

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Lyle J. Goldstein.** *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging US-China Rivalry.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015. 400 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-62616-160-3.

**Reviewed by** Zachary Fredman (Boston University)

**Published on** H-Diplo (September, 2015)

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

Lyle J. Goldstein's *Meeting China Halfway* is essential reading for anyone interested in US foreign relations or contemporary China. A senior China scholar at the Naval War College, Goldstein warns that the potential for US-China military conflict has increased markedly in the past ten years. Influential academics like Aaron Friedberg (*A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* [2011]) and John Mearsheimer (*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* [2014]) have urged US policymakers to abandon engagement and focus on containment. The Barack Obama administration, Goldstein notes, has largely endorsed the program advocated by those seeking to balance China's rise. In China, meanwhile, discourse regarding the United States has become more bellicose. Many high-ranking officials in China's security and defense establishments see the United States as China's greatest national security threat. If the downward spiral in US-China relations continues, Goldstein argues, the result will likely be a repetition of the misery caused by the catastrophic wars and wasteful rivalries of the twentieth century (p. 325). Drawing from a wide array of Chinese and American sources, Goldstein lays out a plan to enable the two powers to step back from rivalry and move toward mutual accommodation. From its position of strength, Washington must take the lead and begin accommodating China's interests in Asia. For America, Goldstein concludes, there is no viable alternative to meeting China halfway (p. 364).

Goldstein makes his case by taking Chinese voices seriously and proposing ten cooperation spirals that outline step-by-step approaches for resolving the seemingly

intractable problems in US-China relations. Cooperation spirals build trust and confidence over time through incremental and reciprocal steps that gradually lead to larger and more significant compromises. In each chapter, Goldstein explores a particular issue by examining its historical background, analyzing numerous Chinese and American perspectives, and then laying out a cooperation spiral composed of ten concrete policy proposals—five for the United States and five for China. Goldstein's analysis of Chinese scholarship reveals a wide range of opinion, even on controversial issues like Taiwan. In a field where many writers are quick to dismiss Chinese viewpoints as propaganda if they bother to examine them at all, *Meeting China Halfway* stands out as a model of rigorous, even-handed scholarship.

China hawks and believers in American exceptionalism will find many of Goldstein's ideas hard to swallow, but they would be wise to read his book carefully. Far too much writing on China rests on ideologically tinged assumptions that Beijing must institute American-style political and economic reforms in order to stave off social unrest or collapse. Goldstein has little sympathy for such views, which reveal more about American anxieties than they do about China. Confidence that China will become much stronger over the coming decades, and that its economy will soon surpass that of the United States in size, undergirds his basic arguments. He also points out that China has already moved ahead of the US military in certain domains, such as anti-ship cruise missiles. Yet just because Goldstein believes the United States cannot hope to impose its will on China does not mean he advocates making concessions without asking Beijing to ad-

just its current and long-held positions in return. Rather, Goldstein urges Washington to demonstrate real leadership and courage in making the first moves. The fact is, as he shows, China's perspective has been influenced by their view of a century of humiliation. While the United States did not take the lead in much of the Western imperialism that undermined Chinese sovereignty in the century leading up to World War II, it still played a large role. Imagine if the Chinese Navy had patrolled the Mississippi River with gunboats from the 1850s to the 1940s, as the US Navy did on China's Yangtze River, and you can begin to understand why it is imperative that Washington acts first.

