

BOOK REVIEW

## Beyond Engagement? Rethinking America's China Policy

**The China Challenge: shaping the choices of a rising power**, by Thomas Christensen, New York, W.W. Norton, 2015.

**The Hundred Year War: China's secret strategy to replace America as the global superpower**, by Michael Pillsbury, New York, Henry Holt & Co, 2015.

**Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: US China relations in the twenty-first century**, by James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2014.

**Obama and China's Rise: an insider's account of America's Asia strategy**, by Jeffery Bader, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2012.

**A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the struggle for mastery in Asia**, by Aaron Friedberg, New York, W.W. Norton, 2011.

### Rethinking engagement

Since the Nixon Administration, the US strategy towards China has been predicated on the assumption that if the bilateral relationship is properly managed conflict can be avoided. Many Americans across the political spectrum believe that through engagement the US can reduce the chances that China will become aggressive (Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, pp. 146–147). Yet, even as US policymakers have sought to integrate China and use cooperation to shape its choices, Beijing's increasing bellicosity has raised concerns in Washington and beyond that engagement may not prevent conflict.

For five decades, the US has aided China economically, rhetorically and politically with the underlying objective to mollify, and if possible, avoid, the rising state's propensity to pursue revisionism using force. In practice, America's engagement-based China strategy means that scores (if not hundreds) of US policymakers in numerous government agencies correspond regularly with their Chinese counterparts across a wide breadth of issues. In September 2014, President Xi Jinping said there were over 90 official mechanisms for US–China exchange.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even as US policymakers have sought to integrate China and use cooperation to shape its choices, Beijing's increasing bellicosity has raised concerns that engagement may not prevent Chinese aggression.

One longtime proponent of engagement with China, David M. Lampton, gave a speech in May 2015 entitled 'A Tipping Point in US–China Relations is Upon Us', in which he noted that, despite the

---

<sup>1</sup>Wu Jianmin, 'The China–US relationship is basically good', *ChinaFile*, (26 September 2014), available at: <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-china-us-relationship-is-basically-good/> (accessed 26 October 2015).

remarkable 'policy continuity' of 'constructive engagement' through eight US and five Chinese administrations, 'today important components of the American policy elite increasingly are coming to see China as a threat.'<sup>2</sup> Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd summarized this view: 'Beijing's long-term policy is aimed at pushing the US out of Asia altogether and establishing a Chinese sphere of influence spanning the region.'<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in June, former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson said on *PBS NewsHour*: 'The longstanding consensus that China's rise is good for the US is beginning to break down.'<sup>4</sup>

In response to misgivings about Beijing's intentions, there have been calls for Washington to actively shape China's strategic choices by enhancing US military capabilities and strengthening alliances to counterbalance against its growing strength. A growing contingent in Washington and beyond claims that extensive US engagement has failed to prevent China from threatening other countries. Recent publications reflect increasing apprehension; most argue that policymakers must avoid an enduring 'structural problem' in international relations that causes rising powers to become aggressive.<sup>5</sup>

Princeton's Aaron Friedberg contends that the US should 'maintain a margin of military advantage sufficient to deter attempts at coercion or aggression' (Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, p. 274). In June, Thomas Christensen, former US deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia, observed that there are two primary questions for US security vis-à-vis China: how to dissuade China from using force in East Asia; and how can we get China to actively contribute to stabilizing global governance? These initiatives, Christensen noted, are based on the assumption that 'whenever a country becomes a rising power, tensions with neighbors arise.'<sup>6</sup> Both engagement supporters and deterrence supporters agree that the US should change China's strategic calculus in ways that increase the benefits of cooperation and the costs of conflict; where they disagree is on how to achieve this.

The five books reviewed here represent a spectrum of assessments of the contemporary US–China relationship. Steinberg and O'Hanlon's book and Pillsbury's are at the two ends of the prevailing 'engage and hedge' continuum, respectively, while the others fall somewhere in between. In order to move beyond this dichotomous conceptual framework, however, more attention should be paid to the domestic political dynamics that have tended to accompany China's foreign military interventions. **To both avoid and prepare for the possibility of conflict, US policymakers ought to resist the urge to generalize about China based on conclusions drawn from international relations theory and the behavior of previous rising powers.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they should pay close attention to the disposition and intentions of China's leaders, and the doctrines advocated by the Communist Party of China (CPC).**

## American scholar-officials on China

Among the numerous studies on US–China relations the five aforementioned books stand out; each is written by a former senior US policymaker on China, *and* all but one has an author that holds a Ph.D. from a top US political science program. These studies can be considered the 'state of the art' in the field of US–China relations. All answer the question: *What policies should the US pursue to reduce the*

<sup>2</sup>David M. Lampton, 'A Tipping Point in US–China Relations is Upon Us', speech at the conference, *China's Reform: Opportunities and Challenges* hosted by The Carter Center and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences in Shanghai, 6–7 May 2015.

