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ARE CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES HEADED FOR WAR?

Professors, pundits, and journalists weigh in on a heated topic.

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Illustration by Javier Jaén

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In a short book pointedly titled “Avoiding War with China” (University of Virginia), Amitai Etzioni has a more concrete idea of how China should be accommodated. Etzioni, a professor at George Washington University, is no softie. Having escaped from Nazi Germany as a child, he served as a commando in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. Etzioni knows what war is like, in contrast to most armchair warriors in Washington or indeed Beijing, and he refuses to get overexcited by China’s martial prowess. China’s military, he writes, “seems to pose no credible threat to the United States in the region, let alone on a global

scale. This conclusion is further supported by the observations of how and when China uses its clout.”

Etzioni admits that China has flouted international laws by claiming rights over islands far from its coastlines. It clearly wants to expand its influence from the Siberian borders all the way down to the sea-lanes running along Vietnam and the Philippines. But so far China has used almost no force to achieve its ends. Etzioni is convinced that Chinese policies are more concerned with rhetorical and symbolic assertions than with the outright projection of force. This means that, in his view, there is room for tension-easing compromise. Resources in the South China Sea could perhaps be shared. Certain concessions might be made; this or that island could be developed by China in exchange for territories elsewhere.

At the same time, he insists that there should be “clear red lines.” Certain “core interests” must be defended. The United States would have to intervene if Taiwan were in danger of being invaded. Free travel through sea and air around China has to be maintained. But Etzioni warns against “habitually interpreting Chinese acts of assertion as aggressive,” which, he says, “is symptomatic of a strategy that holds that China cannot be accommodated and that it must be contained by any means necessary.” This sounds eminently sensible. China’s intentions may, of course, not be quite as benign as Etzioni claims, and any territorial concession by the United States is likely to be read as a sign of weakness both by China and by America’s regional allies. Nonetheless, the United States, which is still the most powerful nation in the Pacific, should resist the temptation of belligerent posturing when it isn’t strictly necessary.



Ian Buruma is the author of, most recently, “Their Promised Land: My Grandparents in Love and War.”