

**2034: A Novel of the Next World War** by Elliot Ackerman  
and James Stavridis, New York: Penguin Press, 2021, pp. 320

*Alok Deb\**

For a book published in 2021 and preceding the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, *2034: A Novel of the Next World War* by Elliot Ackerman and Admiral James Stavridis is remarkably topical and prescient. It forecasts a future where great power ambition and a sense of infallibility of a superpower lure it towards utilising ‘compellence’ as a strategy towards attaining its goal of world domination, leading to predictable consequences. This conflict, interestingly, does not throw up the expected winners or losers; it on the contrary, leads to the establishment of a new world order, which comes close to embodying the Cold War phrase, ‘Nuclear Armageddon’.

The book covers a wide swath of geopolitics and international relations, which will definitely resonate with practitioners and students of these subjects, including those serving in the military. Be it the heightened tensions in the Taiwan Straits or the South China Sea or the lows in US–Russia or US–Iran relations with attendant consequences for the rest of the world, the book is contemporary in its outlook as it discusses ‘conflict triggers’ and ‘red lines’ that are relevant today as much as in the near future. In its essence, the book provides lessons in escalation dominance where there is no peer competitor, as well as, one

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of escalation control, where peers have to manage a situation that is fluid and where a slightest misstep can have major consequences.

The book provides detailed insights into the manner in which decision-making is undertaken at the level of China's Central Military Commission (CMC) and the national security apparatus of the US, thereby providing a comparative perspective. Of particular interest is the authors' narration of the procedure followed in China with regard to the passage of executive orders to a field commander, which apparently are passed collectively by a large number of state organs to diffuse accountability and manage uncertainties. The ruthlessness with which Communist regimes deal with disgraced commanders is also depicted in detail in the book, with discussion of a case of a protagonist who meets an inglorious fate. Equally riveting are discussions of the machinations of officials in the US whose sole objective and focus is to retain American paramourcy by all means possible.

Two incidents, first in the South China Sea involving an exchange between a Chinese vessel and an American flotilla on a 'Freedom of Navigation' mission and second concerning a United States Air Force (USAF) F-35 fighter on a mission over West Asia become the *casus belli* for the war described in the book. The novel's layout is similar to Humphrey Hawksley's 'Dragon Fire', reading like a thriller as it switches locales where events unfold at a rapid pace; taking the reader on a tour of the world's capitals—Beijing, Washington D.C. and New Delhi in 2034. While the inability of the authors to meaningfully depict all global players in this short narrative is understandable, the absence of any role for the European Union (EU), Britain or Russia in subsequent conflict resolution provides an interesting insight into the authors' perspective of a future multipolar world. Here, one must make allowances for this worldview, given that the ongoing Ukraine war and its continued fallout have not been factored in.

The sequencing of actions and counter-actions as the war unfolds, as also the rationale provided by the concerned actors for the same, clearly reflect the authors' backgrounds as former military men with a foothold in academia and public life. They seem to have brought the sum of their experiences to weave a believable war scenario covering the Indo-Pacific. A major portion of the book deals with the South China Sea, which becomes a battleground for the Chinese and the American navies, followed by China's invasion of Taiwan. Throughout these actions what emerges (again, from the authors' perspective) is the huge lead that

China would take in little over a decade over the rest of the world in its offensive cyber and electronic warfare capabilities. In the book, these capacities enable Chinese fleets to 'go dark', that is, effect communication blackouts, carry out electronic eavesdropping, 'cyber cloaking' and satellite spoofing—permitting them to execute their missions almost undetected and unopposed. Overall, the book envisages a coordinated Chinese approach to successfully execute a 'cyber offensive'. Given the purported capabilities of China's Strategic Support Force (SSF), this is a theme with unsettling possibilities for the future—graphically depicted through the example of a latest generation fighter jet whose onboard computer, sensors, controls and weapon systems are rendered useless as the adversary hacks into these and takes control of the aircraft.

A major portion of the action described in the book lies in the maritime domain. A deception by one side is used to engineer initial engagements, giving that country the opportunity to showcase its warfighting capabilities as a warning for the world. The hands on experience of one of the authors comes handy during discussion of the operations aboard the main Chinese carrier battle group (with the carrier itself appropriately named *Zheng He*). As the US takes measure of Chinese capabilities in cyber and electronic warfare dimensions, it is forced to recalibrate its warfighting strategies. This entails falling back on long discarded techniques of warfighting in the naval and aerial domains with minimum reliance on latest generation technology, reminiscent of warfighting post World War II. These two parallel themes resonate throughout the book—the first, pertaining to latest generation warfighting in multiple domains laced with information warfare, whose efficacy is predicated on cyber, electronic warfare and smart weapons. The second, of the inefficacy of such means when faced with even more effective technology held by the adversary, inevitably resulting in one side having to fall back on simpler techniques and methods of yesteryears, 'proven incapable of organizing a centralised cyber defence'. This entails re-learning of long forgotten skills of older weapon platforms to ensure success of the mission. While cyber, electronic and maritime aspects have got their due, a noticeable and inexplicable flaw in the narrative lies in the deliberate ignoring of land and air aspects of a world war, detracting from the overall usefulness of the book.

A noteworthy aspect for Indian readers is the authors' perception about India as a world power in 2034, which has defeated Pakistan 'decisively in the Ten Day War of 2024'. As the world hurtles towards full-

blown nuclear war, it is this hugely capable India, 'the best interlocuter between Washington and Beijing' that decides to become an ultimate arbiter of the world's destiny and to put an end to the conflict. How this is achieved is revealed only towards the end of the book, but points to an acknowledgement in American circles of India's potential—economic, military, scientific, industrial and diplomatic, amongst others and what it can achieve in just over a decade from now. The book also raises questions about the nature of statecraft as the protagonists, now at war, begin to question some basic rationales. It delves into the minds of decision-makers in countries perceived as pariahs by the West (in this case Iran and Russia). Ostracised by the world community, these states discover kinship with each other in the wake of the crisis, while remaining distrustful with good reason of each other's long-term ambitions. Furthermore, they are shown to make common cause to create further disruption for their benefit, even as Russia commences execution of plans to regain its lost glory in one particular domain and similarly, Iran looks elsewhere. The book presents a graphic snapshot of the effect of nuclear strikes while dwelling on the conflict that officials undergo while weighing choices of duty to country versus family. The book further bemoans the fact that decision-makers in the corridors of power, while appraising the present and future through the prism of history, are prevented by this very process from carrying out a reappraisal, which might lead them to different conclusions.

In its conclusion, the book raises some fundamental questions about the dawn and eclipse of empires throughout the history of mankind. In the course of conversations between protagonists, it dwells on the growth and collapse of empires over the ages and how 'blinded by narcissism and decadence', empires dig their own grave as they rot from within. It discusses the waxing and waning of American power, most notably visible in its ability to 'finish' wars started by others up until the middle of the 20th century, and contrasts it with the current American tendency in the 21st century of leaving the task for others. This in effect signals America's decline as a superpower. The book ends with the authors' gazing further into the future, a few years after the end of the War, where the balance of power has shifted decisively away from America. All in all, the book is a cautionary tale reminding one that a nation howsoever powerful, should never fall prey to the sin of hubris.