

ZHOU BO

# Should the World Fear China?

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## INTRODUCTION

The title of the book *Should the World Fear China?* was not my idea. It's the first question I was asked in an interview with the German newspaper *Die Zeit* in 2023. I have been unable to forget this question since. For me, it best represents the uncertainty of the West towards China, which has brought twitches of anxiety and even fear.

Today, China wears many hats; it is the largest trading nation; the largest exporter; the largest industrial nation; and the largest economy by purchasing power parity. However, China describes itself as a developing country. This is certainly right in terms of China's per capita income. But it is also baffling: can a developing country be the largest economy in the world at the same time? And if so, what is the point of making a distinction between developed countries and developing countries?

China's image depends on where its beholders are standing. For the United States, it is a strategic competitor and "pacing threat"—"the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." For Europe, it is a "partner for cooperation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival," a conclusion that seems to tell us more about Europe's

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confusion about China than what China really is. For NATO, China is a “decisive enabler” of Russia’s war against Ukraine. But China has a different yet far more positive image in the Global South in which China considers itself a “natural member.” It is not rare to hear people describing China already as a superpower. Some China-centred organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS are thriving with expansion.

\* \* \*

That is why I have put together 102 of my essays and opinion pieces, written between 2013 and 2024, trying to answer some of the most important questions about China that I believe are still relevant today.

First and foremost, does China really want to reshape the international order, as the US claims? Washington regards the international order after World War II as the “liberal international order.” There is no such order. In my opinion piece, “Why the International Order is Not Falling Apart,” I argued that this is but a Eurocentric view with an apparent air of Western triumphalism. It simplistically takes rules, regimes and institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and GATT/WTO that are indeed made by the West in the economic field as the international order itself, but these are just parts of the whole. The international order is far more complicated. It should also include different but coexisting religions, cultures, customs, national identities and social systems and above all, civilisations.

If there is no liberal international order, then there is no “democracy vs autocracy,” which is but an American strategy to rally around alliances at a time when American primacy looks shaky. According to Freedom House, liberal democracy has been in steady decline since 2006, and it risks continuing to decline. Today, the BRICS economies are already larger than those of the G7 countries. In a report on the 2020 Munich Security

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Conference, titled “Westlessness,” one of the conclusions is that not only is the world becoming less Western, but more importantly, the West itself is becoming less Western too.

Then comes China’s position in the international order. China isn’t a “revisionist power” as the US describes. In the last four decades, no other country than China has benefited more from globalisation, which is rooted in an international system characterised by an open and market-driven world economy. Therefore, it is in China’s own interests to become further integrated with the rest of the world. Of course, China’s growing strength will bring global changes. However, these changes shouldn’t be taken as an erosion of the international order, rather, they could change the world for the better. Take China’s Belt & Road Initiative for example. As it sprawls across continents, it most certainly will spread China’s influence and generate geopolitical implications. Yet it is essentially an economic project that aims at improving the underdeveloped infrastructure across the world.

\* \* \*

Much has been said about whether we have entered a new cold war. In my article written for *The Ambassador Partnership*, I hold that it is too early to tell. We shall only be able to conclude that we have entered a cold war when the prospect of an all-out war has disappeared. This is exactly what happened before—the Soviet Union collapsed without a war, so we know what took place was but a cold war. But the future is not ours to see.

It is not unusual to hear the Chinese talking about the US trying to contain China. My answer is, even if the US wants to contain China, it can’t. The United States is tired of policing the world. Therefore, it is refocusing on the new centre of gravity, which is obviously the Indo-Pacific, where the US sees endless opportunities but also a fierce strategic competitor—China.

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But America's global retrenchment will be a gradual process, in part because the US allies will hold it back. Europe's strategic autonomy won't take shape in the next ten years, if at all. Israel's confidence in being able to stabilise the Middle East in its own favour has crumbled thanks to the war in Gaza.

