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# What China Wants

## Bargaining With Beijing

*Andrew J. Nathan*

*On China.* BY HENRY KISSINGER.

Penguin Press, 2011, 608 pp. \$36.00.

*A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia.* BY AARON L. FRIEDBERG. Norton, 2011, 352 pp. \$27.95.

As a connoisseur of fine diplomacy, Henry Kissinger finds a lot of it to admire in China. His new book, cast as a history of Chinese foreign policy, traces the twists and turns of Chinese strategy since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, quoting liberally from his numerous conversations with Chinese leaders. But *On China* is really neither history nor memoir. Its purpose is to argue that the United States should yield gracefully to China's rise in order to avoid a tragic conflict.

Aaron Friedberg gives the opposite advice. A Princeton professor and former foreign policy adviser to Vice President

Dick Cheney, he analyzes the strategies that China and the United States have used in dealing with each other since the early 1990s and tries to decipher China's intentions in the coming decades. In the face of growing Chinese power and ambition, the United States, he argues, must stand strong in those many areas in which China's interests are adverse to its own. Together, the two books offer a window onto the strategic split over China among mainstream Republicans.

Kissinger likens Chinese diplomacy to the game of *wei qi* (equivalent to the Japanese game of go), a patient contest of encirclement in which victory is only relative. Chinese strategists view the quest for a decisive outcome as illusory. Instead, they play a game of "combative coexistence," seeking to improve their relative power position amid the ever-changing forces

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of world politics. At the necessary moment, one may deliver a salutary psychological shock and then withdraw, as the Chinese did to the Indians in 1962 to put a stop to incursions along their contested border, and as they did to the Soviets in 1969 to deter Moscow from probing Chinese positions along their frontier. On other occasions, one may hide one's light and bide one's time, as Deng Xiaoping famously advised his colleagues to do in 1991, telling them to maintain good relations with the United States while building up China's strength. Or it might be useful to claim hurt dignity and designate a whole topic as nonnegotiable, as Beijing did in 1993-94 when U.S. President Bill Clinton tried to make favorable tariff rates conditional on improvements on human rights, and as it is doing today over territorial issues.

Kissinger sees contrasts here with the usual approach of U.S. diplomats, which often frustrated him when he was running the show. Where American negotiators tend to compartmentalize issues and seek solutions, their Chinese counterparts prefer to integrate issues and seek understandings. Whereas Americans believe that agreements can be reached in one sector while disagreements are expressed in another, Chinese prefer to characterize the whole atmosphere as warm or cold, friendly or tense, creating an incentive for the other side to put disagreements on the back burner. Whereas Americans are troubled by deadlocks, Chinese know how to leverage them to keep pressure on the other side. American diplomacy is transactional; Chinese diplomacy, psychological.

Kissinger quotes the advice of the ancient military strategist Sun-tzu, who argued that one can win a battle before it begins by staking out a dominant political

and psychological position. As far back as the third century, the military commander Zhuge Liang turned back an enemy army by opening the city gates and sunning himself on the ramparts; this looked like a trap and frightened away the opposing general. In 1793-94, the Qianlong emperor fended off the British delegate Lord George Macartney with smothering hospitality; when Macartney failed to get the point, the court dismissed him with a note left on a silk chair. In 1958, Mao Zédong received the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev not just at his private swimming pool but in it, forcing the Soviet leader to negotiate in water wings. When Kissinger met Zhou Enlai for the first time, in 1971, the premier had arranged his schedule to leave only two negotiating slots, totaling 13 hours, available during Kissinger's time in Beijing, forcing the American envoy to agree to a presidential visit with few details resolved in advance.

Such tactics make hospitality "an aspect of strategy," Kissinger explains, leaving a foreign guest awed, discomfited, or wooed by the host's wealth, generosity, and composure. Chinese diplomats are adept at the use of friendship, which leaves "the other side . . . flattered by being admitted to the Chinese 'club' as an 'old friend,' a posture that makes disagreement more complicated and confrontations painful," Kissinger writes. As the Manchu diplomat Qiying said about dealing with the British "barbarians," it was necessary to "curb them by sincerity."

It helps to come from an ancient civilization. "The duration and scale of the Chinese past allow Chinese leaders to use the mantle of an almost limitless history to evoke a certain modesty in their opposite numbers," Kissinger writes. His occasional

digs at the United States—whose foreign policy culture he describes as “missionary,” interventionist, narrow-visioned, and crassly pragmatic—show how hard it was to represent a nation that lacks that asset. At Kissinger and Zhou’s first conversation, Zhou ceded seniority to the United States by comparing the age of the American republic (some 200 years) to that of the People’s Republic (22 years). It was flattering, even though Kissinger knew it was false.