<sup>3</sup>Kevin Rudd, 'America and China are rivals with a common cause', *Financial Times*, (17 April 2015), available at: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/3055b448-e426-11e4-9039-00144feab7de.html#axzz3pgbZSNj1> (accessed 26 October 2015).

<sup>4</sup>Opposite parties, same goal: change US–China relations', *PBS NewsHour*, (3 June 2015), available at: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/opposite-parties-goal-change-u-s-china-relations/> (accessed 26 October 2015).

<sup>5</sup>See Robert Blackwill and Ashley Tellis, *Balancing Without Containment* (Council on Foreign Relations, April 2015), available at: <http://www.cfr.org/china/revising-us-grand-strategy-toward-china/p36371> (accessed 26 October 2015). Also see: Robert Manning and James Przystup, 'How George Kennan would contend with China's rise', *The National Interest*, (30 June 2015), available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-george-kennan-would-contend-chinas-rise-13222> (accessed 26 October 2015); Jeff M. Smith, 'RIP: America's "engagement" strategy towards China?', *The National Interest*, (3 August 2015), available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-americas-china-strategy-should-be-13473> (accessed 26 October 2015).

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Christensen, Comments at Brookings Institution on 25 June 2015.

<sup>7</sup>For an example of this approach see: Graham Allison, 'The Thucydides trap: are the US and China headed for war?', *The Atlantic*, (24 September 2015), available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/> (accessed 26 October 2015).

*possibility of conflict with China, and yet still be prepared for that eventuality?* Each book begins with the assumption that whether China will become aggressive is primarily determined by the interaction among states at the international level, most importantly, the bilateral US–China relationship and the relations among states in East Asia. All agree that US policymakers’ decisions help determine whether or not China will become aggressive.

Although all five books apply international relations theory, they support a range of perspectives and policy prescriptions. Generally speaking, Bader and Steinberg and O’Hanlon advocate expanding US engagement with China, while Pillsbury, Friedberg and Christensen call for strengthened efforts to counterbalance against China. By strengthening its defenses, Christensen argues, the US can shape China’s choices in ways that make aggression less likely. Only Pillsbury and Friedberg identify domestic factors as sources of Chinese aggression, but they disagree on whether China’s regime type or its ancient martial history, respectively, is the primary determinant.

Steinberg and O’Hanlon dedicate a chapter to examining ‘The determinants of Chinese strategy’. In a subsection entitled ‘Domestic determinants of China’s external behavior’ they argue that while some domestic influences increase the possibility that China will become aggressive, others mitigate against it. The need to sustain economic growth, they argue, will reduce the chances of aggression; on the other hand the growth of Chinese nationalism is likely to exacerbate it. Other factors include social media, public opinion, think tanks, interest groups, bureaucratic and institutional forces, but while ‘each of these plays a role, it is difficult to conclude which way these forces cut on balance and how important they are compared with other factors shaping China’s policy’. Steinberg and O’Hanlon conclude that: ‘There is little agreement in China’s case as to whether internal factors are more likely to produce restrained or more aggressive behavior’ (Steinberg and O’Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve*, p. 41).

Steinberg and O’Hanlon focus primarily on international factors, particularly the state of the US–China relations and the regional balance of power. ‘China’s interpretation of US strategy’ and its ‘leaders’ assessments of US intentions’, they argue, will determine whether Beijing will become aggressive. Chinese assessments range from ‘one extreme that the United States is determined to maintain its hegemonic position and resist China’s rise. At the other, they accept the argument that the United States is prepared to “share power”’ (p. 44). The chances to avoid Chinese hostility can be improved if ‘US policymakers can reinforce the domestic political forces in China that are likely to support constructive Chinese strategies’ (p. 47). By empowering Chinese moderates US policymakers will reduce the possibility that more hawkish leaders will push China toward aggression. Thus, by reiterating the US’ willingness to share power with China—an approach the authors call ‘strategic reassurance’—Washington can reduce the chances that Beijing will use force. Put succinctly, ‘Washington can craft its own policies in ways that will call forth reciprocal, positive Chinese actions’ (p. 47).

