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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Book Symposium on Mel Gurtov, *Engaging China: Rebuilding Sino-American Relations*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022. 200 pp.

Review of *Engaging China*

Anne F. Thurston

Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University

US-China relations are at their lowest ebb in decades. A poll conducted by PEW in the spring of 2023 found that an overwhelming 83 percent of respondents held a negative view of the People's Republic. The current US-China relationship has been described as a new cold war, and some have asserted that violent conflict between the two countries, long considered unthinkable, is becoming increasingly possible--most likely to be sparked by a miscalculation.

In *Engaging China: Rebuilding Sino-American Relations*, Mel Gurtov, professor emeritus of Portland State University and longtime prolific China scholar, explores the history of the US-China relationship in fascinating detail and offers thoughtful proposals for how the hostilities might be ameliorated. "We live in dangerous times," he begins, "and the parlous state of US-China relations is one reason why." The crux of the book describes a relationship that has often been ineffective and is perennially fraught with misunderstanding, discord, and mutual frustration. It concludes with a call for a more constructive relationship through a policy of deep engagement and "competitive coexistence."

Gurtov sees the global financial crisis of 2008 as the spark that began the downward trend, leading China's leaders to conclude that the United States was in a state of decline and China's time to pursue its goal of "great national rejuvenation" had arrived. But it was Donald Trump's leadership that brought the relationship to disaster. With little understanding of China (and a great deal of misunderstanding), Trump's China policy was openly hostile and actively confrontational. In quick succession, he abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, demanded that China significantly increase its purchases of US goods, terminated the

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Fulbright and Peace Corps programs in China, and cut cooperation with China's Center for Disease Control. Further missteps followed.

While the Biden administration has walked back from some of the Trumpian excesses, Gurtov is critical of his China policies. Biden, he notes, views China's rise as a threat to American values, defining the relationship in ideological terms of democracy versus dictatorship and calling for "managed competition." He argues that Biden has made meaningful engagement and dialogue virtually impossible. The relationship remains strained. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's conclusion that the two countries are "fundamentally at odds" seems to be the governing principle.

Engaging China is informative, fact-filled, well researched, and perceptive, focusing on the concrete details of the disagreements, frustrations, misperceptions, and general misbehavior that have been a fundamental part of the day-to-day US-China relationship for decades. The reader is made insistently aware that relations between the two countries have rarely been smooth or easy, even in the best of times. In Chapter 5, Gurtov identifies four key issues underlying those strains: Taiwan; human rights in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet; competition over technology; and issues relating to educational and scientific exchanges. He examines each issue in some detail. While the section on educational exchanges is somewhat outdated, the issues related to Taiwan and human rights in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet remain relatively unchanged. Here I will highlight his thoughts on Taiwan and Hong Kong with a brief look at Xinjiang.

Taiwan. Gurtov notes that Taiwan has always been the most contentious issue in the US-China relationship. China's bedrock principle is that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and rejects any outside challenge to that principle. Taiwanese, on the other hand, increasingly, and now overwhelmingly, identify as Taiwanese rather than Chinese and would resist any effort by China to take the island by force. For decades, through several presidents, the United States has remained deliberately ambiguous about how it might respond were China to attempt to reunify Taiwan by force—following a policy of "strategic ambiguity."

Presidential transitions pose problems for the continuity of the policy of strategic ambiguity. Both Trump and Biden (Trump deliberately and Biden unwittingly) have verbally dismissed the policy and suggested that the United States would aid Taiwan militarily were China to attack. A newly briefed Biden later retreated from that position, and Secretary of State Blinken issued an official clarification saying, "All I can tell you is we have a serious commitment to Taiwan being able to defend

itself. . . . it would be a serious mistake for anyone to try to change that status by force.” The policy of strategic ambiguity apparently remains in force.