Two developments in the Indo-Pacific, that is, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) among the US, Japan, Australia and India, and the security partnership among Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, known as AUKUS, reflect what America intends to do in the region. Simply put, Quad is in place because of China, and AUKUS is against China. But Quad won't evolve into a military alliance because of India's position. Unless China and India have a full-blown conflict, India is unlikely to become an American ally. As a rising power and a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement, India is too proud to be dependent on any major power.

AUKUS could grow further militarily to include other American allies in the region, yet it won't become a mini-NATO, as some Chinese have asserted. Although America has over 60 allies and partners around the globe, when it comes to a war with China, those that are helpful to the US won't be more than a handful, as I wrote for the *South China Morning Post*. For example, Japan has treaty obligations to provide logistical support to the American military in a conflict, but public opinion in Japan is generally against getting ensnared in a Taiwan Strait conflict. Having fought in every major US war since World War II, Australia looks like the most reliable ally, but the Australian government has made it clear that it has not promised the US that it will take part in any conflict over Taiwan in exchange for American nuclear-powered submarines.

Another reason that it is premature to talk about a new cold war is because there is no evidence that the China-Russia partnership has turned the relationship into the most

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feared alliance in the West. Twenty days before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, China and Russia signed a statement proclaiming there were “no limits to Sino-Russian cooperation ... no forbidden zones”. I couldn’t understand why such an expression of goodwill for bilateral ties was hyped in the West. As I asked in my op-ed in the *Financial Times*, if two countries vow to develop their friendship, then how could they place limits on it? Russia is China’s largest neighbour and vice versa. For peaceful coexistence, this relationship must be amicable.

China has almost never voted against or vetoed any of the UN resolutions condemning Russia, but rather only abstained. While the US-led NATO has provided full military support to Ukraine, Beijing has provided no military aid or weapons to Moscow. True, China’s trade with Russia has helped it to skirt Western sanctions, but the trade went on before the war and none of the trading violates international rules or regimes.

Perhaps the best way to describe the relationship is to say they are like two lines in parallel, that is, however close they are, they won’t meet to become an alliance. It is not only that non-alliance allows flexibility, but also because China and Russia’s world views are subtly different even if both talk about a multipolar world order. China is the largest beneficiary of globalisation, which relies on the existing international order; Russia resents that order and considers itself a victim of it. Beijing has at least maintained a plausible relationship with Europe; this appears to be impossible for Moscow now.

With the centre of global power shifting from West to East, the Asian Century that Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping described to Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1988 appears to be dawning. Can the dragon and the elephant coexist? The Chinese and Indian militaries had a deadly brawl in the border areas in 2020 resulting in the death of four Chinese soldiers and twenty Indian soldiers—the first case with casualties in over 40 years.



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Despite regular meetings between front-line senior military officers; efforts to deconflict in the most dangerous areas along the Line of Actual Control; and even record-breaking bilateral trade, the relationship is still chilly. India places the border issue almost as a precondition for improving bilateral ties. This doesn't look like a wise policy. India doesn't only have territorial disputes with China. If Pakistan says to India that their relationship won't improve unless they agree to resolve the Kashmir issue, what will India do?

China-India relations are about more than the border issue now. India frets about China's increased economic and military presence in the Indian Ocean while China is wary of India drawing closer to the US. With China-US competition intensifying, Washington naturally needs New Delhi, just as it needed Beijing during the Cold War to counterbalance Moscow.

People often read in the media that China and India are jostling for leadership of the Global South. This is incorrect. China's economy is five times larger than India's. Even if India could sustain an average annual growth of about 5 per cent, its gross domestic product will still only be where China's is today in around 2050. So it is impossible for India to become the Global South leader if China remains a member of the Global South. In my op-ed for the *South China Morning Post*, I expressed my hope that China and India will become Global South anchors, not power competitors.