Bader agrees that US policymakers must avoid ‘falling into the classic security dilemma, wherein each side believes that growing capabilities reflect hostile intent and responds by producing that reality’ (Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise*, p. 150). Like Steinberg and O’Hanlon, he ‘assumes that China could play a more constructive role than it would by sitting outside of that system’ (p. 3). To help make Beijing more cooperative, Washington can shape its choices:

Underlying our approach was a clear understanding that our political, security, and economic policies in Asia needed to be grounded in traditional state-to-state relations and a commitment to shaping the choices of emerging powers like China through our diplomacy and deployments. (p. 6)

To reduce the chances of conflict with China the Obama administration made the ‘strategic judgment’ that ‘America’s relationship with China could be shaped to maximize the chances that China’s rise will become a stabilizing and constructive force rather than a threat to peace and equilibrium’. To establish ‘a modicum of trust between US and Chinese leaders so that there could be political incentives for cooperation’, Bader recalls that Obama’s Asia team built a China strategy based on ‘three pillars’ (p. 11): (1) a welcoming approach to China’s emergence, influence and legitimate expanded role; (2) resolve to see that its rise is consistent with international norms and law; and (3) endeavor to shape the Asia–Pacific environment to ensure China’s rise is stabilizing rather than disruptive (p. 7).

Christensen agrees with Bader that the US' 'strategic goal' vis-à-vis China is to 'shape Beijing's choices so as to channel China's nationalist ambitions into cooperation rather than coercion' (Christensen, *The China Challenge*, p. xxii). The problem, according to Christensen, is that 'China is too big to fail' both economically and politically. He warns that without China's help American 'endeavors will surely fail' to tackle global problems from terrorism to climate change (p. xx). To elicit Beijing's participation US policymakers should 'persuade China that bullying its neighbors will backfire, while proactive cooperation with those neighbors and the world's other great powers will accelerate China's return to great power status' (p. xxi). The US should 'encourage China to contribute to global governance alongside other great powers', and persuade Beijing to accept a position in the international order akin to the 'responsible stakeholder' designation that Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick called for in 2005 (p. 9). A successful US policy, according to Christensen, would convince China to 'pull its weight', although, he laments, 'getting China to pull that weight will likely prove significantly more difficult for US diplomats and policy leaders' (p. xx).

Christensen describes the US engagement strategy towards China, as 'the opposite of our containment policy toward the Soviets' (p. xv). He argues that: 'Since the Chinese reform era began in 1978, no global actor has done more to assist China's rise than the United States' (p. xv). While attending the first US–China Security and Economic Dialogue in 2006 Christensen recalls that he was surprised by 'how far the [US] message diverged from the expectations of some realist international relations theorists' (p. xiv). He summarized the Bush Administration's policy as: 'We wish China well and want to help extend your fantastic run of double-digit growth rates. Chinese growth is good for everyone. Our biggest concern is that you are not doing everything necessary to maintain it' (p. xiv). The Bush Administration, he recalls, explicitly supported the expansion of CPC power over the economy:

US representatives were stating that China needed to increase central state capacity by improving state regulatory and oversight institutions. Imagine a group of responsible Republicans calling for bigger government, and doing so in a country already ruled by Communists! (p. xvi)

The US should build a robust deterrence architecture to counterbalance China's rise and push Beijing towards meaningful engagement, Christensen argues. The US and its allies 'need to maintain sufficient power and resolve in East Asia to deter Beijing from choosing a path of coercion or aggression' (p. xxi). The US can compel China to become less aggressive and more quiescent.

Chinese anxiety about a US containment effort could carry some benefits for the United States: the potential for encirclement may encourage Chinese strategists to become more accommodating. Under conditions in which Chinese analysts believe in the possibility of containment, even the most pessimistic realpolitik thinkers might join their more optimistic colleagues in prescribing moderate policies. (p. 292)

China, knowing aggression could never succeed against a powerful US-led coalition, will 'contribute more actively [and] help shore up the stability of the international system' (p. xxi).