Hong Kong. When Great Britain returned Hong Kong to Chinese rule on July 1, 1997, Deng Xiaoping promised that the newly independent metropolis could operate for fifty years on the basis of “one country, two systems.” Hong Kong would be a part of China, but its government and economy would function independently. The assumption was that Hong Kong would remain an open zone of lively free enterprise and democratic governance. In fact, as Gurtov tells us, by 2021, despite ongoing popular demands for real autonomy and democratic governance, China had obliterated most of the vestiges of democratic rule. Local Hong Kong advocates of democracy have either been imprisoned or fled to exile. While the Biden administration has criticized the imposition of Chinese rule, those criticisms have had little or no effect. The Hong Kong economy and its international investors nonetheless continue to thrive.

Xinjiang. Gurtov’s discussion of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region notes that the Chinese leadership views Muslims in Xinjiang as potential terrorists, separatists, and extremists. Xi’s policy toward the Muslim population has been to stamp out what he deems “religious extremism.” Suspected extremists have been incarcerated in labor reform camps where prisoners are subject to “re-education” and hard labor. Some estimates put the number of Xinjiang Muslims thus incarcerated at 1.8 million. Based on the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (which expands the definition of genocide to include crimes of persecution that cause serious mental or bodily harm short of death), Western human rights researchers have begun attaching the label of genocide to China’s persecution of Xinjiang Muslims. Citing reports by international human rights groups, Gurtov advocates a policy of “naming and shaming” to dissuade the Chinese government from continuing its persecution. The Chinese government remains adamantly averse to foreign reports highlighting their persecution, and journalists who have attempted to gather information inside Xinjiang have been expelled. The success of naming and shaming is necessarily a long-term process that will depend on the availability of information from Xinjiang and the ability of human rights organizations to bring news of the plight of China’s Muslim captives to a Western audience.

Gurtov sees engagement and dialogue as key to outside efforts to influence China. He subscribes to the message contained in an open let-

ter to President Trump that appeared in the Washington Post on July 3, 2019, signed by some 95 China specialists, both academics and former government officials. The letter begins by declaring that despite its troubling behavior, China is neither an enemy nor an existential security or economic threat. Decoupling from China would undermine the role of the United States in the international arena. The fear that China will replace the United States as the world's global leader is exaggerated, and its goal of having a world-class military by mid-century faces enormous hurdles. And it emphasizes the importance of China's participation in the international system. I was one of the signatories to that letter and continue to believe that continued engagement with China is imperative, however difficult and frustrating it may be. World peace truly depends on the two great superpowers finding common ground and working together.

*Dr. Anne Thurston is a Senior Research Professor at the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University and Editor of *Engaging China: Fifty Years of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).



“Let’s Not Jump”

David M. Lampton
Johns Hopkins SAIS

Dangers – As he cast the dye for war in late-1941, not at all certain victory would be Japan's if the looming war with America was protracted, Japanese prime minister Tojo said: “Occasionally, one must conjure up enough courage, close one's eyes, and jump off the platform of the Kiyomizu-Dera,” the famous Buddhist Temple in Kyoto. Mel Gurtov's book is written in the hope of introducing facts, balance, and historical wisdom into the management of the US-China relationship at the current perilous moment, a moment in which leaders and the publics in both America and the People's Republic of China (PRC) seem to be closing their eyes, losing their bearings, and preparing to jump.

Though Mel Gurtov's *Engaging China* appears amidst a flurry of volumes on US-China relations, it deserves a careful reading by citizens as well as academics and political and opinion leaders in both countries.

Its up-to-date quality, readability, and focus on key issues makes it a resource for classroom use. The volume has nuance and does not sugar-coat the problems each side presents to itself, the other, and the broader global system. Gurtov attaches considerable importance to human rights and transnational problems such as climate change but does what others often fail to do—suggest constructive ways forward. He identifies specific steps that both Washington and Beijing need to take to begin to restore balance and a more productive character to the relationship.

The urgency for sober analysis such as this has become increasingly apparent every day since this book's publication. Strategically, in January 2023, the Kishida government in Japan stated its intention to double the percentage of GDP it spends on defense over the next five years. Beijing adopted a large defense budget increase of 7.5 percent in March 2023. That is more than the planned rate of GDP growth in China overall for 2023. For many years Beijing kept defense spending increases at or below the rate of GDP growth—that is no longer true. Further, South Korea and Japan have agreed to increase all-around cooperation in order to more effectively address threats they perceive from the PRC and North Korea. The Philippines has agreed with Washington to increase US military access to four more locations in the archipelago. Canberra is cooperating with Washington and London (AUKUS) to construct several nuclear-powered (not nuclear-armed) submarines for Australia. US-Taiwan security cooperation is steadily growing, to Beijing's great alarm. Beijing suspects Washington of having incrementally moved to a "One China, One Taiwan" policy.

