

Review - A Contest For Supremacy

Written by Zachary Keck

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Princeton University Professor Aaron Friedberg's new book, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* is destined to become a staple text for students of U.S.-Sino relations and Asian international relations. Friedberg- who first gained academic acclaim as the author of some of the founding Neoclassical Realist texts[i]- established himself long ago as a leading pessimist on the future of Asia in general (which he categorized as ripe for rivalry) and the rise of China in particular.[ii] After publishing a number of influential articles on these subjects in the 1990's and early part of this century, he set out to turn these ideas into a book in 2001 but was interrupted by the election of the George W Bush administration, in which he served as a foreign policy advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney.

A Contest for Supremacy is therefore the culmination of these earlier efforts along with Friedberg's work since leaving government to return to Princeton in 2005.[iii] The book cements Friedberg's position as one of the more thoughtful and balanced of the Asia pessimists. In fact, one of the principle strengths of the book is its ability to offer a careful assessment that avoids any pretense of determinism, while still making a strong and, in this author's view, ultimately persuasive argument.

Friedberg's thesis is essentially two-fold. First, he argues the United States and China are "locked in a quiet but increasingly intense struggle for power and influence" in Asia and across the globe, which will only become more acute as China continues to accumulate more power. Second, and "despite what many earnest and well-intentioned commentators seem to believe, the emerging Sino-American rivalry is not the result of easily erased misperceptions or readily correctible policy errors" but rather is driven by power politics and differing ideologies (1). These two factors, Friedberg writes, "are stronger and more deeply rooted than is widely assumed, and they also tend to reinforce one another in important and potentially dangerous ways" (38).

This is not to say that Friedberg doesn't recognize that other factors also influence the nature of U.S.-Sino relations. In fact, Friedberg considers a number of other factors that all tend to promote cooperation (or at least discourage conflict) between Beijing and Washington including: economic interdependence, China's increasing participation in international institutions, the presence of common threats such as climate change and transnational terrorism, and the existence of nuclear weapons. Although acknowledging these factors will certainly impact the trajectory of the bilateral relationship, he ultimately discounts their importance relative to power and ideology.

For example, after noting that China has greatly increased its participation in multilateral forums in recent years, Friedberg argues that absent a resolution of the geopolitical and ideological issues underpinning the competition between Washington and Beijing, these international institutions are "likely to become just another venue for struggle (53)." Specifically, China will seek to promote and strengthen regional organizations that exclude the United States- such as ASEAN+3 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization- while the United States will seek to promote ones in which it does have a seat at the table.

With regards to greater economic interdependence, on the other hand, Friedberg admits this has thus far damped U.S.-Sino rivalry. At the same time, however, he disputes whether this will continue to be the case and is even more skeptical as to whether this factor will be strong enough to overcome the competitive impulses that power and ideology generate. After all, Friedberg notes, economic interdependence failed to prevent Great Britain and Germany from going to war in 1914. Moreover, economic issues- such as restricted market access, China's holding of U.S. debt and currency manipulation- already create tension in the bilateral relationship. Therefore, economic interdependence might end up heightening the rivalry in the coming years.[iv]

Thus, Friedberg concludes that power and ideology will be the most decisive factors in determining the trajectory of U.S.-Sino relations in the future. Unfortunately, neither of these factors bode well for fans of peace and cooperation, or the United States.

With regards to power, Friedberg notes that hegemonic transitions have historically almost always led to dramatic upheavals.[v] This is troublesome given that China has been steadily advancing its economic and military power across Asia over the preceding decade at a time when the United States was distracted by events in the Middle

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East.. This has resulted in the initially large power gap that existed between the two countries at the end of the Cold War shrinking considerably in the ensuing two decades. With Washington's budgetary problems and, in Friedberg's opinion, inability to grasp the magnitude of the China threat, the power gap is almost certain to continue narrowing in the years ahead. Additionally, Friedberg notes-citing his Princeton colleague Thomas Christensen[vi]-geography allows China to challenge the United States' position in the Asia-Pacific without equaling it in power. This is especially true if China is effective in asymmetric warfare.

The competitive tendencies that power considerations generate are further exacerbated by the different ideologies that underpin the political systems in China and the United States, according to Friedberg. In the past, I have been fairly critical of Friedberg's emphasis on ideology in analyzing U.S.-Sino relations. [vii] In this book, however, I found some of these arguments more compelling because Friedberg is more precise and thorough in explaining the particular ways in which ideology contributes to the strategic competition between Beijing and Washington.

The first ideological effect Friedberg notes is one that democratic peace theorists have long made; namely, that tension between non-democracies and democracies is inevitable because the latter group is unable to trust authoritative states given their inherent secrecy and their willingness to violently exploit their own people. The opaque decision-making and domestic repression of Authoritative regimes leads Democratic governments to conclude that they can never be truly certain of the Authoritative states' capabilities and peaceful intentions.

Friedberg's second and more interesting point is that Chinese policymakers will never trust the United States and its democratic allies because Beijing believes their ultimate goal is to bring about Revolutionary political change in China. Interestingly, Friedberg doesn't dispute Beijing's assessment; in fact he embraces wholeheartedly: "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 and leave a liberal democracy in its place (184)." This is true of Western Hawks as well as Doves that advocate engaging with China. As Friedberg prudently notes, Western policymakers who advocate engaging with China usually defend this policy by arguing that this is the best way to facilitate political reform in Beijing. Although this may be appealing to the American public, it inevitably creates distrust and angst towards the United States among the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, whose wealth, power and very possibly their lives all depend on the preventing this outcome.