\* \* \*

Are China and the US destined for war? This should be one of the overriding questions for the twenty-first century. There are two scenarios that might trigger a conflict between the PLA and the US military—the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Contrary to what most people think, I believe the South China Sea is far more dangerous than the Taiwan Strait. In “War in

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the Taiwan Strait? It's the South China Sea, stupid", I pointed out that a war in the Taiwan Strait between China and the US is very unlikely to be triggered by an accident like we saw in the South China Sea. The Taiwan issue is so flammable, every word from Beijing and Washington would be scrutinised. However, there is no easy way to deconflict in the South China Sea. American military aircraft regularly conduct close surveillance and reconnaissance in China's exclusive economic zones. US naval vessels sail through waters off the islands and rocks in the South China Sea over which China claims sovereignty. But an ever-stronger PLA can only become more determined in checking what it believes to be American provocations. Since neither wishes to back down, I assume—and I hope I am wrong—that it is only a matter of time before another deadly collision like the one in 2001 between a Chinese jet fighter and an American spy plane reoccurs.

Although the South China Sea is more dangerous, it is hard to say that a collision at sea or in the air, even deadly, will surely trigger a conflict. The only issue that could drag China and the US into a full-blown conflict is over Taiwan. How likely is that? US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2023 and again in 2024 that a conflict with China was neither imminent nor inevitable. Such an assessment is a welcoming denial of the irresponsible remarks made by some American generals and admirals when they predicted when and how mainland China might attack Taiwan.

The conflict in Ukraine also gives people food for thought. If Nato, an alliance of 32 states, hesitates to take on Russia, then what gives the US absolute confidence to fight China far away from its shores with a few half-hearted allies on China's doorstep? China's economy is ten times larger than Russia's while its defence budget is three times bigger. The 2 million-strong PLA is the largest military in the world and the PLA Navy

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outnumbers the US Navy in ships. The only obvious advantage Russia has over China is its store of nuclear warheads, the biggest in the world. Should China decide to increase its nuclear arsenal, it is only a matter of political decision.

How can war be avoided in the Taiwan Strait? My answer is simple: let China believe peaceful reunification with the island is still possible. So far there is no indication that Beijing has lost confidence or patience. China has never announced a timetable for reunification. It is still talking about peaceful development of cross-strait relations. But provocations from either Taipei or Washington will be checked with more robust responses from the PLA. They will lead to a new, irreversible status quo that favours the mainland. For example, after former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit, the PLA conducted four days of live-fire exercises around the island. Now the median line in the Taiwan Strait that was tacitly observed by both sides no longer exists. Chinese fighter jets regularly fly to the other side of the line in different sorties.

For peace to prevail in the Taiwan Strait, as I have written in *Foreign Affairs*, the United States should reassure China that it has no intention of straying from its professed commitment to the "One China" policy. US leaders have refused to enter into direct conflict with Russia over Ukraine despite the extent of Russian transgression. Equally, they should consider war with China a red line that cannot be crossed.

\* \* \*

Once at an international seminar, I heard what I thought was the most intriguing question: what is the most ideal world for the Chinese people, in which most of the Chinese are happy, but foreigners can also survive? I don't think there is such a world. Although the twenty-first century might indeed be an Asian century, unlike Pax Britannia in the nineteenth

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century and Pax Americana in the twentieth, the twenty-first century won't be Pax Sinica. Instead, this Asian century will be characterised by the collective rise of nations, including China, India and Indonesia, etc, and regional organisations like ASEAN and BRICS.

However, this question does raise an issue of how China might live with others. Thanks to China's seemingly inexorable rise, nowadays everything that doesn't seem to have anything to do with China eventually ends up having something to do with China. This is particularly the case with the war in Ukraine—a faraway conflict that China is not involved in. China was nevertheless asked which side it would take; whether it would become a mediator between Russia and the West; and whether it might seize the opportunity to launch an attack on Taiwan. Is this unfair to China? As I wrote in the *Financial Times*, this is the price to pay for being a global power.

