Bertrand VENARD 2013

Book review:
Edward LUTTWAK 2012
The rise of China vs. the logic of strategy
M@n@gement, 16(4), 515-522.
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Edward LUTTWAK (2012)
The rise of China vs. the logic of strategy.
Cambridge, MA : Belknap Press.

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INTRODUCTION

When the prolific and renowned author Edward Luttwak published his new strategic treatise, experts in the subject and political scientists pounced on his new work, eager to discover an opinion that could change the field. The excitement generated by this author comes from his extensive bibliography and his entrenched positions. Edward Luttwak usually builds his arguments in terms of strategic and historical analysis. He expands the areas usually covered by his subjects and because of this he is sometimes labeled by recognized academics as a superficial “outsider”. There was strong criticism of his major works on the Roman Empire (1976) and the Byzantine Empire (2009). One of his theses involves the importance of paradoxical strategies, strategies that are not intuitive, the best example of which is perhaps the Roman aphorism: “si vis pacem, para bellum” (to make peace, prepare for war) (1987). In his latest book, Luttwak develops a paradoxical strategy for contemporary China. Before giving a critical analysis of this new writing, it is necessary to present his arguments.

THE ARGUMENTS OF THE BOOK

Luttwak begins his book by reassuring his readers saying that China will never exceed the United States in military power. Due to China's booming economy, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has seen its resources grow rapidly (over 9% per year over a long period) (2012). However, according to Luttwak, the domination of the world by China, “eclipsing the USA”, is unlikely because of the likely reactions of concerned countries. Indeed, demonstrations of power can only provoke the reaction of revolt and not submission in these countries. This would undeniably be detrimental to the power of the Middle Kingdom. Luttwak stresses that the logic of a strategy cannot be linear: a rising military threat implies resistance against it and this results in a loss of influence. If the threat persists, the threatened powers attempt to arm themselves and/or gather allies. Even if China becomes more democratic, if it becomes too powerful, it will provoke hostile reactions that will reduce its hegemony.
For Luttwak, although the risk of global Chinese supremacy is low, China may become more and more threatening, as evidenced by its many border disputes with countries as diverse as India, Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines. The increased power of China can be explained by several factors: its financial resources, the 2008 crisis that has undermined many countries (including the United States), the individual strategies of some Chinese leaders and a general belief of the Chinese leaders in the ability of a threatening attitude to provide better bargaining power.

The warlike character of China, Luttwak suggests, is the result of its “autism”. He describes China as an autistic nation (2012) with a “Strategic Acquired Deficiency Syndrome” (2012). By this analogy, he means that the country pays more attention to internal than external issues and makes decisions on international policy on the basis of simplified and schematic representations of reality. Without quoting it, Luttwak seems to be a supporter of Baumard’s thesis concerning the strategic vacuum of the twentieth century (2012). In Baumard’s sense, China could be an example of such a strategic vacuum. China’s “autism” is reinforced by its idiosyncratic history. For more than two millennia, China has developed a system of tribute. This is a system of exchange between the dominant power (Imperial China), which provides benevolence and security (symbolized respectively by gifts to dominated countries and the enslavement of their leaders) and the “inferior nations” that must obey it. This domination has gradually developed through corruption and ideological indoctrination. Luttwak points out that the increase of Chinese power (in the various dimensions of the economy, the military and diplomacy) causes reactions by threatened countries. Thus, in the face of rising Chinese power, the author highlights, in separate chapters, the negative attitudes towards China of Japan (Chapter 14), India, Australia (Chapter 13), Vietnam (Chapter 15) and the Philippines (Chapter 19). Nations’ negative views of China have expanded from centering on its international relations to including its economic role as well. Luttwak cites a study by the BBC that shows a dramatic increase in anti-Chinese sentiment between 2005 and 2011 (2012).

