

[*A War Like No Other: The Truth About China's Challenge to America*, Richard C. Bush and Michael E. O'Hanlon, John Wiley and Sons, 232 pages]

## Taiwanese Linchpin

By Ted Galen Carpenter

IN RECENT YEARS, most writers who deal with U.S. policy toward China fall into two distinct camps: panda huggers and panda sluggers. Members of the first faction rave about the growing trade ties between China and the United States and assert with a confidence bordering on certainty that economic progress in China will soon lead to political liberalization and the eventual emergence of a full-blown democracy. The panda sluggers, by contrast, view China as a 21st-century version of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union—an odious totalitarian power that is fast becoming a strategic adversary and mortal threat to America.

Brookings Institution scholars Richard C. Bush and Michael E. O'Hanlon are refreshing exceptions to the tendency to view China in such extreme terms. In *A War Like No Other: The Truth About China's Challenge to America*, the analysts make a serious attempt to capture the complexities and nuances of Washington's crucial relationship with the rising economic giant and possible military competitor. They are clearly worried about some aspects of Beijing's behavior, yet they also conclude that China's rise as a great power is "much less destabilizing than Germany's or Japan's in the first half of the twentieth century."

Despite such balanced treatment, *A War Like No Other* is ultimately a disappointment. It could have—and should have—been so much more than it turned out to be.

For a book that purports to examine the overall challenge China poses to the United States, several topics get short shrift. For example, Beijing's role in cre-

ating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a strong security partnership linking China to Russia and various Central Asian countries, receives only two passing mentions. Yet the SCO has not only conducted joint military exercises, it has openly advocated excluding the influence of "outside powers" (i.e. the United States) from Central Asia.

Likewise, Beijing has been less than helpful in dealing with the Iranian nuclear crisis. A fairly consistent pattern has emerged. The United States and its European allies keep pushing for stronger economic sanctions against Tehran, while China (together with Russia) opposes such coercive measures and works to dilute any sanctions that are ultimately imposed. China has been only marginally more helpful in dealing with North Korea. Yet the authors say relatively little about this behavior and what it portends for Beijing's role in the international system.

The mounting resource competition between China and the United States, especially over oil, also receives little analysis from Bush and O'Hanlon. This is strange, given the growing agitation in Washington over China's extensive ties to key oil producers from the Persian Gulf to Africa to Latin America. Even the oil-rich Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, the centerpiece of a massive territorial claim by Beijing, receive only brief mention, though the Spratlys could become a focal point of tension between the U.S. and China. In addition to their probable oil resources, the islands stand astride key sea lanes. To put it mildly, Washington is not inclined to recognize Beijing's bold claims to virtually the entire South China Sea, which would give China control over sea lanes that are crucial to Japan and other key American allies and clients in East Asia.

Even the treatment of the large and vibrant U.S.-China trade relationship is rather meager. In particular, China's emergence as the second largest holder of U.S. treasury debt—and probably the largest holder within the next three or four years—should have been the subject of more analysis. It will become

increasingly difficult for Washington to take a strong position on trade or strategic disputes with China when it means angering America's chief banker.

Despite its broad title, the bulk of *A War Like No Other* is really about whether the Taiwan issue could ultimately lead to a conflict between China and the United States. Perhaps this shouldn't be too surprising, since Richard Bush was once the head of the American Institute in Taiwan—Washington's *de facto* embassy in Taipei.

To their credit, Bush and O'Hanlon recognize that the volatile Taiwan issue is the one factor in the overall U.S.-China relationship that could ignite a full-scale war. Other areas of disagreement seem manageable, in their judgment: "Most hypothetical causes of war between the United States and China turn out, upon inspection, to have little or no basis. The two countries will not duke it out simply to settle the question of who will 'run the world' in the twenty-first century." They note correctly that China and the United States need each other for economic prosperity.

The Taiwan issue, though, is a dark cloud on the horizon. They argue, "Even if the chances of war between the United States and China are less than 25 percent—indeed, even if they are less than 10 percent—they are far from zero." Bush and O'Hanlon not only fret about the danger of armed conflict over Taiwan, they understand that a war is more likely to arise because of blunders and misunderstandings than any ruthless Chinese desire for conquest.

Even so, the authors actually underestimate the risk of a Sino-American war over Taiwan. Developments in both Taiwan and mainland China (some of which have occurred since publication of the book) are increasingly alarming. Although the extensive economic ties between China and Taiwan should induce prudent behavior on both sides, that has not done so—especially on the part of Taipei. Indeed, the sense of Taiwanese nationalism and a distinct, assertive Taiwanese identity has grown even as the economic linkages have expanded.