The Taiwan problem has long been a key irritant in US-China relations. Goldstein's cooperation spiral for this issue rests on the assumption that the United States cannot indefinitely maintain close security ties with a claimed island off the coast of a nuclear-armed superpower. He urges Washington to create circumstances that promote the settlement of the Taiwan problem rather than its perpetuation. Taiwan-Mainland integration, Goldstein argues, will actually strengthen US alliances with Japan and South Korea by preventing these countries from being pulled by treaty commitments into a conflict over Taiwan. Goldstein seeks a permanent solution by beginning with smaller moves: reducing US forces on Guam and closing the military office at the American Institute in Taipei while Beijing instigates military exchanges with Taiwan without preconditions and pulls missiles back from East China. The cooperation spiral culminates with Washington halting weapons sales to Taiwan, and Beijing renouncing the use of force and beginning a peace treaty process that joins Taiwan and the Mainland in a confederation. Goldstein concludes that a breakthrough on the Taiwan problem is imperative to U.S.-China cooperation in the twenty-first century (p. 72).

In addressing economic relations, Goldstein points out that economic interdependence does not preclude conflict. America was Japan's leading trade partner in the years before Pearl Harbor, and Europe enjoyed a high degree of economic interdependence leading up to World War I. Despite high levels of trade, economic tensions between Washington and Beijing have increased over the last decade. But success stories like Boeing Corporation's extraordinary role in improving China's civil air safety record from the 1990s to the present, while also increasing its market share, have demonstrated how closer collaboration can yield win-win results on a massive scale. Beginning with reciprocal steps to decrease

barriers to the purchase of US companies and encourage major investment in the US economy, Goldstein seeks to lay the groundwork for improved economic relations that will eventually lead to Washington easing restrictions on high-technology transfers to China and see Beijing allow free float for the Renminbi.

When it comes to environmental issues and relations with the developing world, Goldstein sees many opportunities for closer cooperation. Public opinion in both countries shows increasing awareness of the dangers of global warming. The November 2014 bilateral climate accord demonstrates that key Chinese and American policymakers recognize the enormous stakes. Goldstein's cooperation spiral on the environment and climate change lays out ten policy proposals leading toward mutual acceptance of a global climate change treaty. Goldstein also addresses environmental concerns when discussing the developing world and US-China relations, but he is most keen on formulating policy proposals that can prevent Cold War-style geopolitical competition in Africa and Latin America. Chinese thinkers show little appetite for a militarized approach to Africa, and Goldstein argues that Washington should shutter the Pentagon's Africa Command (AFRICOM).

In the Middle East, meanwhile, Goldstein believes that closer cooperation between the United States and China could facilitate improved ties between Teheran and Washington. The cooperation spiral he outlines in this chapter is particularly ambitious, with its final steps calling for the United States to pressure Israel into giving up its nuclear weapons and China to use its influence to pressure Iran into recognizing Israel and initiating bilateral ties. Goldstein concedes that this cooperation spiral has a low probability of success. Yet both China and the United States have an interest in stabilizing the Middle East, and US ambitions to transform the region with military power have met with repeated failure. China's rise as a global power, Goldstein concludes, could help to rebalance the structure of power in the region. Acting in concert with other great powers, especially China, could help the United States in building a more stable, just, and prosperous Middle East.

On the Korean Peninsula, Goldstein makes the case for coequal Chinese and American leadership in forging a durable peace. His analysis of Chinese writing on Korea is enlightening. Chinese intellectuals see the South Korean military and defense industries as models to emulate. They do not view Seoul's evolving military posture as a threat. At the same time, more and more Chi-

nese analysts have called for a reevaluation of Beijing's stance toward Pyongyang. Goldstein, however, actually encourages Beijing to take steps that would enhance Pyongyang's security, including a reinvigoration of the 1961 Sino-North Korean Defense Treaty and a symbolic troop presence in North Korea. Given the vast disparity of economic power and conventional military capabilities on the peninsula, Pyongyang's anxieties are understandable. A token Chinese military presence and stronger commitment to upholding security and stability on the peninsula could preclude the need for North Korea to take radical steps to demonstrate its will to fight. Further steps on the cooperation spiral propose that Washington inaugurate diplomatic relations with North Korea and withdraw a large number of troops from South Korea while still maintaining its alliance with Seoul. China, for its part, should oversee North Korea's complete and verified nuclear disarmament. The most salient problem on the Korean Peninsula, Goldstein concludes, is North Korea's stark vulnerability and insecurity. To achieve disarmament, North Korea must first be made more secure, and only China has the means and incentive to aid in this endeavor (p. 218).

