



The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare

by Christian Brose.

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Christian Brose's¹ *Kill Chain* is one in a series of alarmist books² warning that the US military is unprepared for a possible coming war with China. The title of his introduction, "Playing a Losing Game," alerts readers to his thesis—the need for

a sweeping redesign of the American military: from a military built around small numbers of large, expensive, exquisite, heavily manned, and hard-to-replace platforms to a military built around large numbers of smaller, lower-cost, expendable, and highly autonomous machines. Put simply, it should be a military defined less by the strength and quantities of its platforms, then by the efficacy, speed, flexibility, adaptability, and overall dynamism of its kill chains.... No, the real problem is a lack of imagination. (xxviii)

The *Kill Chain* is military parlance for defining and grasping the situation, deciding what to do, and acting to achieve the desired objective. Closing the *Kill Chain* means completing that process. Breaking it means thwarting the ability of a foe to achieve his objective. These actions sometimes involve no violence.

Brose profiles earlier alarmists like Andrew "Yoda" Marshall, who have urged a remake of the US military to counter growing threats to the "traditional platform-centered approach." They warn that the US government and military have grown complacent over time because of their post Cold War global dominance. Marshall settled on the now popular term "anti-access and area denial" as required capabilities. Brose suggests that the Chinese were building the same weapon systems by 1992. (5)

Brose and other writers argue that the Chinese will dominate the United States by (a) neutralizing a network of US military bases, primarily on Guam and in Japan with a swarm of ballistic and cruise missiles, (b) negating the power of US strike aircraft with strong air and missile defense systems, (c) assaulting US aircraft carriers with multiple hypersonic "carrier killer" missiles that will cause the carriers to protect themselves by moving away from China, (d) using an asymmetric arsenal of weapons ("Assassin's Mace"), (e) attacking the American global positioning system and command, control, and communications networks, and (f) using satellites and missiles to destroy unarmed ships and planes crossing the Pacific.

The author identifies a major weakness in the US military system: the reluctance of social and commercial media innovators in Silicon Valley and elsewhere to interact with the US military, which is committed to hardware. It also lacks access to the latest technology and does not push to

1. Brose has served as a staff director of the US Senate Armed Forces Services Committee and senior policy advisor to Sen. John McCain. He also wrote speeches for Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice.

2. E.g., Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon* (NY: Henry Holt, 2015), and Rush Doshi, *The Long Game* (NY: Oxford U Pr: 2021) and *To Govern the Globe: World Orders and Catastrophic Change* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

get it. This schism does not exist in China, which promotes military-civilian fusion. In a word, companies “cooperate” with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) military.

Brose highlights technical innovations needed for a war with China and a different type of arms race. In 2015, China announced its *Made in China 2025* program to dominate technical development in several critical areas of its economy and military—hypersonic weapons, directed energy weapons, cyber warfare, quantum information systems and sensors, biotechnology, and new space capabilities. It aims to reach these goals by whatever means necessary. The US has announced similar aspirational plans but not emulated the CCP in prioritizing them.

To support his thesis, Brose identifies how military, congressional, and civilian bureaucracies impede the US government’s ability to adapt to the new environment where the United States is no longer the dominant global force. Massive military budgets fund existing hardware and rather than for evolving technologies the United States will need in the event of war with China. For example, in 2018 the Air Force wanted to replace its venerable and defenseless JSTARS long range radar aircraft with a new generation of robotic aircraft serving the same purpose. Congress members from states where such new weapons were to be based killed that program. Brose reflects,

if the future is going to win, it will have to win inside our current system. It will have to win in a system comprising parochial military services, self-interested companies, and largely distracted political leaders—all of whom will continue to be consumed more by present concerns than future ones. (227)

When Brose presented a problem to McCain, he always elicited a solution. He tries to do the same here. The upside is that “we have so many decent, hardworking, dedicated people, ... amazing technology in our country and ... all the money we need” (249). Still, “We are playing a losing game, we will not win in the future” (255).

He identifies changing incentives and imagination as two requirements for change. The overwhelming incentive in Washington, however, is to maintain the status quo. Imagination in the form of new weaponry is poorly funded and frequently ignored in the military budget. Unfortunately, he provides no path forward to change incentives in the face of powerful congress men and women, lobbyists, and military suppliers. He also offers no viable means of appeal to top non-military technology suppliers, as China successfully does.

Christian Brose’s useful summary of the issues and challenges facing the US military will appeal to readers seeking an overview of the status of the United States vis-à-vis the rising power of the Chinese military. In that sense, it is a clarion call for reform of the way the United States goes to war.