Friedberg is far less convincing when arguing that were China to become an established liberal democracy, the contest for supremacy would not exist or at least be significantly less severe. To support this claim Friedberg appeals to vague and familiar arguments. For instance, he argues that "a liberal democratic China will have little cause to fear its democratic counterparts, still less to use force against them (51)." Similarly, the democratic states will have less reason to see a democratic China as a threat and therefore it will be easier to cooperate with it in reaching negotiated settlements to inevitable disputes. This is all very possible but highly abstract. Furthermore, elsewhere in the book Friedberg makes a convincing case that the changing balance of power alone is a strong factor pushing Washington and its allies towards greater competition with China. It's unclear how China becoming a democracy would resolve the tensions power cause, especially when Friedberg freely admits that a democratic China could very well likely remain assertive and nationalistic.[viii] Ultimately, then, it seems that the ideological gap heightens the rivalry between China and the United States, but it's not clear that the rivalry wouldn't continue to exist if it wasn't present.

In any case, Friedberg is highly skeptical about the chances of China becoming a democracy anytime soon. After all, he notes, Western audiences have continuously predicted that China was nearing a dramatic political transformation ever since it began liberalizing its economy in the late 1970's. Yet, despite all its dazzling economic growth-and though Chinese citizens are granted greater freedom in some areas-the CCP "retains a stranglehold on political power and shows no signs of loosening up.... For now, at least, the ideological divide between China and the United States remains as wide as ever (51)." Furthermore, Friedberg notes, citing Jack Snyder and Edward Mansfield's research[ix], states are often more prone to aggression during their transition to a liberal democratic system.

Assuming China's current political system endures, then, what will it do with its newfound power? Moreover, how should the United States respond to an increasingly powerful, yet still authoritative, China? Although admitting that predicting future international outcomes of this magnitude is "fraught with uncertainty," and "cannot help but rest

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heavily on inference and speculation” Friedberg sets out to do just that (156-157).

His answer to how a stronger China will act is more persuasive and straightforward than his response to how the United States should respond. Put simply, Friedberg believes, “What China’s current rulers appear to want and what their successors will almost certainly want as well, is to see their country become the dominant or preponderant power in East Asia, and perhaps Asia writ large (157).”

In answering how the United States should seek to counter a powerful authoritative China, Friedberg first reviews some alternative strategies. This includes the United States current strategy of engaging China in some areas such as economics, while hedging against it in other arenas, primarily military (Friedberg refers to this as conengagement). Also considered is pure -containment and confrontation, appeasement, and enhanced engagement, which is greater emphasis on the engagement part of the current strategy with less importance placed on containment.

Although representing each of these viewpoints fairly well, Friedberg ultimately rejects them in favor of an enhanced balancing strategy. This strategy would entail, among other things, policies aimed at strengthening American alliances in the Western Pacific, particularly with democracies such as Japan, India and Australia; pursuing a more balanced economic relationship with China; defense procurements that more precisely try to defend against China’s anti-access/anti-denial strategy, while also exploiting areas where China is weakest; offering more public criticism of China for its questionable international behavior, such as supporting despotic regimes, as well as when it clamps down at home;; and being more forthcoming with the American public about the threat China’s rise potentially poses to the United States.

I don’t necessarily disagree with any of these particular policies outright, although some of them I believe would be difficult to suffer during the implementation phase. The larger failing I see in Friedberg’s enhanced balancing strategy is that it lacks any general coherence or underlying principle tying together these different policies. Instead, the chapter in which Friedberg lays out the substance of enhanced balancing just reads like a wide-ranging number of policies that he believes would be beneficial to the United States. Perhaps this is the best we can expect from American strategists in the more complex post-Cold War world we inhabit; still, I don’t believe we should give up trying.

Whatever shortcomings Friedberg’s enhanced balancing strategy may have, his pessimistic account of the U.S.-Sino relationship is an important counterargument to the much more rosy assessments other international relations scholars have offered.[x] We should all hope Friedberg’s analysis never comes to pass; however, as Friedberg notes, “prudent planners hope for the best but prepare for the worst (245).” Ultimately, the world would be best served if the United States and its allies follow this advice in managing the rise of China.

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[i] See especially *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[ii] Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” *International Security*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Winter 1993/1994), pp. 5-43; “The Struggle for Mastery in Asia,” *Commentary* (November 2000), available at <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/the-struggle-for-mastery-in-asia/>. For an example of Friedberg’s prominence as a leading Asia pessimist see selections from David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda eds., *International Relations of Asia* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

[iii] For this later work see, in particular, Aaron Friedberg, “The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable,” *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 7-45.

[iv] Some recent scholarship lends support to Friedberg’s argument here. Specifically, one recent study found that individual Americans’ perceptions of China’s rise correlated directly with their personal economic interests in the U.S.-China trade. Americans that stood to profit from trade with China were far more likely to say they didn’t see

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China's rise as a threat to the United States. In contrast, Americans whose incomes were likely to decrease because of higher levels of trade with China were more likely to see China as a potential threat to the United States and supported adopting a more confrontational policy towards Beijing. See, Benjamin O. Fordham and Katja B. Kleinberg, "International Trade and US Relations with China," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 7, issue 3, pp. 217-236.

[v] The classic work on hegemonic transition theory remains Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[vi] Thomas Christensen, "Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Spring 2001), pp. 5-40, available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/international_security/v025/25.4christensen.html.

[vii] Zachary Keck, "Review: Kissinger on China," *e-International Relations* (July 7, 2011), available at <http://www.e-ir.info/?p=10250>.

[viii] Moreover, surely some past hegemonic transition wars have taken place between states that didn't have an ideological quarrel with one another.

[ix] Jack Snyder and Edward Mansfield, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies go to War* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2005).

[x] See, for instance, Bates Gill, *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 2007); John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2008), available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63042/g-john-ikenberry/the-rise-of-china-and-the-future-of-the-west>.

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