Goldstein's approach to Japan is equally bold and creative. To a large extent, he writes, the divisive issues between Tokyo and Beijing are "imagined" (p. 226). Tokyo fears an immensely powerful and militaristic China that could hypothetically threaten Japan's vital interests in the future. Beijing's anxieties about a revival of Japanese militarism ignore how cautiously and sparingly Japan has deployed its armed might since 1945. Nevertheless, relations between China and Japan have been in a virtual death spiral since at least 2010, if not before (p. 225). China has legitimate historical grievances that Japan must address, and Goldstein states that Washington must push Tokyo toward a "Willy Brandt" solution involving reparations and a prime ministerial visit to the Nanjing Massacre Museum. Other proposals in the cooperation spiral call for a reduced US Marine Corps presence in Okinawa, joint administration of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and a median line settlement in the East China Sea. Ultimately, Goldstein advocates a restructured US-Japan alliance and Chinese endorsement of a permanent seat for Japan on the United Nations Security Council.

Tensions in the South China Sea have recently overshadowed antagonistic relations between Beijing and Tokyo, and Goldstein's chapter on the topic is both timely and sobering. Beijing's official stance and the opinions expressed by leading Chinese academics have

become more hawkish. US-China rivalry in the region has also intensified following Chinese construction and land reclamation projects over the past year. Voices of moderation are now rare on both sides of the Pacific. Goldstein reminds readers, however, that Beijing made many compromises in the past to settle its land border disputes. The present situation is undoubtedly dangerous because of misperceptions and disturbing action/reaction patterns, but it need not inevitably become "the Fulda Gap" of a new Cold War (p. 291). Creating the conditions for a cooperation spiral will be difficult, and Goldstein proposes modest initial steps. To begin, the United States should invite China to play a major role at the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training exercises in Thailand. Bangkok enjoys excellent relations with both Washington and Beijing, and the exercises focus on nontraditional security issues like counterterrorism, an issue the Chinese Navy explicitly embraces. China should respond by proposing a regional antipiracy patrol in the Malacca Strait area in cooperation with the US Navy. As the two countries build up greater trust, China must clarify the precise nature of its claims in the South China Sea and make those claims consistent with the Law of the Sea. From there, the United States can begin supporting bilateral negotiations between China and other claimants so that China can operationalize a joint development program for the South China Sea guided by a 50/50 split framework.

In sum, Goldstein argues that China must adjust some of its long-held claims, increase the transparency of its national security apparatus, and press countries like North Korea and Iran to conform to international norms. The United States should reciprocate by drawing back some of its military deployments and military engagement activities, including trimming its force of aircraft carriers. He admits that hardly any of the compromises he suggests will be easy. Leaders in both countries must show bravery and avoid popular China-bashing and America-bashing. Washington needs to also resist pressure from Asian allies to take a more forceful stance against China. Exercising restraint and dealing with China as an equal will not be easy, but as Goldstein concludes, there is no other way.

*Meeting China Halfway* never calls for unilateral concessions, and none of his policy proposals are set in stone. Gradualism, reciprocity, and mutual compromise are the core principles of his approach. As his painstaking research demonstrates, a very substantial number of Chinese scholars and strategists want to work constructively with the United States. However, if US policymakers

opt for containment rather than engagement, then China's own hawks will carry the day in Beijing. A new cold war will undermine regional stability and decrease the chances for US-China cooperation across the board. Goldstein concedes that Washington must hedge against the worst-case scenario, but to make this hedge the central thrust of US China policy would be a colossal mistake.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Zachary Fredman. Review of Goldstein, Lyle J., *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging US-China Rivalry*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44359>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.