

THE COLD WAR OF AMERICA AGAINST CHINA: DESTINED TO FAIL

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Peter Nolan, a Cambridge economist and Director of the Centre of Development Studies at Cambridge University, analyzes the “New Cold War” between the United States and China. The book argues that since 2008 global financial crisis, “the USA has launched a new Cold War against China,” focusing on issues of China’s territorial integrity (Xinjiang, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan) and technology (semiconductors).

Nolan contends that China’s response-following a Confucian injunction to “return aggression with firmness” rather than reciprocal hostility—has thus far blunted US efforts. In Nolan’s view, America’s bid for hegemony in Eurasia has “failed,” the only viable path is cooperation with China to address global challenges. The book’s scope encompasses both historical background and contemporary policy, tracing continuities and differences between the Cold War era and the present confrontation.

Nolan’s thesis is laid out in an introduction and subsequent chapters that juxtapose the “Old” versus “New” Cold Wars, describe US and Western strategies toward China, and detail China’s policy responses. The author draws heavily on historical analogy and policy analysis. For example, he explicitly contrasts China’s diplomatic stance with a Confucian adage: China has chosen firmness instead of “returning aggression with kindness” or violence. The table of

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contents (as gleaned from publisher descriptions) suggests a mostly chronological and topical arrangement: early chapters review the evolution of the US-China relations. In contrast, later chapters dissect specific theaters of tension. Nolan's argument combines the exposition of historical events with a clear normative point: that the US policy of containment is self-defeating. His evidence ranges from historical parallels (invoking classic texts like Thucydides and Hegel, as seen in the bibliography) to contemporary data and policy statements (including Chinese government White Papers on Xinjiang and Hong Kong). He cites official sources and economic studies, reflecting his background in development economics, but the style is primarily argumentative and analytical rather than statistical. Overall, Nolan's methodology is one of the critical narratives. He interprets policy shifts through a broad geopolitical lens, using history and ideology as analytical tools rather than conducting original empirical research.

The central content of the book is Nolan's critical analysis of the US policy. He documents how successive American administrations have adopted increasingly confrontational measures-trade sanctions, diplomatic pressure over Hong Kong and human rights, and intensified military posturing in the South China Sea and around Taiwan. These are framed as components of a coherent strategy to "organize an anti-China front" (Yuntao, 2020). In Nolan's narrative, each instance of the US "aggression" has been met by a measured Chinese reaction: for example, instead of counter-sanctions or military escalations, China has often retaliated with policy firmness or reciprocity in kind (e.g., countersanctions on trade, diplomatic protests), consistent with his quoted aphorism. Nolan concludes that despite sustained US pressure, China's economy and strategic position have not collapsed; on the contrary, "the United States' effort to establish hegemony over Eurasia has failed." Therefore, he argues that the US must abandon its Cold War approach and cooperate on global issues.

When evaluating Nolan's argument and evidence, both its strengths and limitations are apparent. A strength is Nolan's comprehensive framing. He connects disparate policy arenas (economics, technology, territorial disputes) into a single strategic narrative and places them in a historical context. His use of classical analogies, such as those from Confucius and Cold War precedents, lends rhetorical power to the analysis. He also highlights issues like Xinjiang and semiconductors often underplayed in Western accounts. However, Nolan's treatment is one-sided. He describes US policy exclusively as "aggression" and largely omits any discussion of Chinese actions that have raised international concerns. For example, issues such as China's assertive maritime claims, the construction of artificial islands in disputed waters, or its global economic policies are not given comparable scrutiny. The book also assumes that China's governance model and policy choices are fundamentally benign or reactive, which may

overstate the case. In scholarly terms, Nolan's argument is persuasive only to the extent that one accepts his premises; he tends to interpret all US measures as hostile rather than strategic competition.

