
Reviewed by David C. Atkinson (Purdue University)

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Stuart Rollo’s *Terminus: Westward Expansion, China, and the End of American Empire* is a richly kaleidoscopic contribution to the ever-burgeoning literature on US-China relations. Rollo situates the Sino-US relationship in terms of the rise and fall of American empire, and this is the book’s most important interpretive contribution. Focusing on the context and character of Americans’ evolving disposition toward China over the last 250 years, he begins with an overview of US continental colonization and Americans’ subsequent expansion into the Pacific Ocean. He concludes with President Joseph Biden’s attempt to resuscitate the diminished structures of the US-dominated liberal internationalist order. In between, Rollo entwines his evaluation of American engagements with China with an expertly rendered narrative of imperialism and foreign relations, blending historical and international relations perspectives throughout. It is an erudite and informative synthesis that should appeal to all H-Diplo readers, as well as our students and members of the public who seek a clear understanding of why contemporary US-Chinese relations remain so fraught in our present moment, and how we got here.

*Terminus* is a versatile book that can be read in multiple registers. Rollo’s narrative is especially valuable for the way he weaves four distinct narrative threads together. On one level, it is a useful survey of Sino-US relations, albeit one that emphasizes the perspectives of American rather than Chinese interlocutors in that relationship. Readers looking for the Chinese perspective, or a greater focus on traditional diplomatic relations, will find it lacking compared to Warren I. Cohen’s still essential *America’s Response to China* (2019), for example. But that is not Rollo’s purpose. Rather, *Terminus* seeks to integrate that story into the history of American empire and expansion. On that level, it offers something particularly novel. Historians of American imperialism might balk at Rollo’s emphasis on the imperial rather than colonial mani-
festations of Americans’ desire for economic, if not territorial, suzerainty in Asia, but again, that is not his objective: how Americans conceived of China (Qing, Nationalist, and Communist) in relation to the rise and fall of American empire (commercial, financial, territorial, military, and ideational) is the focus. In addition to interlacing these themes, on another level Rollo pays regular attention to the ideas of those theorists and strategists who whetted American appetites when it came to China, combining historical and international relations scholarship and perspectives throughout the narrative. We hear from a large cast of both critics and boosters of American power from across the centuries, including Karl Marx, John Atkinson Hobson, Nicholas Spykman, William Appleman Williams, and Andrew Bacevich to name a few. Finally, the book can be read as a very engaging survey of US foreign relations writ large, since Rollo never confines himself to the transpacific lens, and instead constantly keeps American visions of China in the same frame as Americans’ conceptions of a broader global imperium.

Terminus is therefore best understood as an alloy, in that it derives its strength from the mixture of these four interlacing narratives and frames. The result is a concise and accessible book that offers an adept historical overview of China’s changing significance to American policymakers, theorists, and strategists from independence to the present.

The book is divided into three sections, each encompassing a distinct phase of American ambitions for China. Part 1 traces the story from the aftermath of independence to the turn of the twentieth century and focuses on the commercial and financial aspirations of American merchants, statesmen, and strategists during that century. In the first two chapters, Rollo roots his narrative in a familiar story of westward expansion characterized by violent Native dispossession and the insatiable drive for land and commercial access to Asia. In that context, China especially enraptured those seeking to exploit Asia’s potentially lucrative markets, goods, and raw materials. Rollo is attentive to the domestic and international contexts that both facilitated and inhibited the realization of these prospects—whether real or imagined—and he emphasizes the internal and external ruptures that catalyzed the Qing dynasty’s nineteenth-century decline. This part of the book culminates in the convulsion of late nineteenth-century US imperialism, and Rollo rightly focuses on the major manifestations of that paroxysm in the Asia-Pacific region. The Open-Door Notes and the Boxer Rebellion receive particular attention, and Rollo is attentive to the racial and geostrategic anxieties that suffused the most capacious cravings of those who viewed China as an outlet not only for American goods, but also American capital and civilization.