More narrowly considering US-China bilateral interactions, in January 2023, a PRC reconnaissance balloon flew an extended route across the United States in January–February 2023, setting off mutual recriminations and leading Washington to indefinitely (and unwisely) postpone Secretary of State Blinken's planned meeting with Chinese president Xi Jinping in early February 2023; President Joe Biden publically criticized China and Xi Jinping by name multiple times in his February 2023 State of the Union address; President Xi Jinping slammed Washington for its "all-around containment, encirclement, and suppression" efforts as he started his norm-busting third term as president in March 2023; and then, Xi Jinping almost immediately traveled to Moscow to embrace, figuratively and literally, Vladimir Putin as the western alliance and Kyiv were worried about the possible sale of lethal weapons to Moscow by Beijing for use against Ukraine. At this moment, Japan's prime minister traveled to Kyiv in a show of solidarity. It has become ever-clearer that Beijing believes that the abject defeat of Russia in Ukraine would

leave the PRC alone and strategically exposed in the world. In short, nothing has happened since the publication of Gurtov's book to reduce the force of his analysis or the importance of his recommendations. On the contrary, dangers mount.

Deeper Problems and Possible Ways Forward – Trying to distill *Engaging China's* rich argument with respect to the United States, Gurtov argues that the “China threat” is exaggerated; Americans underestimate the past gains of engagement and consequently underestimate the opportunity and direct costs of higher levels of future conflict; and, Washington has reintroduced internal governance in China as a decisive consideration in America's relations with the PRC—“democracy versus autocracy.” Nixon and Mao downplayed ideology as a major consideration in bilateral ties, and Xi and Biden have reintroduced it.

For its part, PRC behavior is increasing anxiety in its region and beyond (including in Europe). Chinese unwillingness to discuss arms control amidst an obviously growing and dangerous arms race is unsettling and perilous, creating risks of miscalculation as well as squandering money desperately needed domestically and abroad. Xi Jinping seems increasingly impatient about some form of reunification with Taiwan even as sentiment on the island moves steadily away from any such vision. China is being unhelpful on North Korea and Iran from Washington's perspective. Critically, Beijing's rapid and dramatic tilt toward Moscow kicked off by the February 4, 2022, Joint Statement of China and Russia conjures up apparitions of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance of 1950, a prelude to war on the Korean Peninsula seventy-plus years ago. Finally, the PRC seemingly has abandoned the primacy of “respect for sovereignty” as its foreign policy talisman. This jettisoning weakens the sanctity of Beijing's sovereignty claims elsewhere (Taiwan) and simultaneously alarms Beijing's neighbors. How respectful will Beijing be of their sovereignty, they ask themselves?

Cumulatively, all this has resulted in a reversal of the strategic triangle that Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong took advantage of to launch the long process of normalizing US-China relations in the early 1970s. This circumstance is contrary to the consistent American strategic principle that it is US policy not to permit any hostile power, or coalition of unfriendly powers, to dominate the Eurasian landmass. Current US policy is a mighty contributor to precisely this unwelcome outcome—Moscow and Beijing are working to western disadvantage.

We need, Gurtov argues, to revivify comprehensive engagement and reengage not only officials but citizens in both countries. Gurtov specifically calls for a series of actions conducted at several levels: offi-

cial-level diplomacy, military-to-military relations and interactions, and semi-official and non-official dialogues involving civil society. These are sensible initiatives and should be pursued. However, as Gurtov explains in detail, neither President Biden nor President Xi has thus far been willing to move in the direction of picking even low-hanging fruit. Such low-hanging fruit would in my view, include: renewing the Fulbright Exchange Program; reopening the consulates closed in Houston and Chengdu; increasing news media reciprocal presence; and reducing tariffs in an inflationary period. None of this has been possible under either President Trump or his successor, Joe Biden. And it is not all Washington's fault. Take the Fulbright Program, for example. I have had Chinese tell me that Beijing may be just fine with not having US professors running around China spreading the gospel of pluralism.

