fact, we're already seeing China becoming increasingly encircled by groups of democratic and autocratic nations that fear its power. We're seeing this through initiatives like AUKUS [the trilateral security initiative named for Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S.], the Quad and semiconductor alliances.

It is a China that's in decline economically as well. Most of the key drivers of the remarkable growth that China experienced for 30 years after the beginning of Reform

and Opening have stalled or gone into reverse. That's true demographically, in terms of the policy packages that Beijing is promoting, and in the increasing cost and scarcity of resources. A peaking China is a China whose coercive capabilities continue to increase; the Chinese military buildup doesn't appear to be slowing down anytime soon. But it's one that is looking to the future with greater degrees of anxiety because it's going to be facing more international resistance and will have less economic momentum to sustain its advance.

Is China's economy really so doomed?

China's growth coming into the pandemic was, according to official statistics, around 6 percent. Depending on what study you look at, the real number may have been somewhere between 2 and 4 percent and a lot of that growth appears to reflect the force-feeding of capital into relatively unproductive sectors or sectors whose productivity is declining. Add to that the fact that China is going to experience one of the worst peacetime demographic implosions in history in coming decades. It's going to be very, very difficult for China to grow at anything like the rate that a lot of western observers became accustomed to in the 1990s and early 2000s.

But a lot of western observers have long claimed that China is on the verge of collapse, that the Communist Party is toast, that revolution is imminent. But it hasn't happened. Why is today different?

Fair question. One clarification is that we are not claiming the CCP is toast or that China is due for a revolution. We don't have any more insight into China's political future than anyone else. That future is probably unknowable, even to Xi Jinping. What we can say with a fair amount of confidence is that China's rise was due to the fortuitous convergence of a handful of key trends that really primed China for growth in the generation after the late 1970s. You had the opening of the Chinese economy and the pursuit of relatively enlightened economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping and the people who followed him. You had a political system that was always authoritarian but became more technocratic, more meritocratic and more responsive to economic stimuli than it had been under Mao Zedong. You had a demographic windfall which resulted from some wild policy fluctuations during the early P.R.C. era. You had a country that was relatively self-sufficient in critical resources for growth and, perhaps most importantly, whose economic rise was not just welcomed but assisted by the most powerful democracies in the world, including the United States. You put all those things together and China was primed for the remarkable growth that occurred for 30 years after 1978.

BIO AT A GLANCE

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| AGE | 39 |
| CURRENT POSITIONS | Henry Kissinger Distinguished Professor at Johns Hopkins SAIS, senior fellow at AEI, and columnist for Bloomberg Opinion |

“ **Our concern is that Xi will become more risk acceptant and more willing to gamble big to try to achieve big objectives — like the recovery of Taiwan — while he still can.** ”

Every one of those factors has now changed. Each of the tailwinds has become a headwind. You have the demographic problems. You have increasing hostility with the United States and other democracies. You have a world that is no longer welcoming of Chinese growth and assertiveness. You have a political system that is becoming more neo-totalitarian and more brittle. You have an economic reform package that has been stalled for a decade or more. When we look back, we're going to see that the peaking of the Chinese economy wasn't something that happened as the result of Covid. It really began with the global financial crisis and its aftermath in the late 2000s. What we're seeing now is that as a result of all of these tailwinds becoming headwinds, China is just going to find it much, much more difficult to grow in a way that would sustain its global ambitions.

And all of these headwinds, you argue, make it *more* likely, not less, that China lashes out in some destabilizing way. Can you explain why that is?

What we see historically is that revisionist powers — countries that want to reorder the international system — become most erratic and most dangerous not when they are confident of their continued rise but when they start to worry that their window of opportunity is closing, when they worry that the future will be worse than the present. They

have staked out grand ambitions and realize that they may be running out of time to accomplish them. This was the case with Germany before World War I, with Japan before World War II and in a number of other countries as well. This is the scenario we worry about with China today.