The problem with Kissinger’s book is not the facts. These are well grounded in the scholarly literature and, throughout much of the book, in the notes of conversations in which he himself took part. But newer scholarship has long since called into doubt any essentialism about China’s “singularity,” “centrality,” or “strategic patience.” Although Kissinger does not use the word, the picture he paints is of an eternal—and very Oriental—China. And it is not clear why China’s long history of diplomacy makes it necessary for the United States to yield to Chinese preferences in the present. What is lacking for such an argument is an analysis of the material realities of China’s relative power, which even after 20 years of spectacular economic growth remain in many ways unfavorable.

#### **CONTENTIOUS INTENTIONS**

Friedberg also exaggerates Chinese power, although in pursuit of a different argument. His is the most thoughtful and informative of a stream of China-threat books that have come out since the mid-1990s. Within that genre, its contribution is to focus on China’s strategic intentions. Although Friedberg agrees with the classical realist logic that a change in power relations

inevitably generates rivalry, he also believes it is important to figure out what, as he puts it, China wants.

His method is to synthesize the views of Chinese public intellectuals who write in Chinese policy magazines roughly similar in function to *Foreign Affairs* and in other media. The authors on whom he draws are professors or fellows (and some graduate students) at universities and think tanks and a few military officers who work in jobs that allow them to write books and articles for the general public. Friedberg argues that these materials “reflect the main currents of ‘responsible’ opinion” among Chinese writers, “some of [whom] are known to have access to the inner circles of the party and state.” What he reads these experts as saying is that China should seek to “displace the United States as the dominant player in East Asia, and perhaps to extrude it from the region altogether.”

But this method of assessing Chinese intentions is full of pitfalls. Authors who write for the Chinese public have to compete for attention the same way that American public intellectuals do, with edgy views and vivid writing. And they do not all agree with one another. In fact, the authors Friedberg cites take varied positions, ranging from that of Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu, who wants China to become “world number one,” to that of the scholar Wang Jisi, who emphasizes common interests between China and the United States. The attempt to synthesize these views creates a false unity, with Friedberg privileging those of the writers who say the sharpest things. Moreover, as pointed out by Thomas Christensen in these pages (“The Advantages of an Assertive China,” March/April 2011),

Chinese policymakers have consistently been more cautious in practice than the Chinese media have been in their rhetoric. The proper takeaway from Friedberg's analysis is that the Chinese public has been treated to a rich diet of nationalist sentimentality, which for whatever reason is permitted—or perhaps even mandated—by the propaganda department, which ultimately controls the Chinese media.

By focusing on intentions, Friedberg, like Kissinger, leaves out any serious accounting of China's capability to achieve the goals that various writers propose. Such an audit would show that China is bogged down both internally and in Asia generally. At home, it devotes enormous resources, including military ones, to maintaining control over the two-fifths of its territory that comprise Xinjiang and greater Tibet, to keeping civil order throughout the densely populated and socially unstable Han heartland, and to deterring Taiwan's independence. Around its borders, it is surrounded chiefly by two kinds of countries: unstable ones where almost any conceivable change will make life more difficult for Chinese strategists (such as Myanmar, North Korea, and the weak states of Central Asia) and strong ones that are likely to get stronger in the future and compete with China (such as India, Japan, Russia, and Vietnam). And everywhere on its periphery, on land and at sea, China faces the powerful presence of the United States. The U.S. Pacific Command remains the most muscular of the U.S. military's six regional combatant commands, after the Central Command (which is managing two ongoing wars), and it continues to adjust its strategies as China's military modernizes.

Friedberg is also imprecise. His title, *A Contest for Supremacy*, means one thing; part of his subtitle, *the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, means another—and neither idea is vindicated by the body of the book. He is on firmer ground when he writes that “if China's power continues to grow, and if it continues to be ruled by a one-party authoritarian regime, its relations with the United States are going to become increasingly tense and competitive.” But friction is not conflict.

And all this assumes that China's rise will continue unabated. Friedberg reasonably enough makes this assumption for the purposes of argument. But it is unlikely to prove correct in the long run because China's economic and political model faces so many vulnerabilities. To add to the worries of Chinese leaders, as Friedberg points out, there are U.S. intentions: “stripped of diplomatic niceties, the ultimate aim of the American strategy is to hasten a revolution, albeit a peaceful one, that will sweep away China's one-party authoritarian state.” This helps explain why Chinese leaders act more like people under siege than like people on an expansionist warpath.

Even if China does stay on course, it cannot hope for anything that can reasonably be called supremacy, or even regional mastery, unless U.S. power radically declines. Absent that development, it is implausible that, as Friedberg predicts, “the nations of Asia will choose eventually to follow the lead of a rising China, ‘bandwagoning’ with it . . . rather than trying to balance against it.” Instead, the more China rises, the more most of China's neighbors will want to balance with the United States, not against it.

