

## Book Reviews

# Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War

By P.W. Singer and August Cole

Reviewed by Wing Commander Keith Dear

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### Introduction

**P**eter Singer and August Cole's book is important, thought-provoking and gripping. It should be read by policymakers, military planners, the defence and technology industry, and it will be enjoyed by a far wider audience. Both fictional thriller and deeply researched assessment, in the vein of Hackett's 1978 *The Third World War*, this is the best vision of future war that we have, and it makes for enjoyable, intense, yet uncomfortable reading.

The scope of the tale and the research is vast. Beginning 243 miles above the Earth's surface in the International Space Station, the action descends to 10,590 metres below sea level in the Mariana Trench. The war between China and the US focuses on China's *Third Island Chain* with Hawaii at its centre but touches on counter-piracy, European decline, Russian imperial pretensions, Japanese vulnerabilities, the energy industry and globalised industry. It covers the import of autonomous drones in the air, sea and land environments; there is the to-be-expected import of cyber warfare and space, stealth and directed energy weapons. The criticality of logistics is examined. There are important roles for the private sector and non-state actors; a multi-billionaire entrepreneur's help proves crucial while online-hackers Anonymous feature too. I challenge any reader exposed to the array of technologies and trends not to learn something they didn't know before.

This is also an intensely human story, of hubris and nemesis for both the US and China, of difficult family relationships strained by Service life, of racism and identity, of love, of revenge,

of sex. The human element is present in all the main characters, the XO of the USS Coronado Jamie Simmons, as well as a host of others from Vice Admiral Wang Xiaoqian of the Chinese military junta that has replaced the Communist party, to American insurgents in territory occupied by the Chinese. The human interest reminds us of both the enduring nature of war and of man at his best and worst.

There are three principal operational areas of interest for the Royal Air Force. The first is the importance of drones in all of air power's roles including air-to-air combat, the second is the dangers of being reliant on microchips and electronic components often made in China, the third is the need to be able to operate without access to space-based navigation and command and control systems. All are brilliantly described in a series of gripping air-to-air engagements that should leave those planning for our future capabilities with pause for thought.

Strategically the book indicates just how irrelevant Britain is coming to be for the US as it looks to the future. Britain, weakened and divided when Scotland separates from the Union, is unable to deploy its Anglo-French aircraft carriers due to French objections. Britain's air force, seemingly reliant solely on F35s, is unable to respond due to the same software and hardware vulnerabilities in the aircraft that have so weakened the USAF. One can argue with the analysis of how Britain might respond to a global war in the 20-30 year time frame, but when one hears the authors discuss the book in podcast with *War on the Rocks'* Ryan Evans there can be little doubt that Britain is seen, at least by them, as just another declining and unreliable ally. Contrast this with the centrality and import of British capabilities in Tom Clancy's 1986 vision of future warfare in *Red Storm Rising*.

Singer and Cole are both staples of the Washington security commentariat with serious credentials; Singer's *Wired for War* is the seminal book on robotics and warfare. August Cole's work at the Wall Street Journal as Defence Industry Correspondent and his innovative work at the Atlantic Council make him a highly credible and well-informed analyst. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about their book is how impeccably sourced its storylines are. The extensive footnotes at the back of the book provide a trove of useful sources for anyone seeking to think about the future operating environment. The authors are too wise to put a precise date on the story, but have indicated that the furthest forward they thought they could project current trends is the 2020-2030 period. One can only hope our own planning is as well researched and considered.

There is a broader context behind this. The book's authors express the hope that the book is read only as a work of fiction, not prediction. Our strategic context in the future may be that envisioned by Steven Pinker from his detailed statistical analysis of violent trends: a gradually more peaceful, less violent world, marred by warfare yes, but always with violence on a downward trend. Or it may be that Colin Gray, Lawrence Freedman and Nassim Nicholas Taleb are right: the downward trend means nothing. History is made in the discontinuities. And this is certainly the under-pinning assumption of Singer and Cole's book.

Ghost Fleet, has at its centre, a Naval conflict. Perhaps we might end with our senior Service's motto *Si vis pacem, para bellum*, "if you wish for peace, prepare for war". Such a preparation is mental as much as physical. Ghost Fleet's authors have made a significant contribution in helping us to understand what it is we might be preparing for.



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