

BOOK REVIEWS

Cold Rivals: The New Era of US–China Strategic Competition

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Evan Medeiros has brought together an all-star cast of renowned American and Chinese experts to produce a valuable contribution to the literature on contemporary US–China relations. This exciting new edited volume offers both countries’ perspectives on the full scope of contentious topics in the contemporary bilateral relationship, from economics and politics to technology and security.

Medeiros opens the book with an introduction to the new reality of “strategic competition” in the bilateral relationship and a roadmap of the book’s forthcoming chapters. He lays out mounting concerns in both Washington and Beijing regarding a “new cold war” between the two countries and notes the different sources of tension in the relationship from great power rivalry to domestic politics. Most of the chapter consists of a detailed summary of each of the book’s 15 chapters, which are divided into five subsections: historical perspectives; contemporary political and economic dynamics; national security and military dimensions; technology competition; and future projections about the bilateral relationship.

Several contributions to the collection stood out. The chapters by Harry Harding and Wang Jisi make a particularly valuable dyad. Both help the reader to better understand the past, present and future of the bilateral relationship, but from two different points of view. Harding’s *tour de force* traces the US–China relationship from the “engagement paradigm,” to “questioning engagement,” up through today’s “competition paradigm.” Citing David M. Lampton, Harding identifies the “tipping point” in US policymakers’ disappointment with China in 2015, explaining that: “The accumulation of frustrations and resentments produced, in the run up to the 2016 presidential election, a widespread conclusion in the US policy community that America’s China policy had failed and that it was time for a change” (p. 78).

Like Harding, Wang recognizes that after Xi Jinping became China’s top leader in 2012 the country’s foreign policy was altered to reflect his call for “maintaining a fighting spirit and strengthening the ability to struggle” (p. 94). But rather than delve into how or why China’s more assertive foreign policy pushed US officials to begrudgingly alter their China policy, Wang instead focuses on Beijing’s “strengthened resolve of fighting against US policies and actions” (p. 94). Ultimately, he concludes that, more than balance of power and global political developments, the “decisive variable in shaping the direction of China’s US policy is Beijing’s strategic choice contingent on its internal political transformation” (p. 111).

Like Wang, Wu Xinbo’s chapter also addresses how China has sought to respond to Washington’s “competitive strategy.” According to Wu, since the election of Donald Trump Beijing has been resisting “malign US political/strategic intentions” (p. 123). He argues that Beijing is merely responding to US policies aimed at thwarting China’s rise, including rhetorical attacks, tariffs and sanctions on Chinese firms like tech giant Huawei, and “US involvement in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibetan affairs” (p. 126). The most enlightening part of Wu’s chapter is his list of “China’s responses” to the US, including “seeking discursive power,” “counterattack,” “divide and rule,” and “winning over

third parties” (p. 10). Wu places the blame for deteriorating bilateral relations squarely on the US, especially Donald Trump, and at no point does he address the elephant in the room that is articulated repeatedly by his American co-authors: China’s assertiveness under Xi Jinping has provoked the US, and many Americans were, in fact, slow to acknowledge Beijing’s move toward a more confrontational posture and resulting in a lagged US policy response between 2013–2015.

In her excellent chapter Elizabeth Economy speaks directly to this point, looking at how “US policymakers have rethought, recalibrated and reset US policy towards China” (p. 163). She describes Beijing’s “rethink of its relationship with the United States” (p. 149) as part of the “new Chinese assertiveness” (p. 150) that has accompanied Xi Jinping’s rise. In juxtaposition to her Chinese coauthors, Economy’s subsection titled “The Xi factor,” observes that “Xi transformed Chinese domestic and foreign policies in ways that raised fundamentally new questions about the country’s commitment to domestic political and economic reform as well as the rules-based order” (p. 151). She concludes by explaining how the US unilateral “America-first” response to an increasingly assertive China under the Trump administration has now given way to an effort to work with traditional allies to reinforce the US-led rules-based order under President Joe Biden. “Xi Jinping’s choices,” she underscores, continue to push the US to adopt policies reminiscent of the Cold War.

The two chapters by Phillip Saunders and Li Chen are another great pair. Saunders provides a detailed historical recounting and a high-level overview of the central issues in the contemporary security relationship from AI to cyber space and nuclear weapons. His contribution is complemented by Li, who examines the causes for tensions in the contemporary security relationship. Like Wang and Wu, Li also sidesteps Xi Jinping’s policies and instead focuses on Washington’s transgressions. According to Li, China’s response from 2017–2019 was “reactive and reluctant” (p. 239) and it was not until 2019–2020 that “China’s response to US strategic pressure intensified” (p. 241). Li is unequivocal that the rupture in the bilateral relationship was caused by “increased US domestic and international mobilization against China” (p. 241). The highlight of this chapter are the author’s suggestions for Beijing to prevail in its great power struggle with Washington. These include “continued military modernization” (p. 236), “improved crisis management” (p. 251) and “expanded confidence-building and security cooperation efforts with other nations in order to offset the US-led international mobilization against China” (p. 252).

In the book’s conclusion Medeiros lays out four possible futures scenarios for the bilateral relationship: “US–China détente” (p. 392), “strained but stable relations” (p. 394), “slow burn toward rivalry” (p. 395), and “crisis and confrontation” (p. 397). This chapter was particularly valuable in the classroom as it proved an excellent background reading for students to consider the future of US–China relations. Many of my students agreed with Medeiros’s assessment that the most likely scenario is “slow burn toward rivalry” characterized by “a consistent growth in the concerns of both countries about the other’s capabilities and intentions” (p. 397). However, a good number of these young people were considerably more pessimistic than the editor about the future of US–China relations.

Medeiros deserves credit for bringing together so many excellent scholars to shed light on the transition from decades of hopeful US–China engagement to uncertain strategic rivalry. Still, the book is not without its shortcomings. This reader would have welcomed a literature review to help clarify the book’s contribution, an explanation for why certain topics were covered while others were not, and a chapter that offers a Chinese perspective on bilateral technological competition. Section headings in the table of contents and discussed up front in the introduction would have helped clarify the book’s structure. But perhaps most importantly, by including both American and Chinese perspectives this volume highlights how they fundamentally disagree on what ails the bilateral relationship. The editor would have done well to grapple with these stark differences and explain their sources, or to offer guidance on what, if anything, can or should be done to mend US–China relations.