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Published on H-Diplo (July, 2024)

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Evan S. Medeiros has assembled an all-star cast of eleven scholars for a well-conceived, well-written, timely, and important edited volume on the current state of China-US relations. Three of the distinguished authors are based in China; the rest are affiliated with US institutions.

The central question of this volume is very important: have China and the United States already entered a new cold war? Richard Betts, a distinguished scholar of security studies, argues that the two nations are in a new cold war, though “in th[is] new cold war, it is still early” (p. 64). In comparing the old Cold War to the “new” one, Betts argues that what is similar is bipolarity, although he finds that the nuclear dimension is less important today than it was during the first Cold War. This may be correct, but given China’s rapidly growing nuclear arsenal and America’s nuclear modernization process, it is not clear that the distinction will hold.[1] One disturbing difference between the old and new cold wars, Betts notes, is that there is a lack of a firebreak between conventional and nuclear weapons. This is chiefly because of China’s practice of colocating conventional and nuclear weapons.[2] Betts argues that the new cold war is less ideological than the old one. Even so, differing regime types are no less important this time around than they were last time, and Chinese president Xi Jinping’s major speeches since 2017 have increasingly highlighted Chinese ideology in national and international political milieux.[3]

David Shambaugh is less convinced that the US and China are engaged in a full-on cold war. He argues that China and the US are not trying to counter each other everywhere. Contra Betts, Shambaugh argues that ideology and regime type are important parts of today’s Sino-American relations, noting that the ideological dimension of Sino-American competition today is comparable to that of the old Cold War. He thus deems today’s China-US relations Cold War 1.5 rather than 2.0. While Betts’s argument about the new cold war is
persuasive, Shambaugh’s argument that ideology is as important today as it was in the original Cold War must be taken seriously as well.

In his introduction, Medeiros asks the key question of why the bilateral relationship has shifted to a state of great tension in recent years. All of the authors respond to it. Wu Xinbo argues that it was primarily the team of former president Donald Trump that “fomented the strategic competition with China and drove Sino-US relations to an abrupt downward trend in 2018” (p. 126). Li Chen notes that “the US is expanding the competition to the global level and is determined to confront a rising China’s international influence and the success of its high-technology industries” and that the US “is preoccupied with the competition in modernization and military posture” (pp. 242, 250). While the essays by Wu and Li do an excellent job of examining the changing nature of the United States’ posture toward China in recent years, they do not discuss how Chinese actions might have driven US policies. For instance, they do not discuss China’s support of North Korean attacks on South Korean islands and ships, its atrocities against Uighurs, its treatment of Hong Kong residents, its transgressions against Philippines territory in the South China Sea, its attempts at manipulations of politics and elections in Australia and elsewhere, its intellectual property violations of/companies, or the Chinese government’s subsidies of Chinese companies doing business abroad so as to attain market dominance.

[4] All of these actions have had an impact on US perceptions of China, and US decisions to take a stronger position on China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in recent years, as many of the other authors in the volume attest.

The chapter by Wang Jisi opens with a more nuanced view of US-China relations, noting the importance of Chinese leaders’ domestic political insecurities as key to understanding their foreign policy orientation: “The current security and diplomatic issues between China and the United States, including those related to the South China Sea, Taiwan, and external military relations, should be seen in light of their connection with China’s political security rather than simply as ‘national security’ issues, as they are treated in the West” (p. 91). This is true (and well understood in the West). As with the essays by Wu and Li, Wang’s too attributes the downward trend in bilateral relations primarily to US actions. Taking the not uncommon view in the literature in China that the US is declining, Wang outlines thirteen “episodes” that, he argues, comprise “US interference in [China’s] internal affairs,” including the Tiananmen Square incident of June 4, 1989, and “the political storm in Hong Kong in 2019-20,” all of which put CCP leadership on the defensive (pp. 95-96, 98).

