

The Four Flashpoints: How Asia Goes to War

Brendan Taylor

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Reviewed by Ahmed S. Hashim



According to Brendan Taylor, Professor of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University, Asia is currently the most critical flashpoint in international relations. In his recent book, *The Four Flashpoints: How Asia goes to war*, he marshals considerable evidence to show how and why this is so.

While, in the early Cold War period Asia barely registered as a global hot spot, it is unequivocally clear that it now commands everyone's attention. It has come into its own, no longer a subsidiary battleground in the ideological conflicts of other powers. Asia, argues Taylor, is hardly a 'pacific' continent, no pun intended. Contemporary tensions should be seen against the backdrop of the continent's wars of decolonisation, the Cold War battlegrounds of the

Korean and Vietnam wars, the Chinese Civil War of 1945–1949 and continuing insurgency and counterinsurgencies. The continent contains the fastest growing economies in the world, which has allowed many Asian countries to engage in arms procurement and the development of sophisticated defence industries. Alarming, there has also been a rise in strident nationalism and xenophobia. And then there is China, which has risen 'faster, further and across more dimensions of power than any country in history'¹. Asia, however, is not important merely because of the factors mentioned above. Taylor is clearly worried that major inter-State or conventional war, or wars, could occur in the region. In this context, he poses and seeks to answer three questions: (i) how probable is *major war* in Asia? (ii) where is conflict most likely to originate? and (iii) what can be done to prevent it?

The continent, writes Taylor, is home to four critical flashpoints that flare up into crises now and then, each of which could lead to a deadly war:

- the Korean peninsula, where the US and South Korea face North Korea across one of the most militarised borders in the world
- the East China Sea (ECS), where a conflict over 'rocky outcrops'—Senkaku/Diaoyu—pit China and Japan, bitter historical enemies, against one another

1 Brendan Taylor, *The Four Flashpoints: How Asia goes to war* (Melbourne: LaTrobe University Press, 2018), 4.

- the South China Sea (SCS), where several littoral states lay claim to portions of the sea and certain islands and reefs; and where China, has militarised several artificial islands

Taiwan, which China regards as a 'renegade province' that should return to the motherland (by force if necessary) even though the island itself endeavours to shape an independent identity.

Each flashpoint is discussed in a detailed chapter, which trace the origins and evolution of the conflict, the potential for war breaking out, and the prospects for a diplomatic solution or grand bargain. While these conflicts are not new they are becoming serious flashpoints, not because the protagonists are heavily armed but because they involve major powers, China and the United States. A powerful and assertive China is directly involved in three of the four flashpoints Taylor identifies: the SCS, the ECS and Taiwan. China is also involved in the fourth flashpoint—the Korean peninsula—because of its relationship with the reclusive regime of the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK). What China thinks and does concerning the Korean peninsula affects the calculations of Pyongyang, Seoul, Washington DC, and even Tokyo. The United States also has a stake in all of these flashpoints, although its interest in each conflict is not equal across the board. The US alliance with South Korea and Japan is well-known; but it seems ambivalent about the SCS. Despite insisting, like other West-

ern nations on freedom of navigation through the SCS, it is clear, that neither the United States nor the other parties involved believe that what China has achieved in the SCS can be reversed.

Taiwan, writes Taylor, is the trickiest and most dangerous of the four flashpoints. It is a 'core interest' for the People's Republic of China (PRC). They simply cannot allow Taiwan to declare independence, as that would constitute a threat to the territorial integrity of the Chinese state and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is built not only on economic success but also on nationalism. However, is Taiwan really an existential matter for the United States? Can it forego Taiwan in return for a quid pro quo elsewhere? The absorption of Taiwan would increase China's power, its prestige and strategic reach. If the US were to walk away from Taiwan it would affect US status in Asia and its allies would question its commitments. What about what the Taiwanese think? If the international system is based on certain norms and order, surely, the fact that Taiwan is charting its own independent democratic path is worth considering.

Although I enjoyed reading, and profited from, *The Four Flashpoints*, there were some general and specific weaknesses in the book. First, a book like this, focused on current affairs, suffers from in-built obsolescence as it can be overtaken by changing circumstances. The dizzying turn of events in the Korean peninsula—as a result of the

peculiar *bromance* between two mercurial leaders, Trump and Kim, and of inter-Korean dialogue—could not have been predicted by Taylor as he was finishing his book, although he was not optimistic about any solid outcome coming from the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore.