A growing number of Taiwanese advocate changing the name of the country from the Republic of China—established when Chiang Kai-shek’s government fled the mainland following its defeat in the 1949 civil war—to the Republic of Taiwan. The current government is engaged in a concerted de-Sinification campaign in everything from the educational curriculum to the names of state-owned corporations. Beijing, which insists that Taiwan is rightfully part of China, issues ever more pointed warnings that pro-independence forces on Taiwan are dangerously close to crossing bright red lines that will require a harsh Chinese response.

For its part, the United States urges both Taipei and Beijing to avoid any actions that would disrupt the status quo. The problem with such calls for restraint is that the three capitals have very different concepts in mind when they speak of the status quo.

American officials mean a willingness by all parties to tolerate indefinitely Taiwan’s ambiguous political status. In other words, the island should continue to enjoy its *de facto* independence (but not internationally recognized legal independence) until Taipei and Beijing can agree on a peaceful resolution of the dispute. This rationale enables Washington to acknowledge Beijing’s position that there is only one China and that Taiwan is part of China while continuing to sell arms to Taiwan and maintain an implicit commitment to defend the island against a Chinese assault. Taiwan’s attempts to push the envelope regarding independence are considered troublesome and undesirable, but so, too, is any attempt by China to compel reunification. That is why the United States has explicitly admonished both capitals about their behavior.

China has a radically different definition of the status quo. For Beijing, it is a synonym for a one-China policy and Taiwan’s eventual reunification with the mainland. Anything that challenges the concept of one China is, therefore, an unacceptable attempt to alter the status quo. Thus, from the perspective of Chinese leaders, the anti-secession law that

the National People’s Congress passed in early 2005—which threatened to use military force against Taiwan under certain circumstances—was not disruptive; it merely re-emphasized the only acceptable political outcome: reunification. Conversely, even Taiwan’s mildest actions to gain international diplomatic recognition—Taipei’s recent applications for membership in the World Health Organization and the United Nations General Assembly, for example—are a threat to the status quo and must be resisted at all costs.

Taiwan’s concept is the opposite of China’s. Taiwanese officials routinely argue that the status quo means Taiwan as a sovereign state. They point out that the Republic of China has been in existence since 1912 and is recognized by many countries in the world (at present, 24 mostly small nations that Taipei has bribed). Reunification with China, according to Taipei, is only one possible outcome among many to be negotiated by the governments of two independent and equal states. From Taiwan’s perspective, Beijing’s anti-secession law and the increasing deployment of missiles (now numbering more than 1,000) aimed at the island are aggressive attempts to alter the status quo, whereas Taiwanese efforts to secure international recognition are consistent with it.

Unfortunately, Beijing, Taipei, and Washington are simply talking past one another. Serious diplomatic quarrels and even armed conflicts have begun over less significant misunderstandings.

Bush and O’Hanlon only partially comprehend the gravity of the situation: “We think that policymakers have generally handled the Taiwan and China problem reasonably well over the past quarter century, and expect that they will continue to do so.” They add that the “core of U.S. policy is basically correct.” That policy, in their view, is one of “dual deterrence”—maintaining the implicit commitment to protect Taiwan from coercion by China while pressing the Taiwanese not to provoke Beijing. Other scholars have described it as “strategic ambiguity.”

The logic of strategic ambiguity is that the Taiwanese will remain uncertain

about the extent of U.S. protection—especially if Taipei engages in provocative conduct. Conversely, Beijing will believe that using military force against the island is too risky because the United States would probably intervene. Supposedly, this mutual uncertainty should lead to caution and restraint on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

The chief problem with this policy is that it assumes both governments will interpret Washington’s posture in exactly the way American officials desire. Unfortunately, events suggest that the precise opposite is occurring. The Taiwanese seem increasingly confident that the United States would never abandon a fellow democracy. At the same time, China seems ever more skeptical that the United States would disrupt the entire global economy and risk war with a nuclear power just to back a small, upstart secessionist island. These developments are a warning bell in the night about the danger of miscalculation.

Bush and O’Hanlon do not really come to grips with this problem. Instead, they largely repackage the conventional wisdom regarding Taiwan policy. They believe that with a few tactical tweaks, such as urging China to give Taiwan a little more international space, the United States can maintain the status quo indefinitely. That is a dangerously complacent attitude. The risk is increasing that America will be dragged into a conflict between Taiwan and China, unless Washington makes a radical policy change to extricate itself from that quarrel.

