

Former Australian PM: Beware the Guns of August in Asia

Peter Symonds
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Writing this week in the prestigious US-based journal *Foreign Affairs*, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd warns that the danger of armed conflict between the United States and China is higher than at any time since the 1950s. His essay, titled “Beware the Guns of August—in Asia: How to keep US-Chinese tensions from sparking a war,” recalls the extreme geo-political tensions in August 1914 as the world was plunged into a catastrophic war.

Rudd, moreover, is not warning of a distant danger. After reviewing the intense political pressures on leaders in both Washington and Beijing, as well as the most dangerous flashpoints, he argues that “the risks will be especially high over the next few critical months between now and the November US presidential election.”

The former prime minister, who is president of the Asia Society Policy Institute in New York, is well connected in American political and strategic circles. Rudd explains that he is not alone in his fears about the dramatically worsening tensions between the two nuclear armed powers.

“The question now being asked, quietly but nervously, in capitals around the world is, where will this end? The once unthinkable outcome—actual armed conflict between the United States and China—now appears possible for the first time since the end of the Korean War. In other words, we are confronting the prospect of not just a new Cold War, but a hot one as well,” he writes.

As an unreserved supporter of the Australian-US military alliance, Rudd covers up the role of American imperialism in deliberately raising tensions with China over the past decade, even though he himself was a victim of the worsening relations. He was ousted as prime minister in 2010 in an inner-party coup involving “protected sources” of the US embassy in Canberra. He was removed for failing to line up completely with the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot to Asia,” aimed at the economic and strategic undermining of China.

Rudd argues in his essay that Chinese President Xi has sought to exploit the historic decline of the US with “a much more assertive strategy abroad, both regionally and globally,” to which Washington has responded “with increasing levels of aggression.” In reality, Obama’s aggressive “pivot” involved a massive military build-up in the Indo-Pacific and efforts to

isolate China economically, prompting Beijing to take counter-measures. Underpinning the “pivot” was the recognition in Washington that, in its historic decline, the chief threat to US global dominance came from China.

What began under Obama has been massively accelerated under Trump in his trade and economic warfare, his provocative naval operations in the South China Sea, increased arms sales to Taiwan and arms build-up in Asia. Confronting a worsening political crisis at home as a result of his criminal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump in the last six months has abruptly turned on Beijing, blaming it for the “China virus,” accusing it of spying and intellectual property theft, as well as “human rights” abuses in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Rudd does note that the US “has made plain that 35 years of strategic engagement are over”—in other words, that the rapprochement between the two countries that began with the visit of US President Richard Nixon to Beijing in 1972 is being replaced by an “era of strategic competition.” He also recognises that Trump’s “chaotic” presidency has stripped the US-China relationship of “the political, economic, and diplomatic insulation carefully nurtured over the last half century and reduced to its rawest form: an unconstrained struggle for bilateral, regional, and global dominance.”

Rudd points out that this aggressive anti-China campaign is bipartisan, writing, “Meanwhile, Trump’s opponent, former Vice President Joe Biden, is determined not to be outflanked by Trump on China, making for a uniquely combustible political environment.”

Rudd, who speaks Mandarin and regards himself as an astute observer of Chinese politics, also identifies the challenges facing Chinese President Xi.

“In China, an already slowing economy, the ongoing impact of the trade war, and now the COVID-19 crisis have placed Xi’s leadership under its greatest internal pressure yet,” he notes. Xi has made high level enemies through “his brutal anticorruption campaign,” “massive military reorganization” and “major personnel changes... in the party’s intelligence, security, and military hierarchies.”

While he concludes that Xi will deal with internal party enemies and rivals through a “party rectification campaign”

launched in July, Rudd pays no attention to the acute social tensions in China produced by growing unemployment and the huge gulf between the rich and poor that have been compounded by the pandemic.