Friedberg also believes the 'emerging Sino–American rivalry is driven by forces that are deeply rooted in the shifting structure of the international system' (Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, p. 1). In contrast to Christensen's more subtle critique of engagement, however, Friedberg openly admits that he is 'puzzled and frustrated' by decades of 'willful, blinkered optimism' across 'academic and business communities and significant portions of the US government' about China's intention to unseat the US (p. xiv). He challenges the contention that through engagement Washington can mollify Chinese concerns about US intentions, bolster moderates in the CPC and reduce China's propensity for aggression:

The notion that a low-key, nonconfrontational American approach will favor China's 'moderates' has an intuitive appeal. But the opposite is at least equally plausible. If Washington adopts a softer, more acquiescent stance, Chinese 'hard-liners' will no doubt try to take credit, arguing that the change was direct result of tough policies. Attempts at accommodation could wind up strengthening precisely the groups and individuals it was intended to weaken. (p. 261)

China, Friedberg argues, has done a better job at using engagement to constrain the US than America has done in changing Chinese perceptions. He identifies a 'yawning ideological chasm' that inhibits the success of US engagement, arguing that: 'The very different domestic political regimes of the two pacific powers' make the liberalization of the Chinese political system essential for 'a true trans-Pacific

entente'. CPC repression inhibits change in China and presents 'a significant additional impetus to rivalry' (pp. 1–2, 42).

Friedberg gives three reasons why the CPC makes China aggressive: first, the party's ideology and expansive controls over free expression produce 'hostility and mistrust' with other countries, thus undermining 'the possibility of a warm, trusting and stable relationship'. Second, the party's secrecy renders its intentions and capabilities difficult to discern, thus suspicious, and makes it easier for Beijing to use force without warning. Third, China's leaders may become aggressive because they 'are motivated above all else by their belief in the necessity of preserving Communist Party rule' (p. 159). Friedberg argues that: 'Anxiety over their own lack of legitimacy at home can cause non-democratic governments to try to deflect popular frustration and discontent toward external enemies, real or imagined', hence making them more likely 'to take extreme risks to retain their hold on power' (pp. 42–43). The party's desire 'to avoid the perception of weakness', thus drives it 'to accumulate an overwhelming preponderance of power in the areas adjacent to it' (p. 161).

Friedberg discounts Chinese traditional strategic thinking as a possible reason for Beijing's aggression, arguing that: 'The authoritarian nature of China's government is a far greater concern than its culture' (p. 43). Instead, it is the illiberal CPC that best explains Chinese aggression:

Since 1949 China's rulers have shown a particular penchant for deception and surprise attack. This tendency may reflect deep strains in Chinese strategic culture extending back to the great philosopher of war Sun Tzu, but it is also entirely consistent with the character of its current domestic regime. (p. 43)

Thus, because China's regime type causes it to become aggressive 'only one factor (the possibility of political liberalization of China) has the potential to push the relationship decisively toward a stable and lasting peace' (p. 38).

Pillsbury, like Friedberg, is pessimistic that engagement can help mitigate the risk of Chinese aggression. He believes that China's martial history, philosophy and culture (rather than the party) are why its hawkish leaders have developed a 'secret strategy to replace America as the global superpower'. For Pillsbury, China's 'hundred-year marathon' to replace America as the world's superpower is rooted in an application of strategies and tactics that are as old as the Chinese people themselves (Pillsbury, *The Hundred Year War*, p. 11). China's hard-liners penchant for aggression dates back to 'explicitly distilled ideas from the hundreds of years of successes and failures of rising powers during the Warring States period' (p. 33). Meanwhile, Americans see what we want to see in China, and what we want to see most, Pillsbury argues, is ourselves:

In our hubris, Americans love to believe that the aspirations of every other country is to be just like the United States. In recent years, this has governed our approach to Iraq and Afghanistan. We cling to the same mentality with China. (p. 10)

Pillsbury's analysis combines realism with Chinese traditional statecraft. Chinese aggression, he argues, is caused by a combination of ancient Chinese martial lessons of realpolitik, Confucian hierarchy, Darwinian ideas of racial preservation and survival of the fittest, narratives of the 'century of humiliation', and China's historic grievances. He traces China's propensity to challenge the US for global supremacy back to the Warring States period of the fifth century b.c. arguing that: 'The notion of China's special position in the hierarchy of states long predates the rise of the Chinese Communist Party' (p. 18). According to Pillsbury, the 'Chinese strategy [to bring about a China-led world] is, at its core, a product of lessons derived from the Warring States period', which 'have long been dominant among China's leaders' (pp. 32–33). For instance, 'in its proper context', Deng Xiaoping's strategy of 'bide our time and hide your capabilities' (*taoguang yanghui*), 'actually alludes to overturning the old hegemon and exacting revenge, but only once the rising power has developed the ability to do so' (p. 33).

