

## 2034: A Novel of the Next World War

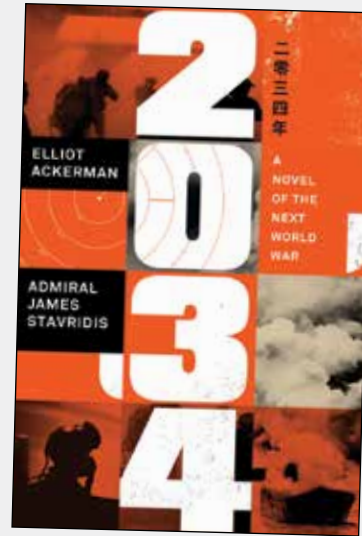
By Elliot Ackerman and James Stavridis

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This is a thriller that carries a cautionary note for those interested in national security who worry about the risks of human miscalculation. The point that the book makes is that in the emerging threat environment, when state players rely heavily upon technology to improve military capabilities, the human factor remains central.

The tale is not new. World War I ignited arguably because Germany's military feared that it must act or lose what it viewed as military superiority, and then the key players misread the intentions of one another and miscalculated what everyone else would do. The point is important and Ackerman and Stavridis merit a lot of credit for packaging their caution in an exciting thriller that keeps the pages turning. As impressive, the story unfolds through the eyes and actions of well-articulated characters.

Knowing Admiral Stavridis and being familiar with his world view, the book does not predict that World War III will break out. Their aim is to impress upon readers the risks in current trends and the failure for all sides to comprehend how one another view their equities and their capabilities. In an era in which major competitors are rushing headlong into building up capabilities for armed conflict, one must recognize that while we cannot afford to

let a nation like China trump our capabilities, better capabilities carry heightened risks.

Since the book is a thriller, it's not fair to give away too much of the story. That spoils the fun. One thing I admire is that they were careful to avoid attaching angels' wings or forked tails to the main characters. This is not Rambo-On-The-High-Seas. In the book, China's defense attache in Washington, Admiral Lin Bao is half American and studied at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport. He is depicted objectively. He is neither good nor evil. He is a Chinese nationalist who admires the U.S. and harbors ambitions of living here.

But he doesn't flinch from carrying out his duty as he sees it: to forge a strategy that exploits a manufactured crisis in the South China Sea to advance national security interests.

In the book's characterization, Beijing's top strata of decisionmakers play hardball. The winners live like royalty. But their existence reminds me of the crack someone made about whether to impose term limits on members of the U.S. Congress: combine term limits and the death penalty. Officials can run for re-election, but if they lose, they die. Lin Bao

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grasps the stakes and he is no fool. He plays to win.

The central characters on the U.S. side include cigar-smoking Commodore, Sarah Hunt, an American, the first to confront China's strategy that roots itself in its recognized warfighting doctrine of stealth and surprise, backed up by its notion of lawfare. Lawfare—justifying action through China's own, often strained, interpretation of governing law in order to ensure that Chinese actions occupy the moral high ground. Mischief Reef, an islet twelve nautical miles off the mainland's coast, is well named for what happens.

In the meantime, the U.S. President—here is where you know this is fiction, not docu-drama—has been freshly elected an Independent. In the real world, good luck on that. But she is a great character, and how the authors handle the dilemma that confronts her is artful and moves the story along. Air Force Major Chris “Wedge” Mitchell is aptly named for the role he plays, in piloting an F-35 whose flight path opens up an opportunity for Iran. And there is a pivotal character I will not mention, as that character's appearance is a surprise and represents the kind of unconventional thinking that mark an original novel.

This book does not fit into the Tom Clancy techno-thriller genre. It is a political thriller, more in the vein of P.W. Singer and August Cole's *Ghost Fleet* and General Sir Richard Shirreff's *2017: War with Russia*. In all three books, the authors explore the strategic implications of potential dystopian military scenarios rooted in a failure to understand what opponents intend or their worldview. Shirreff's book focuses on Russia, and argues that the path to deterrence or prevailing in armed conflict lies in striking a balance between robust conventional and nuclear arms. Singer and Cole take a more global view in which Russia teams up with a post-Communist China to launch a technologically sophisticated attack against the United States in the Pacific.

*Ghost Fleet* and *2034* somewhat echo each other

in their examination of how modern technology can have a substantial impact on the warfighting capacity of the United States. But while *Ghost Fleet* struck me as ultimately a thriller with somewhat implausible plot points that comprise its matrix, *2034* presents a plausible scenario rooted in what we know and how a new competitor for global influence might shape outcomes.

I enjoyed the scenarios that the authors envisioned and how they allowed events to unfold. An important point the book makes is that both China and the United States should think again before allowing ambition and the flaws that make us human to dominate political or military strategy. In the minds of those who initiated World War I, matters would move swiftly and smoothly to a harmonious conclusion. Warfare qualifies as none of those things. It is messy and unpredictable, with knock-on consequences that vindicate the views of those who agree that “give war a chance” sounds fine when spewed from a political soapbox, while in reality it can potentially lead to catastrophe.

Much of the discourse about U.S.-China competition revolves around whether we should characterize China as a competitor or rival, or an opponent or adversary. The click-bait stories highlight technological changes, such as what Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley described to Congress as a “Sputnik” event in China's launching of a hypersonic speed missile that could circle the earth. The revelation that the hypersonic nuclear weapon fired a second missile while traveling five times the speed of sound reportedly caught the Pentagon off-guard.

China's current warfare approach, aimed at achieving military dominance by 2049 to support China's ambition of establishing global economic supremacy by that date—the so-called China Dream—roots itself in efforts to seize global leadership by developing new military technology. China sees taking the lead in developing artificial

intelligence as key to achieving its strategic goals. In the United States Nicolas Chaillan—the first Chief Software Officer for the Air Force—resigned after claiming that ill-judged U.S. priorities had given China an unsurmountable lead in Artificial Intelligence and U.S. failure to give cyber security proper focus.

Others have challenged that conclusion, but the point is, our military and political leaders get hung up on the absolute importance of technology in determining outcomes in engagements and conflicts. The debate reminds one of proclamations that the “revolution in military affairs,” a military theory of warfare connected to technological and organizational recommendations for military reform, had somehow changed the nature of warfare, rather than merely affecting the ways and means for executing strategy.

Ways and means are important, and building our warfighting capabilities is essential in keeping pace with Chinese competition. But technology has not changed the nature of warfare, so well described by Count Carl von Clausewitz’s “holy trinity” of will, chance, and cause, and their interaction with the frictions of warfare. What Ackerman and Stavridis want us to do is remember that wars are fought between humans, and technology serves as tools—as ways and means—for the conduct of warfare and achievement of strategy.

In that view, it is the judgments—or miscalculations—of humans that propel us into war, not machines. Thucydides observed that three factors motivate nations to go to war: fear, pride, and national interest. His views have ignited long debates, but it seems evident enough that pride—or national honor, or nationalism, take your pick—can touch off armed conflict. Indeed, a key theme for Thucydides was how Athenian pride fueled its own nationalist imperialism and shaped the way they thought about the Athenian empire. Hubris produced devastation.

Chinese nationalism is driving that nation’s threat to attack Taiwan and driving the China Dream. Pride can give rise to anger and hubris and fuel arrogance as well as blind players into overconfidence. Technology can be so spectacular that it blinds a military to its strategic limitations. Ackerman and Stavridis recognize that, and the cautionary notes they strike insightfully express those views. Technology matters, but the exercise by leaders of sound judgment and avoiding strategic miscalculation matter more. This a fine book, as fiction and as a clear lesson offered without preaching. Highly recommended. [PRISM](#)