The US was not in fact behind the events of June 4, which involved a protest by Chinese citizens against CCP policies, disappointed in their government’s lack of response to their pleas following the relative openness of the previous few years during the 1980s.[6] Likewise, the US was not the cause of the 2019 (or any other) Hong Kong protests. Here, too, the citizens of Hong Kong were protesting Beijing’s policies, in this particular case Hong Kong’s 2019 extradition bill.[7] Wang also suggests that the American decision to send two carrier groups to the Taiwan area during the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis “reminded many in China that Washington remained the foremost obstacle to reunifying Taiwan” (p. 100). The US is not the foremost obstacle to reunification with China.[8] China’s policies are the greatest obstacle to unity between Taiwan and the mainland, for the majority of Taiwanese people oppose reunification with the mainland as long as the CCP runs China, fearing that their end would be no different than that of Tibetans, Uighurs, or Hong Kongers, all of whom have seen their societies and cultures repressed and their freedoms encroached upon. [9]
In diagnosing the downturn in Sino-American relations, Harry Harding argues that from the US perspective, 2015 was a “tipping point” (he cites David M. Lampton for that phrase) in the relationship after the “accumulation of frustrations and resentments,” wherein a consensus emerged in both major US political parties that the US engagement policy had failed and a new, tougher approach to China was warranted (p. 78).[10] A number of other contributors take a similar tack. In her chapter, Elizabeth Economy writes that the reason for the downturn in relations between China and the US was “a changing China,” the rise of Xi in particular (p. 149). Economy notes that while US president Joe Biden’s national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, said in late 2021 that the US seeks “not a new cold war,” Xi’s choices are in fact contributing to just that, a new cold war (p. 164). In his chapter, James Mulvenon quotes a speech from January 31, 2022, by the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Christopher Wray, regarding reasons for the United States’ more hawkish turn. “We have now reached the point where the FBI is opening a new China-related counterintelligence case about every ten hours. Of the nearly 5,000 active FBI counterintelligence cases currently underway across the country, almost half are related to China. And over the past decade, we’ve seen economic espionage cases with a link to China increase by approximately 1,300 percent” (p. 263). Wray’s statement underlines the point that the challenges the CCP poses to the US are not just international in nature but domestic as well.

Phillip Saunders’s chapter examines the military dimension of China-US competition, highlighting the “aggressive military behavior” of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) as a key factor (p. 213). He cites “Chinese interceptions and harassment of US military ships and planes operating inside China’s exclusive economic zone [EEZ]” (US military ship/plane passage in the EEZ is permissible by United Nations Law of the Sea rules); Chinese use of “paramilitary ships to seize control of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines” inside the Philippines’ EEZ; land reclamation efforts on non-island maritime features outside of its EEZ; and “grey zone” and paramilitary tactics in its own waters and in areas legitimately claimed by other players, some of which are formal US allies (Japan, Philippines) (p. 213). In recent years, all of these tactics have led to a US perception of increasing Chinese aggression and opportunism.

One of the most interesting and potentially important takeaways of the book is the difference in responses between the Chinese and American authors to the question of why things have become so tense in Sino-American relations. For all three Chinese-based scholars, it is Washington’s fault. Their essays describe the increase in tensions between China and the US today as arising because of changes in US policy, which stem from a US turn toward aggression and confrontation under the Trump administration in particular. According to these essays, China has done nothing wrong, unusual, or aggressive to elicit such a change in Washington’s orientation. The American-based scholars draw different conclusions as to the reasons for the downward turn in China-US relations, pointing more so to the actions of the CCP, the rise of President Xi in particular, as being key to understanding the change in Sino-American relations in the past few years.

In the final section of the book, Medeiros, David Edelstein, and Shambaugh each offer scenarios for possible Sino-American outcomes. Each piece is interesting and worth considering, but forecasting the future is difficult. Our meteorologists have a lot more data than those observing Sino-American relations do, and they often get it wrong, so it is difficult to predict where Sino-American relations will go, though I see clouds on the horizon regarding relations between these two great nations.

Medeiros offers a helpful conclusion. He argues that a Taiwan crisis is “expected ... perhaps by the end of the decade” (p. 397). In research I am conducting, I am afraid that I would put it at less
than three years, unless there is drastic improvement in China's relations with the US and/or Taiwan, which does not seem likely at present.[11] One bit of phraseology Madeiros concludes with is striking, and I leave the reader to ponder it. Madeiros says that China and the US are “one crisis away” from a new cold war, “one crisis away” from “major political disjuncture” (p. 398). I believe Madeiros is right. I am worried, profoundly.

Because of the quality of the contributors and the importance of the subject at hand, this volume is one of the most important books to come out on China-US relations in some time and should be read by anyone interested in the future of this bilateral relationship. One of the most apparent features of the volume, though I am not sure it was intended by the editor, is its portrayal of the clear differences in how Chinese and American scholars view each other and their relative responsibility for the quandary they find themselves in. Regardless of one's views of which side bears greater responsibility for the current sorry state of China-US relations, perhaps we should all worry at least a bit, for, as veteran American China-watcher Shambaugh puts it in the volume, no less than “the future of the world is at stake” in how China-US relations develop in the next few years (p. 378).

Notes


[11]. Gregory J. Moore, “Xi Jinping’s Taiwan Dashboard” (lecture, presented to faculty and cadets at the US Air Force Academy as part of a workshop series by the USAFA’s Institute for Future Conflict, Colorado Springs, CO, December 7, 2023). This work is currently being revised for publication.

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