For China to fulfil its international responsibilities, it should start at home. First and foremost, it needs to overcome its lingering victimhood. Admittedly, victimhood is not confined to the Chinese. In 2016 and 2024, Donald Trump succeeded in making the majority of American voters believe the strongest nation on earth was in “carnage” and he was the man to “Make America Great Again.”

For China, its victimhood over the “century of humiliation” stems from the Opium War in 1840. But the century of humiliation should have ended with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 when Chairman Mao Zedong declared that “the Chinese people have stood up.” I wrote for the *South China Morning Post* that, rather than a victim, China today is the envy of the world. China must leave its past behind and embrace its strength. Victimhood is not the foundation for patriotism. It leads to nationalism, populism, and isolationism. This is the last thing China wants.

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A global power has two things that are not found in a small country—huge overseas interests and greater international responsibilities. In “The future of the PLA,” in *Foreign Policy*, I argue that in spite of China’s territorial disputes with some countries, a major power like China should look beyond its borders into the horizon to protect China’s overseas interests and shoulder more international obligations.

The need to protect China’s overseas interests is easy to understand, but what exactly are China’s international responsibilities? China’s success in restoring diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a turning point in Chinese diplomacy. It indicates not only China’s willingness but also capabilities in shouldering its international obligations. The signing of the Beijing Declaration by 14 Palestinian factions is another good example of how China can play a role as an honest broker in a most volatile region. In my interview with *Time* magazine, I said that when China started to reform and open up, it was trying to “cross the river by feeling the stones on the riverbed,” as Deng Xiaoping said, but now China is entering the ocean. You can’t feel the seabed. These are uncharted waters, but there is no turning back.

As for the PLA, I hope its international responsibilities will be confined exclusively to humanitarian operations. So far, all the military operations of the Chinese military overseas, be it peacekeeping, counter-piracy or disaster relief, are invariably humanitarian in nature. This is not accidental; it is a careful choice. These military operations other than war will help war-stricken nations, reduce casualties to a minimum level, but won’t turn China into a warring party.

China’s peacekeeping is the best example. China is the largest troop-contributing country among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and the second-largest financial contributor to peacekeeping. In “How China can improve UN

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peacekeeping” in *Foreign Affairs*, I mentioned that China has good reason to beef up its peacekeeping commitments because it serves China’s image as a responsible nation on a peaceful rise. And two of peacekeeping’s guiding principles—impartiality and the “non-use of force except in self-defense and defense of mandate”—resonate with China’s foreign policy and military ethos.

\* \* \*

In the last four and half decades, China has changed a few defence policies, such as not stationing troops abroad, not establishing military bases overseas and not conducting joint exercises with foreign armed forces. However, some still remain, and I hope they will continue to be upheld in the years to come.

1. Caution in use of force. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, China was involved in wars and conflict virtually every decade until the late 1970s when China started to reform and open up. China’s rise in the last four decades is a miracle in human history in that few, if any, major powers have risen so peacefully. It is made possible thanks in no small way to Beijing’s restraint in use of force in spite of serious challenges such as bombs hitting the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, when NATO was bombing Yugoslavia, and the collision of Chinese and American military planes in the South China Sea.

The China–India clash in the Galwan Valley in 2020 is most unfortunate, yet there are still positives. In this deadly brawl with stones, wooden clubs and fists, neither side attempted to shoot at the other. This shows the confidence-building measures made in a litany of agreements have worked to a certain extent. Some people may point out that the Chinese coast guard used water cannons against Filipino ships in 2024. But that is not

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exactly use of force. It is an effort to deter the Filipinos from violating their promise by carrying building materials to fortify a rusted Filipino war ship into a permanent base in the disputed Ren Ai Jiao/Second Thomas Shoal.

For over four decades, China's military expenditure has been lower than 2% of its GDP, a NATO standard for its member states. Most probably it will remain at this level short of a war. At a time when NATO members are being pushed by the US to spend 2% of their GDP on defence, and some of China's neighbours like Japan and India have drastically increased their defence budgets, China's sustainable and predictable defence budget says a lot about China's self-control and self-confidence. This is important for the stability of the region.