Xi Jinping has been very transparent about his ambition to make China the dominant power in Asia and globally. He's made it very clear that China would like to recover Taiwan sooner rather than later. During this decade, he's going to have as good of a window to achieve these things as he ever will, particularly as Chinese growth slows and the world becomes more hostile to an assertive China. Our concern is that Xi will become more risk acceptant and more willing to gamble big to try to achieve big objectives — like the recovery of Taiwan — while he still can.

| MISCELLANEA | |
|------------------|--|
| RECENTLY READ | Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom by Stephen R. Platt |
| RECENTLY WATCHED | Top Gun: Maverick |
| FAVORITE MUSIC | Classic Rock |
| MOST ADMIRE | I admire a lot of people. Recently I have been thinking about the accomplishments of people like Alexander Hamilton and George Shultz. |

Why would it be in America's interest to go to war over Taiwan?

It's an entirely appropriate question. Taiwan is a medium-sized island thousands of miles from the United States. But there are three reasons why Taiwan is *very* important to the United States. The most important is strategic. Taiwan is the centerpiece of the first island chain: the line of

islands and groups of islands running from Japan and Taiwan to the Philippines that block China's access to the open Pacific. If China is able to subdue Taiwan and occupy it, it gains a whole bunch of military advantages that come with punching a hole in the first island chain. This can make it much more difficult for the United States to defend other allies in the region, such as the Philippines or Japan. Taiwan, in many ways, is the fulcrum of the balance of power in the western Pacific, which has always been a region that matters a lot to the United States.

The second reason is economic. Taiwan is at the center of one of the most critical supply chains in the world, advanced semiconductors. We certainly would not want to see China gain control of TSMC facilities, intellectual capital and other things that it could use to vault itself to the head of the pack in global semiconductor design and manufacturing. And even if that's not possible for China to do, it would create enormous economic disruption if there was a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

The third reason is essentially ideological and values-based. Taiwan is the only Chinese-speaking democracy in the world. Its existence makes a mockery of the CCP's argument that Chinese culture is somehow incompatible with democracy. It is a flourishing vibrant democracy with twenty odd million citizens. And, typically, the United States has not welcomed it when authoritarian powers try to conquer peaceful vibrant democracies on their doorstep. I should say, though, that there is not consensus in the United States on this issue. We have no formal defense commitments to Taiwan. We have an ambiguous commitment as part of the Taiwan



Tsai Ing-wen speaking at a ceremony commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), April 15, 2019. Credit: 總統府 via [Flickr](#)

Relations Act, but there's nothing like an Article Five that we have with the NATO allies. I expect there will be a lot of debate around this question in the years to come.

One can imagine an isolationist American president thinking, 'Well, that's too bad for Taiwan if China invades but it doesn't seem so bad for America if China stops there. If Beijing only wants this tiny island, why not give it to them, especially if it means preventing World War III?'

A lot of it depends on what you think China's longer term ambition and level of assertiveness will be. If China were to attack Taiwan and *only* Taiwan and we could somehow guarantee that China would not seek to use Taiwan as a stepping stone to coerce Japan or the Philippines or shatter the credibility of American alliance commitments in Asia, then there would be a stronger case for the argument that you just characterized. The challenge is that we can't have any certainty that China would stop at Taiwan. We can't have any certainty that having absorbed Taiwan it would not take further steps to reorder the Asia-Pacific to its liking. Perhaps not by trying to conquer Japan or the Philippines or anything like that. But by exerting military, geopolitical and economic pressure on them, making the argument that the United States has shown that it won't defend the balance of power in the region and forcing them to come to some sort of accommodation with Beijing. That's the scenario that people worry about with regards to the day after Taiwan.



Xi Jinping, Beijing, October 9, 2021. He remarks that "Taiwan independence is the greatest obstacle to national reunification and a grave danger to national rejuvenation".

Many observers think the idea of China invading Taiwan is unrealistic given the economic devastation that would likely follow. Do you think economic deterrence is overrated?

