

SHELF LIFE

by **STEPHEN WERTHEIM**

ONLY IN AMERICA IS THE CAREER of Edward Luttwak possible. A prolific public intellectual, Luttwak simultaneously practices “military consulting” for the gamut of US defense agencies, as well as some foreign governments and private firms. In that capacity, he even conducts field operations, but not to worry: his interrogations, he maintains, stay strictly nonviolent. What appeals to everyone, from op-ed aficionados to Pentagon brass, is his particular kind of expertise. Luttwak offers knowledge of “strategy,” ostensibly a distinct field of inquiry capable of delivering profound insights across time and space. Given strategy’s privileged place in the military-intellectual complex, it comes as no surprise that, when the Defense Department commissioned him to study the rise of China—a tall order, one might think, for someone who made his name in 1976 by appraising the Roman Empire—he not only agreed but within two years had turned his findings into a book.

In *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy* (Belknap Press of Harvard University; \$26.95), Luttwak promises to assess China “as a strategist and not as a Sinologist...for the universal logic of strategy applies in perfect equality to every culture in every age.” This “logic of strategy,” according to Luttwak, mandates that China cannot continue to grow both its economy and its military at the rapid pace of the last decade. Should China persist in enlarging its military budget in proportion to its 9 percent annual economic growth, neighboring states will resist its rise so mightily that China’s overall influence in the world might decline. Against all appearances, Luttwak sees the country on a “path toward vast troubles, if not ruin.”

These sound like bold predictions, but recent events in East Asia provide some (limited) support. Since the global financial crisis

of 2008, China has become more assertive. Luttwak catalogs how it has staked expansive claims to the South China Sea, reopened disputes over maritime territories and sharpened the language of its diplomacy. Country by country, he reviews the reactions prompted by China’s shift. His analysis is informative, but it also manages to be at once alarmist and humdrum. Luttwak hypes both Chinese aggrandizement and its neighbors’ resistance, imagining them as portents while conceding how minor they’ve been so far. Twice we hear that “Chinese warships saluted on the high



Edward Luttwak

seas by U.S. Navy vessels did not reciprocate and instead switched on their fire-control radars.” It’s almost as if Emily Post had joined the Committee on the Present Danger.

There’s a larger problem with Luttwak’s “logic of strategy,” which allegedly dictates that a rising power inspires others to oppose it, until it grows so powerful that the rest submit: even if such a simple law existed, it would indicate little about China on its own. One would need to project how power differentials between China and its neighbors might unfold over time. At what point is resistance likely to mount? Would it reverse or merely slow China’s rise? If the current rates of Chinese economic and military growth are too high, what levels would suffice? The reader will look in vain for answers: Luttwak won’t dirty his hands with grubby concrete reality. “Strategy is stronger than politics,” he intones, as if italics could expunge the fact that his own

conception of strategy depends on politics in order to mean anything in any particular time and place.

Because pure strategy’s yield is meager, Luttwak ends up becoming the Sinologist he initially forswore. His prose comes alive as he diagnoses China with a “virulent” strain of strategic “autism.” China’s inward-looking leaders, he argues, can scarcely comprehend the outside world and show scant regard for foreign sensitivities. Though such autism afflicts every great nation, including the United States, China’s case is worse thanks to its deep past. Its tributary system cast all others as barbarians; ancient texts like *The Art of War* emphasized the use of clever stratagems against culturally dissimilar states. These legacies pose a “specifically Chinese and most peculiar” obstacle in a world of sovereign equality and cultural difference.

Luttwak writes as though Chinese leaders have stepped straight from the first millennium, or earlier, into the third. He says next to nothing about the twentieth century, when China not only learned to live among legal equals but also became a paramount defender of the doctrine of state sovereignty against Western interventionism. Nor does he burden us with evidence that Chinese leaders think as reductively about their past as he does. Vociferating in a vacuum, Luttwak goes right ahead and contradicts his whole thesis by declaring himself “confident that China will not ultimately disrupt the equilibrium of world politics, because the Chinese themselves will moderate their conduct as they advance culturally as well as economically (two different translations of *The Iliad* are now on sale).” Where this interjection leaves the chapter titled “Why Current Policies Will Persist” is no clearer than the reason translations of *The Iliad*—not exactly a pacifistic text—should herald geopolitical moderation.

What is to be taken seriously about *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy* is the credibility its kind of reasoning may command in the United States. If US policymakers buy Luttwak’s line and China’s military keeps growing, it would be a small step to conclude that the country is hopelessly autistic and must be contained. Economic interests should counteract the coming of a new cold war, and that alone may make the difference. But if we achieve peace and cooperation with China, it will be not because of strategists like Luttwak, but despite them. ■

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