Part 2 addresses the twentieth-century phase of US economic and strategic predominance, from the emergence of American power following the First World War to the ostensive triumph of the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991. Rollo unsurprisingly foregrounds the American and Japanese competition for East Asian predominance at the core of this section’s first chapter, orienting his analysis productively toward modern industrial warfare’s thirst for strategic raw materials. From this perspective, both contenders perceived China as a repository of essential minerals like manganese and tungsten that would consolidate their prospective regional—and in the case of the United States, global—primacy. Chapter 5 broadens its frame commensurate with the now truly global aspirations of American power. The allure of potential markets and investment opportunities in China and elsewhere now gave way to more sophisticated geostrategic conceptions of global capitalist integration and cooperation. Commercial dominance remained an important objective, but security and prosperity now required the creation and management of an intricate, internationally panoptic liberal-democratic architecture, one dominated of course by the United States. In
Asia, that manifested in what Rollo provocatively calls an “American-led Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere,” anchored by Japan (pp. 120-121).

The sixth chapter addresses the emergence of the People's Republic and the Cold War, which in Rollo's interpretation sees China evoke a more dangerously existential threat to the broader hegemonic project fostered by the United States, not just in Asia but around the world. He sees the wars in Korea and Vietnam as exemplars of that project, but also harbingers of its demise. It is the one chapter in which Rollo’s argument might have benefited from more room to breathe, since we are hurled at breakneck speed through some of the most consequential moments in the history of Sino-US relations. This includes not only those devastating American wars in Southeast and East Asia, but also President Richard Nixon’s rapprochement, President Jimmy Carter’s fulfillment of recognition, and the profound economic transformations of the Ronald Reagan years, not to mention those of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping.

The third part of Terminus transitions to the post-Cold War era through the present. Here, Rollo recounts the flush of victory that encouraged American policymakers to confidently thrust the open door upon the globe. The desire to secure markets, raw materials, and investment opportunities reigned supreme, as successive US presidents and their counselors inside and outside government tried to reshape the world in America’s apparently transcendent image. For Rollo, economic access and predominance remained paramount, but contemporary presidents differed in their enthusiasm for strategic competition with China. It waned during the Bill Clinton years, during which American officials believed the gospel of globalization would convert Chinese Communist leaders to the benefits of democratization and neoliberal economics. Strategic competition nevertheless waxed under the presidency of George W. Bush, exacerbated by the events of September 11 and the global war on terror. American imperial over-reach during the Bush years diminished the United States’ capacity to reshape the world in its image, and China seized the opportunity to reorient and strengthen its own economy, eventually supplanting the US as the global economic hegemon by many metrics.

Chapters 8 and 9 deal with American attempts to alternatively understand, manage, resist, or reset that reality. The final chapter is, from my perspective, the most generative and thought-provoking. Rollo proves as fluent in the lexicon of modern security studies as he is with its historical antecedents. His assessment of our contemporary options to grapple with the threat and possibilities posed by Xi Jinping’s resurgent China is clear-eyed and judicious. Rollo’s estimation of the most productive path forward reflects that most venerable analogy, favored by generations of American national security personnel: the Goldilocks principle. While President Donald Trump favored a white-hot porridge laced with quid pro quos, zero-sum transactions, and military superiority, others have mooted the cold gruel of retrenchment. Rollo not surprisingly favors the more palatable oats of “offshore balancing and mutual deterrence and denial” (p. 206). That might not set the taste buds alight, but it is much less likely to cause irreparable indigestion.

The final chapter concludes with one of the book’s most intriguing points. Here, Rollo posits our contemporary conundrum: how to ensure peace between “a rising Chinese empire and a declining American one” (p. 208). This brief recognition that China is erecting an imperial structure of its own—one that reflects its own interests and yet echoes many elements of the now deteriorating edifice constructed by the United States—is a tantalizing gesture toward the next century of US-Chinese relations. It also demands that we retrain our focus less on American intentions and possible rear-guard actions, and more on the objectives of China’s ruling class as it looks toward the next century. Others are already doing that work,
of course, and Rollo’s *Terminus* will be a very useful text for them as they come to grips with the American half of that equation.[1] The nightly gaggle of pundits who confidently espouse the unique dangers of China’s rise would do particularly well to take cognizance of Rollo’s historicization of the United States’ attitudes toward global power across the last two centuries. They may find more resonances than dissonances between the waning American imperium they lament, and the expanding Chinese imperium they decry.

**Note**


David C. Atkinson is associate professor of history at Purdue University. He is the author of *The Burden of White Supremacy: Containing Asian Labor Migration in the British Empire and the United States* (2017), along with numerous articles and chapters on international migration, diplomacy, and empire.

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