Ultimately, *A War Like No Other* is modestly useful, but most of its insights are not especially original, its policy prescriptions even less so. Anyone hoping for a breakthrough book on the complex, delicate, and critically important relationship between the U.S. and China will have to wait. ■

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## MUSIC

[ Magic ]

# The Boss Is Back

By A. G. Gancarski

WHEN MOST POP STARS have an album to promote, they dutifully go to the expected outlets, like MTV's "Total Request Live." But Bruce Springsteen is no ordinary pop star. He's a cultural institution, and it seemed natural that promotion for his new chart-topping and critically acclaimed album, "Magic," saw him interviewed not on some tawdry MTV showcase of ephemerality but on CBS's "60 Minutes."

Predictably, Springsteen's outspoken comments on the Sunday night news show made headlines. A few days before the episode aired, the Drudge Report ran a "flash" spotlighting of some of the Boss's most provocative political comments on what was then the upcoming show.

In response to charges that Springsteen's criticism of certain extralegal tactics of the war on terror somehow made him "unpatriotic," the rocker maintained that such claims were "just the language of the day ... the modus operandi for anybody who doesn't like somebody ... criticizing where we've been or where we're going. I believe every citizen has a stake in the ... direction of their country. That's why we vote... It's unpatriotic at any given moment to sit back and let things pass that are damaging to some place that you love so dearly and that has given me so much."

Springsteen elaborated further on his problems with the foreign-policy missteps of the current administration: "I think we've seen things happen over the past six years that I don't think anybody ever thought they'd ever see in the United States. When people think of the United States' identity, they don't think

of torture. They don't think of illegal wiretapping. They don't think of voter suppression. They don't think of no habeas corpus. ... Those are things that are anti-American. There's been a whole series of things that ... I never thought I'd ever see in America."

For those who still insist that "9/11 changed everything," that entertainers are forever obliged to "support the troops" Toby Keith style and avoid making politically charged statements, Springsteen's nationally televised criticisms of the Bush administration were apparently too much to bear. FoxNews talking head Bill O'Reilly, along with some chick who routinely appears on his show to "analyze body language," took Springsteen to task twice within the span of a week for being a "very liberal guy" who lacks an ability to "back up his opinions with facts."

"Violations of habeas corpus, Bruce? When and where? Attack on the Constitution? How so? Now we've invited the singer on this program to explain, but of course, he declined, perhaps understanding that his words have consequences," O'Reilly claimed in his usual blowhard manner, adding, "if he couldn't prove his points, he would be held accountable right here. Pop stars, as you know, are rarely held accountable."

What O'Reilly seemingly doesn't understand, or more likely, refuses to concede for the sake of his own self-aggrandizement, is that Bruce Springsteen doesn't need him to prove his bona fides or to hold him "accountable." Springsteen is arguably the most gifted singer-songwriter—not to mention best live performer—of his generation, and today, not far from his 60th birthday, he is as relevant as ever, saying things that many other "pop stars" wouldn't dare say for fear of losing their recording contracts or "heavy rotation" status.

Springsteen's willingness to risk media opprobrium and speak out on these issues commends him, and the new album—aptly titled "Magic"—is proof positive that, even as he reaches the end of his career, he hasn't lost much as a singer, a lyricist, or a front man.

Indeed, like Bob Dylan, he's one of the few stadium-fillers who have managed to rock into their golden years.

The album starts off strong, with the hard-rocking "Radio Nowhere," a song that manages to at once critique the vapidness of American radio and the poignancy of lost love. "I was spinnin' 'round a dead dial / Just another lost number in a file. ... Just searchin' for a world with some soul," Springsteen sings, setting the tone for an album that at once wrestles with issues of morality, spirituality, and the thoroughly vitiated American Dream. The melody, meanwhile, is oddly reminiscent of the early '80s Tommy Tutone classic "867-5309," a condition that comes attendant with a certain cognitive dissonance, at least for this writer.

The second track, a mid-tempo rocker entitled, "You'll Be Comin' Down," is somewhat repetitive lyrically, but contains one of the album's most trenchant couplets: "Like a thief on a Sunday morning / It all falls apart with no warning." Like so much of this album, "You'll Be Comin' Down" serves as a eulogy for an America that might never have really existed, but almost certainly has no chance of existing in the current context of no-win wars and a collapsing currency.

"Livin' In the Future," like the rest of the disc, spotlights Springsteen's apparent inability to type out gerunds without apostrophe endings. More importantly, though, it's the first song on the album with explicit political allusions. "Woke up Election Day / Skies Gunpowder and shades of gray / Beneath a dirty sun, I whistled my time away," sings the Boss. Later in the song, he bemoans his spiritual condition, debauched because of his apparent inability to take righteous action: "My faith's been torn asunder / Tell me is that rollin' thunder / Or just the sinkin' sound / Of somethin' righteous goin' under." Much of Springsteen's career, of course, has covered similar territory—as he said on "60 Minutes," his music, to a large degree, allows him to express the disappointments his father and his father's generation experi-