**REACTING TO RISE**

Kissinger ends his book with a policy recommendation that is disappointingly brief and imprecise. He urges the creation of a Pacific Community, "to which the United States, China, and other states all belong and in whose peaceful development all participate." But why should the United States yield so much authority to China? Every other potential member of this community will also ask whether such a project would enhance or reduce its power. The Chinese will wonder why they should bind themselves to U.S. priorities in this way. Larger Asian powers, such as Japan and South Korea, will doubt the benefit of submerging themselves in a U.S.-Chinese condominium. And smaller states will see themselves at risk of being sold out by their major ally, either China or the United States. The proposal's premise, that a U.S.-Chinese confrontation must be avoided, is sound, but it fails to take national interests into account.

Friedberg rejects the idea of a two-power condominium in Asia as appeasement. At the other extreme, he discredits the idea of trying to delay or derail China's rise as too confrontational. A third option, "enhanced engagement," is fine as far as it goes, but it places too much hope in the willingness of Chinese policymakers to cooperate with an opponent whose interests are not identical to their own. Instead, he recommends that the United States set proper boundaries for China's rise by maintaining a favorable balance of power in Asia. This will require the United States to undertake "costly and difficult measures," such as maintaining its alliances with Japan and South Korea and its cooperative relations with most of

China's other neighbors, continuing to upgrade its military posture to match China's military modernization, and balancing its transpacific trade relationships. In a version of "we have met the enemy and he is us," Friedberg says that in order to do all this, the United States must restore its economy, keep its scientific edge, protect its advanced technology, and maintain its margin of military advantage.

One can only say amen to the recommendation that the United States pull up its socks. Such proposals are persuasive with or without China in the picture, and it is well to reinforce them in the context of China's rise. But few of them are controversial. That they form the core of Friedberg's strategy is a sign that the United States' future in Asia is not as hostage to China's rise as is implied by the alarmist tone of his earlier chapters. China cannot displace the United States from Asia; only the United States can. Friedberg's counsel resembles the essence of U.S. policy for at least the last decade. Certainly, the Obama administration has been working to do what Friedberg suggests. The United States is hardly "on track to lose [its] geopolitical contest with China."

The real target of Friedberg's criticism is not U.S. policy but "China-watchers in academia, commerce, and government," whom he accuses of stifling debate and of "willful, blinkered optimism." Prominent among these is Kissinger, whom Friedberg characterizes as part of a "Shanghai Coalition" (more plainly, a new China lobby) that wants "to avoid criticism of China and to support good relations." Friedberg's strongest disagreement with this group concerns the place of human rights in Washington's China policy.

If a key technique of Sun-tzu-style diplomacy is to convince the other side that certain issues are too culturally and politically sensitive to be discussed, China seems to have secured that part of the *wei qi* board when it comes to Kissinger's views on human rights. Speaking of the immediate post-Tiananmen period, Kissinger says that "the American advocates of human rights insisted on values they considered universal" and that such universalism "challenges the element of nuance by which foreign policy is generally obliged to operate." He continues: "If adoption of American principles of governance is made the central condition for progress in all other areas of the relationship, deadlock is inevitable." These statements combine three fallacies: that the universality of international human rights is a matter of opinion rather than international law, that human rights equals American principles of governance, and that promoting human rights means holding hostage progress in all other areas.

Friedberg's counterargument is persuasive. Showing softness on core values will reinforce the view of many Chinese that the United States is in decline, thus encouraging China to miscalculate U.S. resolve. As Friedberg writes, "Soft-pedaling talk of freedom will not reassure China's leaders as much as it will embolden them." He tellingly applies Kissinger's insight into the emollient effects of friendship to Kissinger himself, arguing that the Shanghai Coalition's members are motivated in part by "the psychic rewards that come from believing that they are helping to promote peace and the gratification of being revered and well treated by Beijing."

It is no wonder that Chinese statecraft aims to establish the cultural relativity of

human rights and to pose talk of human rights as the enemy of friendship. After all, the failure to respect human rights is a glaring weakness of Chinese power both at home and abroad, whereas promoting human rights has been among the United States' most successful maneuvers on the *wei qi* board of world politics. What is surprising is that the United States' master strategist wants to play this part of the game by Beijing's rules. Would it not make more sense to emulate Chinese strategy than to yield to it? Emphasizing the principled centrality of the human rights idea to American ideology and keeping the issue active in bilateral relations even though it cannot be solved would seem to be—along with exercising the United States' strengths in other fields—a good way to set the boundaries within which a rising Chinese power can operate without threatening U.S. interests. 🌐