As a historian, if you were predicting a country's behavior purely on the basis of economic self-interest, you would not have predicted World War I, you would not have predicted World War II, you would not have predicted Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine or a number of other major disruptions to the geopolitical status quo. Countries are not motivated solely by the pursuit of economic self-interest. They're motivated by greed, honor, pride, all the things that motivate people. It is entirely possible and would be entirely consistent with the history of the last century if Xi Jinping made a decision that seems economically irrational — because I do think that a protracted war over Taiwan could be economically catastrophic for China and the world — but it would not be the first time that a leader has made a decision of that sort. We've already seen that Xi Jinping is willing to optimize on other issues at the expense of economic growth. We've seen the crackdown on the tech sector. We've seen political reforms that give the CCP added control over the Chinese economy but seem at odds with the short and long-term dynamism of the economy. The trap we need to avoid is assuming that a country would never do Thing X because Thing X would be economically disastrous for them.

What is a “danger zone strategy” and do you see one coalescing in Washington today?

A danger zone strategy is a strategy you pursue when you are in a long-term competition with another country but you have to navigate a shorter period of very elevated peril. There was a Cold War danger zone during the first years of that conflict when the United States had to create a containment order and avoid the collapse of the West against the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The danger zone we have in mind now is the period between now and the end of this decade. That is when China's best military window of opportunity vis-a-vis Taiwan is going to be. It's when China is going to be best positioned to make big gains in the fight for technological supremacy. It is a period where the United States is really going to have to move with a degree of urgency to get its own policies right to close down these Chinese windows of opportunity so that we don't find ourselves in a very bad place.

Do I see a danger zone strategy coming together in Washington? Yes. But it's not coming together quickly enough. You can point to a variety of things that the United States and its allies are doing to shore up the balance of power in the western Pacific so that China is not tempted to invade Taiwan or otherwise disrupt the status quo. There's the invigoration of the Quad and the creation of AUKUS. There is all of the planning and cooperation the United States is doing bilaterally with Japan and Australia to think about how these



The Quad Leaders Summit in Tokyo, May 24, 2022. Credit: MEAphotogallery via Flickr

countries will respond to a major contingency in the region. There are the defense reforms that Taiwan just voted to give itself more of an asymmetric defense capability. There are the capabilities the United States is trying to develop for potential fights with China a decade from now. The challenge is that a lot of these things are not going to deliver major benefits until the very end of the 2020s or the early and mid 2030s. The U.S. defense program that appears to be oriented towards preparing for a potential fight with China in the early 2030s won't do a huge amount of good if the China-Taiwan confrontation comes in 2024, 2025 or 2027. You can make that same point about a lot of the things I just mentioned. Taiwan has embraced a smart defense program, but it is not moving nearly fast enough to implement it. Time is the one thing that we really don't have enough of right now. My concern is not that American officials and other democratic officials fail to recognize that China is a problem. It's that we have so far failed to stimulate the urgency we would need to solve that problem on the appropriate timeline.

“ We’re going to have to play a pickup game in terms of acting with the friends and partners and capabilities that we have or can quickly assemble because time is not on our side in the next few years. ”

How does one stimulate that urgency in the national security apparatus? Through what mechanism could things be advanced faster?

The American political system responds fairly well to crises, but it doesn't move quickly in response to anything but crises. The United States and the rest of the free world has

benefited in some way from the tragedy that is unfolding in Ukraine. It has reminded us that conquest is not an anachronism, that local wars can have devastating global consequences. And that you may not have as much time as you think before a situation goes critical. My hope is that both the U.S. government and allied governments will use the urgency that Ukraine has created to take steps that would help shore up the balance of power vis-a-vis China as well. We're seeing some of that, which is hopeful. We've seen discussion in Japan over significantly increased defense spending and perhaps constitutional revision. We've seen similar arguments emerge in Australia. The question now is, can we really harness the energy and the opportunity that the Ukraine war has created to strengthen defenses in the western Pacific?

The consensus that economic development would liberalize China seems to be universally accepted in Washington today as wrong. Do you see any other notions floating around about China today that you think are similarly wrong or naive?