To understand the geopolitical risk posed by China, the author makes a historical analogy (although he doubts the relevance of this argument) between the rise of China in the early twenty-first century and that of Germany in the late nineteenth century (2012). The German development led to a reaction by threatened nations (Britain, France and Russia), which ultimately resulted in Germany losing the military confrontation of the First World War. The solution advocated by Edward Luttwak is for China to adopt the paradoxical strategy of limiting its military growth. This strategy is difficult to enact for several reasons: China’s formidable economic power, the myopia of the country and its elites (and their “autism”), power games within the PLA, the weight of the public sector and the influence of Chinese history (see Chapter 8). Culture is yet another factor in the refusal to adopt a temperate strategy. Chinese leaders are inspired by stories and writings that describe the rise of the country. However, Luttwak points out the inadequacy of attempting to use the elliptical precepts of ancient Chinese texts (such as Sun Tzu’s The Art of War) in the development of China’s current strategy. In particular, he dismisses the concepts of causing crises in order to push rivals to the negotiating table and of using deception in interstate relations.
Instead of seeing its history as a source of inspiration, the Middle Kingdom should take into account its historical failures, many of which arose from its incompetence in dealing with other states. China shows an evident self-inflicted congruity, i.e. the absence of learning from previous failures (Baumard, 2012). Luttwak points to the example of the domination of China by the Manchus, in spite of their numerical inferiority to the Han, a failure that has not pushed the Chinese to real introspective analysis.

After presenting, over several chapters, various powers and their attitudes towards potential Chinese hegemony, Luttwak concludes with a description of several U.S. strategies for dealing with China. The first policy is that the U.S. Department of the Treasury promote the economic development of the U.S. By buying massive amounts of U.S. Treasuries bonds, China can put pressure on the U.S. government through the Department of the Treasury. “Nullity of the department of commerce”, “the absence of any policy department and dedicated to the industry” mean that U.S. government policy is driven in part by the Treasury. The buying by China of U.S. Treasury bonds is damaging to the U.S. as it increases the overvaluation of the dollar against the yuan, accelerating U.S. trade deficit even faster. The second strategy advocated by the U.S. Department of State (the U.S. Ministry of Foreign Affairs) is confrontation (the creation of anti-Chinese alliances and the pursuit of an ideological war) backed by elements of cooperation. For example, the Department of State pushes a strong alliance with India against China, possibly supported by the sales of sensitive military equipments.

The US Department of Defense (DOD) considers China as “the main enemy” of the United States. The DOD is an advocate of a third strategy, involving a hard line towards China and an increasing of investment in military technologies on the U.S. side. Luttwak notes in passing the stealing by China of key American technologies.

In conclusion, the author recommends, in addition to alliances, a geo-economic strategy for the United States, reducing Chinese imports, lowering the maximum export of raw materials from the U.S to China and preventing technology transfers to China.

The main thesis of Edward Luttwak’s argument is twofold:
- He advocates a paradoxical strategy (paradoxical in that it is alien to ordinary linear logic) for China’s international relations: to continue economic development without accelerating military development.
- He recommends a geo-economic strategy for the U.S. of using economic weapons against the Chinese threat.

To support his thesis, Luttwak repeats it throughout the book, multiplying the indicative cases. The book consists of 21 chapters. The chapters are sometimes very short but they are all important parts of his overall demonstration.
THE AUTHOR

Born in Romania in 1942, Edward Luttwak is an American specialist in strategy and geopolitics. After studying at the London School of Economics and Political Science and getting a PhD in International Relations from The Johns Hopkins University, he began an academic career in Europe and the USA at The Johns Hopkins and Georgetown Universities. He has held positions as a senior advisor on international strategy issues for many U.S. defense agencies. He has also worked in private and public intelligence agencies1.

As stated in the preface of one of his books, Luttwak is a “Republican neoconservative, among the most influential in the U.S.” (2009). Since 2008, he has been working as a Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a bipartisan U.S. institution (CSIS, 2011). He is a prolific author and often puts forward iconoclastic theses, such as his virulent attack against Barack Obama in 20082. Among his best known works are Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace (1987) and The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century AD to the Third (1976).

Luttwak's position is a highly subjective one: he is an American neoconservative with a militarist ideology but supported by great culture and a deep multiculturalism and multilingualism that allows him direct access to original sources and is uncommon among American intellectuals.

STRENGTHS OF HIS ANALYSIS

The strengths of the book are five in number and are given below in no order of importance.

The book is easy to read, with a clear and simple style. The ideas are well developed. Simultaneously, the author cites numerous sources to make his argument as relevant as it can be. He makes reference, for example, to an exciting report on military strategy in Australia from 2009.