Gurtov also argues that both Beijing and China need to reach an understanding of what our mutual security actually entails. He calls for both sides to adopt the concept of "cooperative security," the idea being that neither society can achieve security for itself without addressing the other's insecurities—there is no such thing as unilaterally achieved absolute security. Also, cooperative security broadens the concept beyond strictly military considerations to human, cyber, pandemic, and environmental security, among other things. Both sides need to implement an engagement menu that can slowly rebuild reassuring practices rather than emphasizing deterrence, which in the final analysis rests on threat. If Americans had a more accurate understanding of Chinese strengths and deficiencies, Washington would be less prone to overreact and be defensive.

All this raises the following question: "So, what do America and China actually need to engage on before we each are in a position to pick even the 'low hanging fruit'?" Like it or not, our two nations are back to needing to address the basic principles of the relationship before we can make much progress on practical, more specific issues. I say this in full recognition that the American preference is to focus on more specific, tangible issues and chisel away at the overall problem incrementally. Irrespective of this preference, however, Nixon and Mao, and later Carter and Deng, had to manage the issues of principle before real progress was feasible on tangible items—that is true again today.

What would be the contours of such principles? I concede that domestic politics in both countries makes this very difficult. Defining such principles requires leaders willing to take risks, as indeed Nixon and Mao did more than fifty years ago. As it turned out, their risk-taking was amply rewarded, but the first steps were taken in a dark room. Nixon

had to worry about the reactions of his own right-wing base and the US Congress and, at the same time, he went to China without having the assurance that Mao Zedong would meet him at all. He left himself vulnerable to Mao not meeting him and looking like a weak supplicant to the communists. Just because it turned out to be a genius political and strategic move in retrospect, the US president could not be sure how it would play out at the moment of decision. And, Nixon was doing all this in the run-up to the general election of 1972.

So, what are the core elements of such a renewed shared understanding between America and China? They include:

- 1) The United States and China return to the principle that internal governance in each society is a matter that is for each country's people and leaders to address in the final analysis. We have our respective preferences, and the international system has its norms, practices, and institutions, but regime change is not a legitimate objective and bears on sovereignty. Concepts of human rights and governance should be part of the Sino-American dialogue but not dominate all other aspects. As Gurtov put it, this governance dialogue "pales beside the opposing case for coexistence founded on mutual respect and mutual gain" (p. 122). Each nation should focus on improving itself rather than changing the other.
- 2) The benefits that both China and the United States have enjoyed from the post-World War II system and its gradual evolution of institutions, practices, and the gains of globalization have greatly benefitted both nations on net. Our shared objective should be to make that system work even better, with more equity and reciprocity, as it evolves and makes room for rising powers and growing economies, not least China. "Spheres of influence" are a nineteenth and twentieth-century organizing principle inappropriate to the twenty-first century.
- 3) And finally, with respect to Taiwan, both sides should acknowledge that the 2008–2016 period of relative peace and prosperity across the Taiwan Strait was in everyone's interests, though no one was entirely satisfied. Beijing and Washington should recommit themselves to the type of practices that made that earlier period possible. This requires restraint and reassurance by Washington, Beijing, and Taipei.

All of this is difficult, some would say impossible, but this, or something very much like it, is what is essential if we are to avoid taking the plunge off Kiyomizu-Dera. Mel Gurtov has helped us think about how we might move away from the parapet.

*David M. Lampton is Hyman Professor Emeritus, former Dean of Faculty and Director of China Studies, Johns Hopkins—SAIS. He is Senior Research Fellow at the SAIS Foreign Policy Institute. His most recent book, with Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, is: *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia*. He is former President of the National Committee on US-China Relations and former Chairman of The Asia Foundation.



