



Book Review

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Aaron L Friedberg, *A Contest For Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*. New York, WW Norton, 2011, 360 pp., \$10.50, ISBN 978-0-393-34389-2pbk.

The “Rise of China” and “Future of Sino-US Relations” are the current flavour of 21st-century strategic discourse generating intense scholarly debate besides serving as themes for a multitude of works. Written by a US academician specializing in the field of international politics and security, this book seeks to assess the current state of US–China strategic interaction and its future contours. The fundamental premise of the book is that Sino–US relationship, in all likelihood, would follow the earlier tales of an intense, prolonged and sustained competition between a *dominant power* and a *rising great power* to influence the international geo-political landscape. This rivalry though subterranean and restrained at present because of the constraints faced by the two protagonists is likely to deepen in times to come. Given a general acceptance that an extended Asia-Pacific is the strategic centre of gravity, this contest would be played out in all its strategic dimensions spanning the continuum of politics–diplomacy–ideology–economics–military–technology aspects.

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The book commences by a broad overview of the Asian Renaissance phenomenon and takes the reader on a historiographical tour recounting the earlier rise of the West in terms of power and wealth since Vasco-da-Gama's epochal journey, onto the ascendancy of the East in contemporary discourse. The author summarizes by stating this has much to do with economic liberalization, political decentralization and socio-economic pragmatism with distinct internal characterizations among the key players like China, ASEAN bloc, India and Japan. The book thereafter delves on the theoretical frameworks that have underpinned "great power" relationships through a historical and strategic contextualization as a backgrounder for the arguments that follow. The entire array of perspectives – ranging from the idealist to the post-constructivist logics have been discussed along with their respective strengths and weaknesses when applied in a US–China context. During the course of this discussion, the entire continuum of prevalent views spanning from the extreme right leaning (offensive realists), centrists (pragmatists) and the optimists have been discussed. The author posits that Sino-US bilateral relationship when juxtaposed against the contemporary environment is unique with no exact historical precedents where a case is made that this relationship is evolving in an uncertain, but an open and interconnected environment with shades of correspondence and divergences across the whole spectrum of issues. The author has termed this cooperative-cum-conflictual bilateralism as "*conengagement*" (containment cum engagement).

The main body of the book explores the intertwined threads of policy-politics, diplomacy, military security, technological and economic dimensions in their "hard" and "soft" avatars. The author opines that these aspects are critical for determining the US–China policy dynamics and their fallout on the international system. While deconstructing the strategic narrative, the book has largely focused on the external dynamics, however; the pushes and pulls of domestic constituents that have contributed to shaping policy decisions, some of them driven by narrow self-interests, have also been presented. Further, the convergences and the dissonances that exist along the economic, military, political and ideological issues between the main protagonists have been examined.

The author has identified influence, perception management and balance of power as the key determinants that would shape US–China strategic relationship. The strengths and weaknesses of various competitive and cooperative strategies adopted by Beijing as well as Washington has been traced through the course of modern history, especially in a post-Cold War context. The effects of these postures and policies not

only affect the two principal actors but have knock-on consequences amongst perceived partners, formal allies and potential adversaries. Some national actors considered critical for the future global order particularly along an Asian centric “arc of influence” like ASEAN, Japan, Russia, India, South and North Korea.

A major thread that runs through the entire narrative is that the USA and China, at present, face limitations that have restrained them from adopting a more “hardened” stance on issues of serious difference. Contemporary geo-economic and domestic fiscal constraints have restrained the USA and the military imperatives have dampened a greater Chinese assertiveness. The author is of the view that while US–China strategic relationship would be played out in a larger Asia-Pacific construct, it will have distinct territorial and maritime nuances given the different geographical paradigms. It is postulated that China enjoys a stable continental periphery but faces a constrained and contested maritime neighbourhood, where USA holds an edge given the hub and spokes alliance arrangements akin to a “metal chain” around the Chinese periphery. The gains that China had accrued through “soft power diplomacy” in last 15 years have been frittered away by its coercive stance on maritime territorial disputes.

Critical strategic factors, internal and external drivers, and the policy-politics interaction, constitute the majority of analytical part of the book. These issues have been analysed through a qualitative-quantitative analytical framework to present a holistic overview. Another noteworthy issue is the examination of strategic cultures, not only of the main protagonists but the key peripheral players that are considered vital to the future form of international order, especially in a Eurasian context. America as the dominant power derives its strategic logic on a status quoist, relative balance of power system, while China sees a different global order through the prism of hegemonic stability and power transition theories. It is assessed that it would be difficult for these two actors to arrive at a consensual mechanism given the different worldviews and the fundamental differences arising out of disparate political and ideological frameworks.

As part of a narrative on American statecraft the strategy of “enhanced engagement” by the first Obama administration has been criticized for generating anxieties amongst allies and partners since it was perceived as an attempt to arrive at “great power” G-2 condominium. Given the current uncertainty, economic and military imperatives and globalized context, the author suggests a more realistic strategic posture based on reciprocity and tangible results. The choices and tools

available to the USA are limited as the alternate strategies of pure confrontation and appeasement are unviable options. A strong recommendation put forth is to strengthen the existing alliances and build a loose web of coalition with similar minded nations. With the two largely indeterminate wars on terror having sapped USA of diplomatic, military and fiscal capital are close to closure, the author is emphatic that the focus needs to be realigned to more pressing and long term strategic challenge posed by China.

As far as India is concerned, it finds mentions as a key swing state in the region that is being courted by China and the USA. The author makes some acerbic (though true) and some complimentary comments about India's strategic outlook. The author is of the view that India inordinately delayed following the liberalization regime and was thus forced into making *fait accompli* choices. One place where the author seems to have missed the mark is when paints India as a quasi-ally of the USA. Given the territorial dilemmas, maritime ambitions, existential security threats, economic and social challenges as well as the strategic culture predicated on consensus building, the above proposition may be too close for comfort for Indian decision makers.

A lucid narrative on a subject of contemporary strategic salience, the book is a serious scholarly work that is well supported by primary and secondary references from all actors including those from China thus enhancing the value of discourse. The interplay between the text and the references to explain some key issues is an interesting style adopted by the author and a well-argued, flowing narrative retains the readers' interest. Written about three years ago, the book is considered a work of enduring relevance since the events from that time onwards have actually played out along the lines as predicted by the author. The book is strongly recommended for reading by the strategic community, scholars of international relations and security, and of course, by the US–China watchers with preliminary understanding and background knowledge.