The book is in tune with the latest news on the topic. For example, Luttwak’s book helps understand the current enthusiasm (expressed by an electoral victory) for the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party, believers in a firm line against China. The appointment of Shinzo Abe as Prime Minister of Japan on December 26th 2012 is an example of the rise of anti-Chinese sentiments in some countries and their desire to form a strong alliance with the United States. Shinzo Abe has announced plans to change the 1947 constitution of Japan in order to rebuild the military power of his country.

Luttwak provides an analytical framework for the international policies of China and various countries like the U.S. For example, in his last chapter, the author explains the various attitudes of the different American Ministries towards China.

Finally, the book recognizes the importance of international economic relations with China. Luttwak is one of the main believers in the theory of geo-economics.


2. For Luttwak, Obama is a President Apostate: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/12/opinion/12luttwak.html?_r=1&ref=opinion
THE WEAKNESSES OF THE BOOK

Luttwak’s book has numerous weaknesses. Due to the author’s background, we should take this book as a lobbying work, attempting to defend a very pro-American thesis. This thesis is deeply biased in its treatment of sources, showing a blatant disregard for China (sometimes by grotesque simplification) and failing to recognize or confront opposing theoretical models. Luttwak’s purpose appears to be to encourage countries threatened by China to join a strategic alliance led by the U.S. This requires converting them to the idea of a Chinese threat and the opportunity of an alliance with the U.S. As Colin Gray points out, security is a matter of interpretation, rather than reality (2012). As a result, it is imperative for the U.S. to enhance their strategic position by influencing other nations on crucial matters. As a lobbying work, the book is not neutral and carries a very focused message. It is viscerally pro-U.S., especially in its treatment of different countries’ international relations with China. So many chapters end with recommendations for the geostrategic benefit of the U.S. For example, Luttwak suggests that Japan, as China is its biggest threat, must increase its military force to preserve its alliance with the United States and be able to participate in an anti-Chinese coalition and ensure the safety of East Asia. From a semantic point of view, the author uses more flattering terms for the U.S. than for China. This is clear when, for example, Luttwak writes: “when the United States were expanding their influence in Southeast Asia after 1945, they were almost universally perceived as a generous power”. When describing China, Luttwak speaks of “indoctrination”, “deception”, “threat”, “autism” and “authoritarian Confucian values”. The vast majority of sources seem to serve the viewpoint that the author wishes to demonstrate. If contrary ideas are advanced, they are quickly swept over. Deliberately taking the point of view of his country against China, Luttwak always uses evidence against the Chinese power. An obvious example is the use of an Australian military report published in 2009. Luttwak cites this document to show that some countries feel threatened by China and have adopted a policy of alliance with the U.S. However, the author fails to mention that a key point of this Australian report is to highlight the need for Australia to be more independent and rely less on the U.S. for its security: “the Government has decided that Australia’s defence policy should continue to be founded on the principle of self-reliance in the direct defence of Australia and in relation to our unique strategic interests, but with a capacity to do more when required, consistent with those strategic interests that we might share with others, and within the limits of our resources” (2009: 12). The sources used to describe Chinese military power are incomplete because they are given in absolute terms without comparison to the efforts of other countries (particularly the U.S.) and without being put in relation to the size (in area and population) of China. Thus, according to America’s China Economic and Security Review Commission, China’s military spending totaled $106 billion in 2011. These expenses are impressive but Luttwak fails to note that the U.S. spent more than $665 billion in the same year, more than 40% of global spending (Greenberg, 2012). With an area of approximately 9.7 million km², China has a population 4.2 times greater than that of the USA but spends six times less on its defense. The per capita difference is 1 to 25.
Luttwak uses the argument of “national Autism” when presenting his attitude towards China. However, “autistic” could equally well be used to describe the behavior of the United States, starting at the micro level with the “autism” of one of its representatives: Edward Luttwak. Is writing a book about a country, its history and its mindset, without being an expert in any of these areas, not a form of “autism”? As noted by the author himself, he presents the subject of China’s international relations as an expert in strategy and not a sinologist. Thus, the topic of “ancient Chinese thought” is limited to the work of Sun Tzu, which seems rather insulting to the country that invented printing. One only has to delve into the writings of a sinologist such as François Jullien to understand the depth and complexity of Chinese thought (1997 /2002). Luttwack describes some facets of the geostrategic problems posed by China too quickly or not at all. Thus, he does not at any time address the influence of Chinese networks in other countries, including those of Southeast Asia. Similarly, no chapter is devoted exclusively to relations between China and India. Instead, the author focuses on China’s relations with Mongolia and Norway. This criticism of the book’s superficiality reaches its climax in the fact that the author gives absolutely no analysis of decision-making in Chinese geopolitics. For Luttwak, China acts almost as a single agent, completely based in Beijing and bound to inevitably follow the wrong strategy. Luttwak should have analyzed the decision-making mechanisms in China in the field of international relations, the criteria for these decisions and the power games and alliances that occur in this field (Legro, 1997). This analysis of international relations is all the more relevant as China’s positions on international matters are often ambiguous and changing (Ekman, 2012). China’s strategy is a mixture of socialist long term planning and short term pragmatism, taking into account the constraints of the situation, close to the effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2008; Silberzahn, 2013). In spite of his academic background, by becoming an apostle of a single view, Luttwak fails to do serious theoretical work. He does not present opposing arguments and therefore does not emphasize their contributions and limitations in order to allow the reader to accept or reject his own position. The author’s argument should be based on descriptions of geopolitical situations presented in a way that focuses on systematic and rigorous scientific evidence. Luttwak’s objective is not to contribute to political science but to support the following implicit assumption: the U.S., with their two centuries of history, are more experienced in international relations than China, with their 4,000 years of civilization, so consequently world domination is normal when it is American but dangerous when it is Chinese3. Why should the U.S. hold global economic, political and military domination but not China? This essential question to the current geopolitical debate is not addressed by the author. To reject Chinese global supremacy, Luttwak should have developed the following arguments: its undemocratic nature, the virtual absence of press freedom, the weakness of its civil society, the magnitude of corruption and its non-compliance with the rule of law. These democratic criteria are crucial for the acceptance of U.S. world supremacy. China cannot take the position of world leader without them.