Response from the Author

Mel Gurtov
Portland State University

I greatly appreciate the positive reviews offered by these two distinguished China experts. As they point out, the passage of time since the publication of *Engaging China* has not resulted in any significant change in the US-China relationship. The key issues remain the same; if anything, both declaratory policies and actions on both sides have hardened. Perhaps the worst development is the near-total absence of high-level meetings between military and civilian officials.

It turns out that the Chinese spy balloon incident that erupted in February 2023, while not of great importance from a strategic point of view, is something of a watershed in recent US-China relations. The incident seems to have precipitated a harder stance in Beijing on direct communications with US leaders, drawn China closer to Russia, and invigorated China's diplomacy with governments friendly to the United States—such as France, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil. Of course, those developments were also affected by factors discussed in my book, such as the US technological competition with China (now dubbed a chips war), tensions over Taiwan, and hostile legislation on China in the US Congress.

Professor Lampton highlights the increasingly dangerous strategic environment in East Asia. From Japan to the Philippines and from Australia to India, militaries are focusing on the presumed China threat. The US security system is expanding beyond the longstanding bilateral defense treaties via AUKUS and the Quad. Regional military budgets are increasing, and bases are expanding. China's military spending, air and

naval forces, and its nuclear arsenal are also increasing. Thus we have some of the essential ingredients for Containment II and Cold War II.

As Professor Thurston rightly observes, the Trump and Biden administrations are largely responsible for exacerbating US-China tensions. They have abandoned efforts to find common ground while preaching the need to “manage” relations. Cooperative projects, such as academic exchanges and pandemics, have been abandoned. The China threat underpins a good deal of US economic and military planning. While that perspective has bipartisan support in Congress and in US public opinion, it actually weakens Taiwan’s security and opportunities to influence China’s assault on human and political rights.

My own review of my book would emphasize two additional themes. One is Chinese national security analysts’ assessment of the United States as the driver of the relationship and, therefore, the party that should initiate efforts to find common ground and reduce tensions. That finding contrasts with the usual assumptions regarding Chinese leaders’ brash self-confidence and belief in the US decline. These Chinese analysts are well aware of US military and economic strengths, in particular the US security system for which China has no equal. They seem to be saying that the United States does not consider relations with China as important as China considers the relationship with the United States—a point well worth considering.

A second theme is the exaggeration of China’s capabilities as well as its intentions. The tendency in the US government is to repeat the Cold War-era mistake of making its chief rival a Behemoth that is inexorably moving toward world domination. The Biden-Harris 2022 National Security Strategy paper is a good example. But consider these elements of Chinese internal weakness: pervasive official corruption, reduced access to semiconductor technology and advanced computer chips, a slowing economy, widespread repression under tightened Party control, high youth unemployment, property bubbles, an aging population, revival of the state-owned sector of the economy, and air and ground pollution. These problems are important not only because they require the leadership’s attention and resources but also because they may shape, and in some cases constrain, foreign policy choices.

These days, US officials wonder why their Chinese counterparts won’t pick up the phone and arrange the next meeting. Have the Americans looked in the mirror? The Republican-dominated House of Representatives, with support from many liberal Congress members, has come up with an extraordinary legislative agenda designed to decouple the two countries’ economies, upgrade US relations with Taiwan, and

increase military and political pressure on China. The Biden administration's China policy incorporates both an ideological and a military component: democracy promotion on the one hand and enhanced China-focused security arrangements on the other. US public opinion has followed suit, shifting from about 60 percent favorable to China in the Obama years to over 80 percent unfavorable today. China has become everyone's favorite enemy, and as Anne Thurston concludes, this bodes very badly for world peace.

How to reverse the tide on China, and hope to influence more positive views in China, is a central task for China specialists here and abroad. My book's main contribution is to outline what engagement should mean—transforming and not merely managing relations—and what an engagement agenda with China might include. I hope other China watchers disturbed by recent events will refine and add to what I have proposed.

*Mel Gurtov is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Portland State University and Senior Editor of *Asian Perspective*. Besides *Engaging China*, his recent books include *America in Retreat: Foreign Policy Under Donald Trump* and *Engaging Adversaries: Peacemaking and Diplomacy in the Human Interest*.