2. Don't seek spheres of influence. Many people confuse two things—influence and spheres of influence. I have argued that precisely because China's influence, especially in the economic field, is already ubiquitous around the world, it doesn't need spheres of influence that are costly and difficult to maintain.

If China doesn't seek spheres of influence, then it doesn't need to build many military bases overseas. Twenty years ago, some international analysts assumed China would adopt a "string of pearls" strategy of building bases stretching from the Middle East to southern China. This is proven wrong. So far, the only Chinese military base overseas is a logistic base in Djibouti [*Ed - In 2024, China reportedly has outposts in Cambodia and Tajikistan. The Chinese government has not publicly acknowledged the existence of these bases.*] Even if China might need to have a few more bases abroad, so long as Chinese military operations overseas remain humanitarian in nature, the PLA doesn't need to have many bases.

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3. Don't seek military alliances. If a group of small nations comes into alliance to resist major powers, the rationale is understandable. But if, say, the US, the strongest nation on earth, would ally itself with other countries, apparently it is not for self-defence. NATO is not only a military organisation, it is also a political one. It is a stick of the West to defend and spread its values. It needs "threats" to survive and thrive. The fact that Finland and Sweden joined NATO might prove its popularity, but as I wrote at the invitation of *The Economist*, the more popular NATO becomes, the more insecure Europe will be. Europe's security is essentially how NATO and Russia might coexist. French President Macron once said NATO is braindead. I said to *Die Zeit* and Bloomberg that it is a zombie that is still walking.
4. Adhere to no-first-use of nuclear weapons. Of the five nuclear states that have signed the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), China is the only country that has declared not to be the first to use nuclear weapons and not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states or nuclear-weapon-free zones. In *Foreign Policy*, I argue that all nuclear powers could afford to adopt a formal no-first-use policy—taking the moral high ground without reducing their capabilities for retaliation.

In Europe, NATO can start with a unilateral no-first-use pledge against Russia as a gesture of goodwill. Even if such an offer isn't immediately reciprocated by Russia, it might begin to thaw tensions. As a second step, NATO could pledge to halt any further expansion of its alliance in exchange for Moscow adopting a no-first-use policy. In Asia, China and the United States could reach a similar agreement, thus de-escalating potential conflicts involving



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US allies as well as the dangers that could be provoked through accidental collisions at sea or in the air.

\* \* \*

The essays and opinion pieces in this book are selected from what I have written in the last eleven years. My life is not one of a scholar. Before I retired from the Chinese military as a senior colonel in 2020 and started to work as a senior fellow at the Center for International Security and Strategy Tsinghua University, I had already worked for 41 years in the Chinese military. For the last 27 years, I worked in different posts in the Ministry of National Defense of China on foreign affairs. I was desk officer and then desk chief for South Asia, Deputy Director General of West Asia and Africa Bureau and then Deputy Director General of General Planning Bureau of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense, Chinese Defense Attaché to the Republic of Namibia and Director of the Centre for Security Cooperation in the Office for International Military Cooperation, Ministry of National Defense.

These experiences helped me tremendously when I started writing in 2013 as a hobby in my spare time. Gradually, my articles started to draw attention, in part because they were written in English and most of them were published overseas, and in part because Chinese voices were rare in the international media. When I was invited to King's College London in 2018 to give a talk, the organiser told me how they lamented that over the years, most people talking about China were foreigners, so they decided to invite Chinese people to come and talk about China! I then made a speech on the role of the PLA in safeguarding China's overseas interests and shouldering its international obligations. I eventually turned my remarks into an essay and had it published in *Foreign Policy* magazine, titled "The Future of the PLA".

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Half of the articles collected in this book were published by *South China Morning Post* where I am a SCMP expert. And some were published in mainstream international media outlets such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, *The Australian* and *Die Zeit*. My two essays in *The New York Times* were published on the front pages of the newspaper. The second one “In Afghanistan, China is ready to step into the void” was highlighted by the Deputy International Editor, Yara Bayoumy, who kindly wrote that I have a unique vantage point to clarify how Beijing is positioning itself in Afghanistan. This was a great honour for me. It also reflected how eager the world is to hear Chinese views in world affairs.