Just as the Trump administration is attempting to turn internal tensions outward by making China the scapegoat for the crisis in the US, so the Chinese Communist Party regime has always resorted to nationalist demagoguery to deflect from its domestic crises. Backed into a corner by Washington, Beijing will be forced to react.

As Rudd writes: “All this makes for a dangerous political and strategic cocktail: a weakened Trump, an uncompromising Biden, and an under-pressure Xi ready to pull the nationalist lever.” While by no means the only potential triggers for armed conflict, he identifies three flashpoints as particularly dangerous: Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South China Sea.

On Hong Kong, Rudd concludes that the current US confrontation with China over its imposition of a new national security law on the territory is “unlikely to result in a full-blown crisis.” His argument is weak. It is based on the fact that Britain, not the US, is “the external treaty power,” having returned Hong Kong to China in 1997, and that “there would be no international legal basis for any form of US intervention.” Trump, however, has time and again demonstrated his complete contempt for international law and institutions.

On Taiwan, a “core issue” for China, Trump has increasingly called into question the “One China” policy whereby Washington recognised Beijing as the legitimate ruler of all China, including Taiwan. Rudd suggests that any crisis over Taiwan triggered by a Chinese military push would be “more likely to come later in the 2020s, when Beijing thinks the military balance will have shifted even further in its favour.”

Rudd, however, does not rule out what is far more likely in the short term, namely a US provocation. “In the current political environment, the Trump administration could choose to escalate—by, say, allowing a U.S. naval visit to a Taiwanese port. The incendiary effect of such an action would be politically impossible for the Chinese leadership to ignore,” he writes.

Rudd regards the escalating military tensions in the South China Sea as the most dangerous potential flashpoint. The Trump administration has deliberately ratcheted up its aggressive naval deployments in the area, including deliberate intrusions by US warships into territorial waters claimed by China. Last month, in a deliberately provocative show of force, the US Navy staged “high-end” war games involving two aircraft carrier strike groups in the South China Sea near and adjacent to sensitive Chinese naval bases in southern China.

Rudd writes: “The South China Sea has thus become a tense, volatile, and potentially explosive theatre at a time when accumulated grievances have driven the underlying bilateral political relationship to its lowest point in half a century. The sheer quantity of naval and air force hardware deployed by both

sides makes an unintended (or even intended) collision increasingly probable.”

In considering what would happen in the event of the downing of an aircraft or the sinking of a warship by either side, Rudd concludes that there is a real danger of an escalation into full-blown war.

As he states: “The prevailing domestic political circumstances in Beijing and Washington could all too easily drive both sides to escalate. Political advisers might argue that a localized military escalation could be ‘contained’ within defined parameters. Nonetheless, given the highly charged public sentiment in both countries and the high political stakes in play for each country’s leader, there is little reason to be sanguine about the possibilities for restraint.”

The most telling aspect of Rudd’s essay is that, having outlined in some detail the dangers of war between two-nuclear armed powers that would necessarily engulf the world, not in the coming years, but in the next three months, his proposals for avoiding conflict are utterly banal. He enjoins US and Chinese leaders to study the lessons of history, when “a relatively minor incident”—the assassination of an Austrian archduke in June 1914—plunged the world into war just weeks later. He concludes with a pathetic appeal to leaders on both sides to navigate the next few months without stumbling into conflict.

The lack of any coherent and compelling answer to the war drive within ruling circles is a sharp warning to the working class and to young people who will inevitably be compelled to bear all the burdens of war. Rudd obliquely hints at the only means to prevent war, suggesting that leaders remember “that nationalistic jingoism tends to become more muted after the shooting starts.” Or, to put it more directly, World War I engendered revolutionary opposition within the working class that rejected the nationalist chauvinist justifications for war and found its highest expression in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The same challenge confronts the international working class today, in the US, China and around the world. That is, to build a unified anti-war movement on the basis of a socialist perspective aimed at putting an end to global capitalism and its outmoded and bankrupt nation-state system, which is the root cause of war.



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