With further analysis, Edward Luttwak should have made more efforts to demonstrate that his theory of geo-economics will have the results he expects. For example, contrary to Luttwak’s view, a trade war could in fact lead to a military confrontation. The reader is not totally convinced because they are

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3 In an interview with an Australian TV channel, Luttwak said at the end of 2012: “The Chinese have no experience in international relations”. Source: http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2012/s3597882.htm
able to imagine alternate strategies to those suggested by Luttwak. Thus, faced with the rising power of the Chinese military, the “threatened” countries could make the opposite choice to the one advocated by Luttwak (a revolt against China). They could instead strengthen their economic partnerships with the Middle Kingdom, making China more dependent on them and thus more vulnerable to them. Avoiding the idea that threatened countries have a static binary choice between the U.S. and China, another geopolitical position could have been described: a set of dynamic alliances without the U.S. or China between countries such as India and Japan. Instead of feeling threatened by the Chinese peril, Asian countries could also use the rivalry between China and the U.S. for their own profits, raising the stakes between the two powers. Moreover, Luttwak gives no significant place to strategies that do not appear as a principle of the rule: the USA should hold domination. Compare this to Australian political scientist Hugh White, who proposed avoiding a conflict involving the U.S. and China by forming a concert of nations made up of China, the US, Japan and India, with none of them taking dominance. In general, the author does not give necessary space in his book to the consideration of a strategy of cooperation between the U.S. and China, with the U.S. helping China to become a responsible nation conscious of its role in the international order. This thesis, however, is defended by various other authors (Bergsten et al., 2008). In the same way as during the Cold War (Hazelgrove, 2013), the role of diplomacy could be crucial to avoiding a war between the two giants (Morini, 2011). The appointment in Beijing in 2012 of a U.S. Ambassador of Chinese origins is certainly a step in this direction. And furthermore, the actual U.S. President is Barack Obama and not, as Luttwak might wish, a neoconservative one.

4. In a post on the Foreign Affairs website, Hazelgrove quotes H. Kissinger as saying: “with regard to forming a new relationship with the PRC, it was necessary for the US to move beyond ideological divisions, or realist conceptions of power, toward a new order in which stability would result, not from clashing and competing interests, but from the evolution of habits of mutual restraint, coexistence, and, ultimately, cooperation”.

And also the recent article in The Atlantic: http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/11/what-the-next-us-ambassador-to-china-must-do/281819/
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