Moreover, the book's central claim that the US campaign "has failed" is more asserted than demonstrated. Nolan offers limited criteria for "failure" beyond the continued rise of the Chinese economy and the resilience of its political system. He does not systematically analyze alternative explanations (for instance, that China's growth could slow independently of US actions) or quantify the economic costs of decoupling or sanctions. The evidence cited is often drawn from Chinese and historical sources: his notes include Chinese government white papers on Xinjiang and Hong Kong and scholarly works on China's economy (Yang, 2020). This lends authenticity to the Chinese perspective but may reflect a confirmation bias. By contrast, most Western scholars have emphasized U.S. policy's competitive or confrontational elements without endorsing cooperation. For example, in *Destined for War*, Yale's Graham Allison warns that major powers often end up in conflict when one challenges another (Afridi, 2025). Whereas Allison's analysis highlights a pattern of rivalry leading potentially to war, Nolan's prescriptive conclusion is diametrically opposite: cooperation with China is imperative to avert disaster.

In the broader scholarly debate, Nolan's position aligns with a more conciliatory or pro-China viewpoint. As Yang Yao observes in a recent strategic study, the Trump administration indeed "started a New Cold War against China," treating China as "America's primary rival" in ideology, geopolitics, and technology (Yao, 2021). Nolan builds on this assessment but frames it as a strategic error that cannot succeed. Chinese analysts echo this line: a survey reported in the *Global Times* finds that most Chinese scholars view US policy as "confrontation" and stress that "China is not the former Soviet Union" in terms of global standing (Yuntao, 2020). In other words, many Chinese observers agree with Nolan that this rivalry is asymmetrical.

By contrast, Western policy analysts and many U.S. officials continue to view China as a peer competitor, as documented by Yang and others (Afridi, 2025; Yao, 2021). Nolan's thesis thus diverges from much of the literature on strategic competition, where the assumption tends to be that continued tension is likely or even inevitable. Nolan's call for cooperation and confidence in China's resilience significantly contrasts the "Cold War" framing prevalent in contemporary Western discourse.

The book's presentation is generally straightforward and accessible, though it is aimed at an informed audience. The prose is formal, and the chapters are organized logically, but at times, the tone is polemical rather than neutral. Technical terms are used appropriately (e.g.

“hegemony,” “containment”), and the historical narrative is apparent. The front matter includes a table of contents (not directly available, but implied by structure) that presumably outlines the sequence of topics. Nolan’s preface and introduction (which outline his objectives) appear effective in setting the stage, and he delivers on those objectives. The footnotes and bibliography are comprehensive: Nolan cites various sources, ranging from Chinese state publications on Xinjiang and “One Country, Two Systems” to classical works such as Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. This breadth demonstrates scholarly effort, although the selection skews heavily toward Chinese and historical material.

In conclusion, Nolan’s *America’s Cold War against China: Destined to Fail* is a provocative intervention that will interest scholars of international relations and Chinese politics. Its strengths lie in the clarity and boldness of its thesis and in highlighting the territorial and economic dimensions of US-China competition that are sometimes overlooked. Nolan writes confidently, and his extensive referencing lends an air of authority. However, the book is not without weaknesses. Its argumentation often assumes the very point (that US intentions are wholly aggressive) and leaves out counter-arguments. The evidence is suggestive rather than conclusive, and the interpretive style may not satisfy readers seeking a balanced policy analysis. Nolan’s portrayal is polemical, bordering on advocacy, which may limit the work’s acceptance in more neutral scholarly debate.

Nonetheless, the book contributes scholarly by articulating a straightforward narrative that counters the dominant Cold War paradigm. For researchers and policymakers, it serves as a reminder to question fundamental assumptions about the nature of U.S.–China rivalry. Its value may be in stimulating debate: if Nolan is correct that the “new Cold War” strategy is unsustainable, then his argument challenges others to explain how the status quo might be maintained or shifted. In any case, *America’s Cold War against China* offers a richly argued viewpoint that must be reckoned with.

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