Some of these articles have made waves globally. *China Daily* informed me that my op-ed, “China’s subs in Indian Ocean no worry to India,” was cited by over one hundred international media outlets within four days. I think this has something to do with the fact that this was the first time that Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean had been mentioned in a leading state-run Chinese newspaper.

My essay in *The Economist*, “Senior Colonel Zhou Bo says the war in Ukraine will accelerate the geopolitical shift from West to East,” was among the earliest Chinese views expressed in the international arena on the Russo-Ukrainian war. In my essay, I started by asking: If the enemy of my enemy is my friend, is the enemy of my friend also my enemy? My answer is: not necessarily. On the one hand, China is Russia’s strategic partner. On the other, China is the largest trading partner of Ukraine. Beijing therefore tries painstakingly to strike a balance in its response to the war between two of its friends.

Three years have passed, and some of my assessments have proven tenable. For instance, I argued that this looks like a protracted war; Putin will fight until he can declare some sort of

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“victory” that involves Ukraine’s acceptance that Crimea is part of Russia, its promise not to join NATO and the independence of the two “republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk.

My most influential op-ed is on how “China can use its leverage with Russia to prevent a nuclear war,” published in the *Financial Times* in October 2022. At the end of my article, I said in the most straightforward manner that if Putin now opens a nuclear Pandora’s box that was kept closed even during the Cold War, it would be a moment of infinite stupidity. I further argued that China can help the world by simply telling Putin: don’t use nuclear weapons, Mr President. I am happy that not using nuclear weapons in Europe is now a crystal-clear Chinese policy towards the war in Ukraine.

If China’s rise is already a given, then can a Global China help to make the world safer, if not better? This is the ultimate question. As I have expressed in this book, my best hope for my country in the twenty-first century, is that it will maintain some pleasant features of the Tang Dynasty. Tang China was prosperous, multiethnic, cosmopolitan and inclusive. It was home to “foreign” religions ranging from Buddhism, Nestorianism, Zoroastrianism and Islam to Manichaeism. It shows that a great power that is next to none can be confident but humble, and loved rather than feared.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is a selection of my writings from the past eleven years.

Although the views expressed in the book are completely mine, I am deeply grateful to the Office for International Military Cooperation of the Ministry of National Defense, where I worked for nearly three decades in different positions, handling the PLA's external relations with foreign armed forces.

I also wish to express my heartfelt thanks to the Center for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University and its China Forum, where I have been working as a senior fellow since 2020, following my retirement from the military. Working in academia, in spite of its own challenges, has been a pleasant change for someone like me, who has spent a long and disciplined time in the military. I have hugely benefited from the interactions I have had with my colleagues. I received a lot of useful advice and tremendous support from Ambassador Fu Ying, former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and founding director of the center; Professor Da Wei, director of the center; Xiao Qian and Chen Qi, deputy directors of the center. I also had support wherever possible from Xu Zhengrong, Wang Jie, Han Hua, Guo Jia, Xu Xinyun, Wu Yiqi, Zheng Lefeng, Shen

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Qingqing, Chen Xi, Qian Jiatong, Shi Chang, and Liu Jiawen. Some of them have since left the center. I understand this is how life goes, but I am glad they are thriving elsewhere.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents, my wife and my daughter. They have provided love and support every day, and have been patient listeners and readers of my writings for the past eleven years.

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**ZHOU BO** is a senior fellow at Tsinghua University's Center for International Security and Strategy; Senior Colonel (Retired) in the People's Liberation Army; and a regular PLA speaker at the Munich Security Conference and the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue. Beyond his education at several Chinese institutions, he has studied at Harvard University and the University of Westminster, and holds an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Cambridge.

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