The U.S. view of China has become considerably more realistic over the past six or seven years. The responsible stakeholder theory is dead. The idea that economic engagement would inevitably bring about liberalization in China is dead. There is now a bipartisan consensus that China represents the greatest geopolitical threat to the United States and the international order and that the United States and its allies need to move toward a more competitive posture. We're still going to argue endlessly about what to do about it, whether that's on semiconductors or defense strategy or any other thing. But you're starting to see the emergence of a China consensus in the United States that is somewhat akin to the Cold War consensus in the early postwar period. That's progress.

[*Click here to read a Q&A with Robert Zoellick in which he discusses his "responsible stakeholder" speech.*](#)

The other idea that I've seen taking hold, which I think is about right, is that the goal is no longer to integrate China into the existing international system. It's to harden that international system so that China cannot disrupt or overthrow it. That has a bunch of different and complicated aspects, from shoring up the military balance of power in the Indo-Pacific to hardening democratic economies so that they're less vulnerable to Chinese economic coercion. But at the 50,000-foot level, I think that's the right way of thinking about the problem.

What have been some bigger wins in America's danger zone strategy in recent years?

One of the reasons we wrote the book is that we don't think the danger zone strategy is coming together quickly enough. It's fair to say that the United States pursued a bunch of very constructive initiatives vis-a-vis China. The Trump administration and the Biden administration should get a lot of credit for reviving and elevating the ambition of the Quad. I think AUKUS is a great example of a multilateral initiative that brings together a handful of countries across different regions that all have an interest in checking Chinese power. You have seen constructive initiatives to undermine Huawei's bid for global 5G supremacy, which spans the Trump and the Biden administrations. There has been a lot of good policy over the past five years. The question is whether we can really bring it together into a strategy that moves quickly enough to meet the emerging challenge.



Joe Biden delivers remarks at a virtual trilateral press statement with then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, September 15, 2021. *Credit: Official White House Photo by Cameron Smith via [Flickr](#)*

Major losses?

The big one is the withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership and the inability to come up with anything reasonable as an alternative. The Biden administration has tried, with the Indo-Pacific economic framework, to come up with a different arrangement that would not have the political liabilities of a big free trade pact but would still help further embed the United States in the region's economy. It seems to have been met with pretty mixed reviews in the region because it doesn't come with a lot in the way of U.S. market access for countries like Vietnam, which was one of the big selling points of TPP. That's been the biggest self-inflicted wound that the United States has had over the past few years.

What do you think of the idea of an Asian NATO?

“ I worry that we may find ourselves in a position three or four years from now where, regardless of whether a commitment to defend Taiwan is deemed credible, we won't have the capabilities to honor that commitment in a crisis. ”

In theory, an Asian NATO would be great because one thing that would meaningfully deter Chinese aggression is a fear that there is no way of fighting a short, sharp, localized war in the Taiwan Strait. That if you pick a fight with Taiwan or Japan you're going to end up having to fight a big regional war involving not just the country you're picking on but the United States and several other advanced democracies and other countries around the region. It would really throw a wrench in any plan to achieve regional dominance.

But that's going to be very hard to do for historical and geographical reasons. The next best alternative is trying to stitch together multilateral arrangements that are somewhat less formal than a military alliance so that you can create something akin to the same effect. In late 2021, there was an instance where seven democratic countries from four different continents held naval exercises in the Philippine Sea as a signal to China that it's not just the United States and Taiwan and Japan that care about freedom of navigation and the balance of power in the western Pacific. The more that the United States can do to disperse its military capabilities in the region, so that if China wants to neutralize those capabilities it has to strike three or four other sovereign nations early in a fight over Taiwan, that's constructive for the same reason.



Two Japanese ships and one U.S. Navy ship during a naval exercise in the Philippine Sea, November 21, 2021. Credit: [Joshua Sapien/U.S. Navy](#)

One thing you two stress a lot in the book is, “Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.” What do you mean by that in terms of China strategy?