Second, I was not convinced by Taylor's methodological and conceptual approach; not because it was faulty, rather because it didn't seem to be well structured. Of course, a policy book like this should not get mired in political science jargon; however, a more integrated understanding of the author's chosen methodology and conceptual framework could have been achieved if the introduction had been incorporated into the beginning of Chapter 1, rather than the pastiche of terms loosely used in both sections. Chapter 1 was better constructed, but here again it was unclear how Taylor differentiated between flashpoints and the structural foundations of wars, a matter of debate that goes back to Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*. Surely, the structural foundations of wars are more significant than flashpoints, as the former are the symptoms of deeper problems.

A third weakness is that the book ignores the two flashpoints on the Indian subcontinent: the Indo-Pakistani and the Sino-Indian flashpoints. He makes no mention of the former but argues that while a Sino-Indian war is 'conceivable', it would be unlikely to draw in 'other major powers'. If as Taylor

argues, Asia has become important in and of itself as a key player in the international system, why then would two potentially deadly flashpoints become significant only if other major powers get involved? If Asia's other four flashpoints are significant only because of the potential involvement of other major powers, then the importance of Asia has been overstated? But that was not Taylor's claim at the beginning of the book when he clearly articulates Asia's importance.

Moreover, who are these other major powers? And why would they not get involved? We are discussing three significant nuclear powers: China, India and Pakistan. China, is a great power, steadily progressing towards superpower status, and despite the structural problems of the Indian armed forces, particularly in power projection, a new Sino-Indian war would be deadly. It is worrisome that some Chinese observers seem to think that the Indian armed forces 'could be easily handled'. Chinese optimism might lead to a miscalculation here. On the other hand, India could fare badly in an encounter, whether it is a major naval clash in the Indian Ocean or anywhere along their lengthy and mountainous border. What would prevent New Delhi from pleading for help from 'other major powers'? Why would that help not be forthcoming? Similarly, why would an Indo-Pakistani war not involve other powers? On paper, India has an overwhelming conventional advantage over Pakistan; in reality though, it might be hard-pressed

to deal that country a truly serious blow conventionally. However, let us assume India prevails conventionally and Pakistan begins to buckle: might Pakistan entertain the use of nuclear weapons? Will other major powers sit by with folded arms? I doubt it. In short, as long as India and Pakistan skirmish within the realm of sub-conventional war—however irritating it is for India—and as long as Indian and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers literally shove each other along poorly defined border posts, then yes, the chances of other major powers getting involved is minimal—unless each flashpoint escalates.

Fourth, and finally, there is a major flashpoint that Taylor does not write about: the superpower flashpoint between the United States and the PRC. Readers of this review might think I am being unfair here; given the rivalry between the two permeates the book. This is perfectly true. But the potentially dangerous interactions Taylor discusses between the two is *derivative* of the four flashpoints that constitutes the foundation of his book. There is a stand-alone rivalry between the US and the PRC—between a rising power suffused with anger about the ‘century of humiliation’ and angst about where it is going, and whether it will reach its destination—and one which has been involved in the Pacific region as a great power even before the Spanish–American War of

1898, as American historian Edward Mead Earle, a key founder of strategic studies, pointed out long ago. Does not the United States also suffer from angst concerning its seemingly diminishing clout in Asia? Of course by their very nature, historical what-ifs are difficult to prove, but if these four flashpoints did not exist would that have precluded a structural situation of a rising China challenging the status quo power, the United States? To be sure, the PRC has ‘entangling conflicts’ in Asia and the US has ‘entangling alliances’, but I am not convinced they would not have emerged as rivals in the absence of these conditions. Their rivalry with one another deserves *independent consideration* in a book of this calibre: these are the two colossi of Asia.

In summary, the book has strengths and weaknesses. It is well-written and extremely readable. It is also a well-detailed policy analysis of the flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific, each of which could lead to a catastrophic war. The book, however, is not a scholarly history like those of Christopher and Margaret MacMillan, whom Taylor mentions in the Foreword. Nor, do I suspect this was Taylor’s intention. Rather, what he has given us is an eminently readable and up-to-date analysis of major conflict zones in Asia. Policymakers, academics, military personnel and students can benefit from it.