Pillsbury's considerable attention to internal policy debates among Chinese hawks and reformers differentiates it from the other books. He agrees with Steinberg and O'Hanlon, and Bader that 'sincere advocates of reform and liberalization ... must be identified and supported', but laments that the 'US intelligence community has not invested in the resources to determine who those true reformers are—as differentiated from the many Chinese leaders who make misleading reformist claims'. Rather

than engaging Chinese leaders, Pillsbury contends that the only way to prevent 'massive intelligence failures' is through improved intelligence collection (p. 228).

Taken together, these five books offer three different reasons why China may become aggressive: the structure of the international system; Chinese culture and martial traditions dating back to the Warring States period; and the CPC's authoritarian regime type. Bader, Christensen, and Steinberg and O'Hanlon advocate the first, Friedberg weaves together the first and third, and Pillsbury the first and second. Friedberg and Pillsbury both highlight domestic considerations, yet they disagree on whether the character of the CPC or Chinese hawks' instrumental use of martial traditions is most important, respectfully. Friedberg's argument is most compelling, but by assuming that the CPC behaves as a uniform actor he neglects Pillsbury's evidence about hawks and how intra-party rivalries may influence Beijing's tendency to become aggressive beyond its borders.

## Beyond international relations

*How can the US improve its policy towards China to avoid, and yet be prepared for, conflict?* As discussed above, for most American scholar-officials this question is nested within assumptions that emphasize states' relative power as the reason for conflict. To identify and explain the causes of possible conflict with China, they begin with international relations theory and propose a combination of reassurance or American resolve to avoid it. Whether China becomes aggressive, they argue, depends on whether it is dissatisfied with the prevailing international order because 'only if it believes that it is disadvantaged will it necessarily choose to use its newfound power to create a world more to its own liking in potentially disruptive ways' (Steinberg and O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve*, p. 17). This systemic 'security dilemma' creates a natural propensity for a 'rising power' to challenge the 'status quo power'. Thus, Beijing's penchant for aggression is not made in China; rather, it is an original sin of international relations, born of states' inherent desire for security. Similarly, China's belligerence towards its neighbors is caused by the 'rubbing' that occurs when a nation's rising power causes friction with its neighbors.<sup>8</sup>

Generalized, theory-based explanations hold that rising powers pursue their national interests by seeking power dominance. They diagnose the causes of conflict and prescribe various combinations of reassurance or resolve to prevent it, yet they do not predict *when* a conflict with China is more likely to erupt and *how* it will be waged. Instead, experts usually assume that China will behave as previous belligerent rising powers—often pre-World War I or II Japan or Germany (Christensen, *The China Challenge*, p. 37).


To both avoid and prepare for the possibility of conflict, US policymakers ought to resist the urge to generalize about China based on the behavior of previous rising powers. Paying close attention to domestic political dynamics that tend to precede China's foreign military interventions will enhance America's existing dichotomous 'engage and hedge' framework. It will make Washington's approach more sophisticated and complete, and thus, more powerful and better able to maximize opportunity, while managing risk. The question, put succinctly, is not merely whether China is or will become a revisionist power; it is *why* and *how* has China used force, under which conditions is it likely to again, and what, if anything, US policymakers can do to reduce those chances? Answering these questions requires less emphasis on general theories of state behavior and more knowledge about China's leaders. That information, as former US Ambassador to China James Lilley explained in testimony to Congress two decades ago, can only be obtained 'through clandestine collection and technical means. Again and again it's been human work that's made the essential difference.'<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2001). Also see: Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Testimony of James Lilley, 'Hearing On the Roles and Capabilities of the United States Intelligence Community', Room SD-106, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, DC, 19 January 1996, available at: <http://fas.org/irp/commission/testlill.htm> (accessed 26 October 2015).

### Notes on contributor

*Joshua Eisenman* is Assistant Professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs and Distinguished Scholar at the Robert Strauss Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and Senior Fellow for China Studies at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.

Joshua Eisenman  
University of Texas at Austin, USA  
 [josh.eisenman@gmail.com](mailto:josh.eisenman@gmail.com)

© 2016 Joshua Eisenman  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1132962>