When you are dealing with time pressures you may not be able to hold out for that perfect multilateral agreement or that perfect solution to the policy problem. You may not have time to develop those exquisite military capabilities that are going to be really cool when they come online in the mid-2030s but won't do much to help you in the mid-2020s. We need to be thinking more in terms of rough-and-ready solutions: fielding a lot of shooters and sensors from capabilities that we already have or can easily acquire to turn the Taiwan Strait into a shooting gallery if the Chinese try to send an invasion fleet across; cobbling together rough-and-ready multilateral groupings from the friends and partners that we have right now rather than holding out for an Asian NATO. We're going to have to play a pickup game in terms of acting with the friends and partners and capabilities that we have or can quickly assemble because time is not on our side in the next few years.



Nancy Pelosi meeting with Tsai Ing-wen, August 3, 2022. Credit: 總統府 via [Flickr](#)

What do you make of the string of high-profile American officials visiting Taiwan? Do you regard this as smart strategy?

I'm sure there's a fair amount of politics involved. It's good politics to be seen to be anti-China and pro-Taiwan. At the same time, the United States has a genuine policy dilemma on Taiwan. We do not have a defense treaty. Nowhere is it

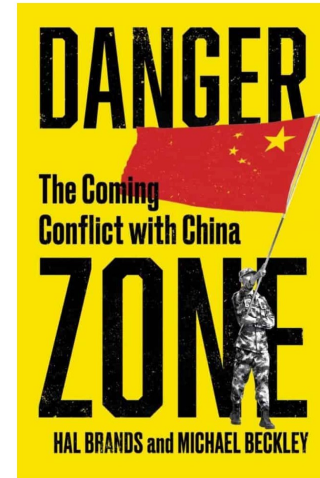
written that the United States will come to Taiwan's defense if it is attacked. The challenge the United States has is to signal to Beijing that even though we didn't respond militarily to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, you should not count on us standing aside if you attack Taiwan. The question is, how do you send that message? One of the answers to that question is by having lots of prominent American officials visit Taiwan to demonstrate the depth of American commitment to preserving a free and democratic Taiwan.

Do you think there should be a formal defense treaty?

That's a little bit beside the point right now. The real question is whether we have the capabilities to help Taiwan defend itself in a crisis. I worry that we may find ourselves in a position three or four years from now where, regardless of whether a commitment to defend Taiwan is deemed credible, we won't have the capabilities to honor that commitment in a crisis. I would rather us speak softly and do much more to accelerate the development of the capabilities we'll need to be effective in the western Pacific then focus on the issue of strategic clarity versus strategic ambiguity.

A lot of people might respond to your book and say, "Doesn't this all just provoke China into more aggressive behavior? Doesn't this create the problem you're trying to avoid?"

We have to recognize that in a country with China's ambitions and China's capabilities a failure to close off emerging weaknesses in our posture can be just as provocative or even more provocative than taking steps to strengthen yourself. In other words, you can't let yourself be paralyzed by the fear that doing something is going to make the other side angry or make the other side insecure. This is something we learned during the Cold War. It was clear that forming the NATO alliance was going to annoy the Soviet Union. It was clear that the Soviet Union objected to the creation of a West German state and to the rearmament of that state in the early 1950s. The Soviet Union didn't like the Marshall Plan either. All of these things, you could argue, were going to antagonize and alienate the Soviet Union. But we decided that we had to do them anyway because the risk of allowing grave weaknesses to emerge in the central theater of the Cold War was just so great that we couldn't tolerate such pronounced weakness. We are in a similar position today.



Hal Brands and Michael Beckley's *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict With China* published August 16, 2022. Credit: [W. W. Norton & Company](#)



Brent Crane is a journalist based in San Diego. His work has been featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Economist* and elsewhere. [@bcamcrane](#)

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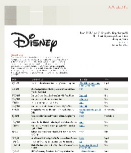
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BY KATRINA NORTHROP

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