

## Review – Getting China Wrong

Written by Niall Duggan

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**Getting China Wrong**  
**By Aaron L. Friedberg**  
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The United States (US) has employed an engagement and containment policy toward the People's Republic of China (China) since the Nixon administration famously reopened diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1972. During the early period of engagement with China (1972 until the end of the Cold War), the US engaged with China in order to make it a more effective counterweight to the Soviet Union. The next period of engagement (from 1990 to the 2008 financial crisis) was driven by an ideological faith in liberal democracy and market-led political structures of the West. Central to this second engagement policy was the flow of US trade and investment into China, which transferred technology and knowledge, thus modernising the economy of China. The logic of this policy had two central pillars: First, for China's economy to develop further, economic growth would require a full market-led economy, which would require political reforms within the Chinese state. Such reforms would include creating an independent judiciary and the development of a multiparty political system. The second pillar was that by investing in China and allowing China to trade internationally, China would become dependent on the current international order for its economic stability and, therefore, China would defend that existing US-built system of global governance.

The central thesis of Friedberg's *Getting China Wrong* is that this long-term US policy toward China, which became the main approach after the Cold War ended, has failed because successive US administrations have not understood the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), its role in the Chinese political system, and its motivation. They have failed to understand the first lesson of modern Chinese politics – that is, to understand the CCP, one must understand that all policies undertaken by the party are solely motivated by the party's desire to remain in power within the Leninist one-party political structure. Friedberg argues that in the case of US-China policy, the party saw and continued to see Western engagement as a plot to remove the CCP from power, and the party undertook a policy to take advantage of aspects of Western engagement to help it remain in power.

*Getting China Wrong* argues that all expected outcomes of the US engagement policy with China have failed to manifest. China has not developed into a market-driven economy. In fact, it relies more on mercantilist and interventionist policies now than it did when it joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001. Political reforms that ought to have created a more democratic Chinese state have not manifested. In actuality, power has become more centralized under the Xi administration. China has not become a status quo power that acts to uphold the existing Western-built international order. Rather, China challenges the system through the creation of its own institutions and initiatives, such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Friedberg argues that the CCP took steps during the US policy of engagement that allowed the party to remain in power. On the domestic front, the party engaged in what Friedberg calls "experiments in cooptation," which included establishing village elections, permitting some level of online debate, responding to public concerns around issues such as health care and corruption. Internationally, China developed strong economic links with Western states, and China became a crucial part of many supply chains. With developing states, China positioned itself as a key ally, offering both political and economic support. Within the US, Friedberg notes that China engaged in an information war by using marketing and PR companies to influence US companies to put pressure on US policy makers to

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continue their engagement policy, even though China's poor human rights record had not improved.

Friedberg argues that in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the failure of US policy in China became clear to US policy makers, as China became more proactive in international policy by drifting away from the Deng Xiaoping "hide your strength, bide your time" philosophy that previously guided foreign policy. The Obama administration's Asia Pivot policy in 2012 reflected this new awareness. However, despite the awareness of the failure of the US engagement policy with China, Friedberg argues that US policy makers to this day still clench to the idea that engagement will lead to a more democratic and Western-leaning China. Friedberg argues that the US must face up to the failure of its engagement policy with China and quickly build capacity to contain China and to face down the challenges that will result from a rising China.

*Getting China Wrong* is a well-presented history of the US policy toward China since the Nixon administration, and it highlights some of the key failings of successive US administrations in understanding the CCP's conceptualisation of its US foreign policy. The book is a valuable contribution to the field. It helps to contradict the growing narrative among the media and the policy making community that China's more proactive foreign policy is driven by Xi Jinping, who is framed as a more nationalist thinker than his predecessors. *Getting China Wrong* highlights that Xi follows a very similar policy toward the US as other Chinese leaders since Mao, but it is acting with a larger capacity to execute policies. This means that China's policy toward the US is unlikely to change, even with a change in leadership. The book also offers an intriguing insight into how China used US lobbying companies to push American companies to influence US lawmakers into taking a softer approach to China on issues such as human rights.

While *Getting China Wrong* is a well-presented book on the US's position toward China since the 1970s, the book boasts three underdeveloped areas: First, it fails to question the coherence of the US's engagement policy toward China since the 1970s. While the US did encourage China to integrate into the international order, it was slow to allow China to take a greater role in international bodies, such as the World Bank and the IMF. Moreover, the US would often block Chinese investment in American companies that it deemed strategic. Such US policies would have reinforced the Chinese view that US policies were designed to contain China and would have unravelled any trust that US policies designed to engage China had established. Second, while the book highlights China's use of lobbying companies to indirectly pressure the US government, it is an under-developed area of the book, and further research is needed to uncover the effectiveness of such lobbying in Sino-US relations.

Third, the book does not question the value of promoting US economic and political values within China. This is not to say China could not adopt a democratic system; Taiwan offers proof that a healthy democratic system can work in China. However, the book does not question the wisdom of the promotion of a Western free-market development model in a country transitioning from a central planned economy considering the failure of that model in Russia. It also fails to highlight that by promoting a multi-party democratic system in China, the US was openly calling for an end to the CCP-controlled Leninist one-party political structure, which prevented the CCP from trusting the US's engagement policy.

Overall, *Getting China Wrong* is a must-read for those who are interested in the US perspective of what is an interesting, tense relationship between China and the US. However, the reader may need broader context to understand fully the relationship beyond the perspective of either the US or China.

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### About the author:

Dr. Niall Duggan is a Lecturer in the Department of Government and Politics at University College Cork, where he teaches international relations, international political economy and Asian Politics. His research focuses on emerging economies in global governance and China's foreign and security policies – centering on non-Western International Relations theory and its development. His work has been published in the *International Political Science Review*, *The Conversation*, *The Asia Europe Journal* and *Politics and Policy* among others.

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