

***US-Chinese Relations: Perilous Past, Pragmatic Present.* By Robert G. Sutter. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010. Softcover: 331pp.**

Sutter organizes his book around a worthy question: given that the US-China relationship includes elements of both competition and partnership, will the future of bilateral ties be dominated by cooperation or antagonism?

In his first five chapters, the author provides an historical summary of the relationship. This section makes abundantly clear that US-China relations drag along enough historical baggage of mutual suspicions to fill Tiananmen Square. In the latter part of the book, several thematic chapters explore various aspects of the bilateral relationship. It is a professorial approach that reflects Sutter's present position as a respected academic at Georgetown University. However, the book is largely descriptive, overwhelming the reader with a deluge of historical facts and issues without providing much in the way of an analytical framework to order and make sense of all the information. The book is copiously footnoted. There are a few instances of repetitious passages. Beware of the statement that China's holdings of US securities in 2008 was "\$1.2 billion" (p. 199); "billion" should read "trillion".

The bulk of the book concerns the US side of the relationship, which Sutter explores with far greater detail and nuance than he does the Chinese side. This is a reflection of both the greater transparency of policy-making in the United States than in China and of Sutter's long career as a Washington insider in both government and academe. Indeed, a better title for the book would be *US Policy Towards the PRC*. This is not necessarily a criticism: one of the strengths of the book is Sutter's ability to articulate the shifts in US-China policy from one administration to another throughout the post-war period.

Sutter's China is not aggressive or vindictive. As with many other observers, he sees the Chinese leadership as focused on internal stability and economic development, with the result that China is steered increasingly towards good international citizenship. He warns, however, that the continuation of "the prevailing moderate Chinese approach" cannot be certain because Chinese leaders are sometimes prone to acting injudiciously due to their sense of domestic and international political vulnerability (pp. 143, 149). Sutter is critical of domestic political actors in the United States who have criticized China out of "partisan or other ulterior motives" and thereby

complicate US government's efforts to keep the relationship with China constructive and stable (p. 126).

Sutter makes the cautious prediction that the "positive equilibrium" is "likely to continue into the first years of the Obama government" — already passed by the time of the book's publication — "and possibly longer" (p. 274). Although the bilateral relationship has seen serious downturns in the past, these are less likely in the future because the relationship has become more "multifaceted and often deeply rooted". In particular, Sutter argues, the degree of interdependence between the two economies gives Beijing and Washington a compelling reason to manage disputes and avoid conflict (p. 276).

The argument seems to be that the past history of the relationship answers the central question posed at the beginning of this review. Suspicions and disputes have always bedeviled relations between the United States and modern China, but despite these divisive elements, a foundation of economic interdependence and limited strategic cooperation has taken hold and now appears to have stabilized the relationship. Sutter is well known for his advocacy of the view that reports of the demise of America's pre-eminent role in the Western Pacific are greatly exaggerated. He briefly restates that argument in this book as well, observing that both the difficulties of China becoming the region's dominant power and the resilience of the United States are frequently underestimated (pp. 164–65, 277).

Sutter thus sees strength in the status quo. US-China relations will probably remain mostly constructive, with the strains effectively managed, for the foreseeable future, and China will not supplant the United States as the pre-eminent power in the Asia-Pacific region.

This view, however, will not satisfy observers who believe that the rise of China as a relatively stronger economic, political and military power — and the expectation that China will soon rival if not surpass the strength of the United States in important areas — will inevitably change China's behaviour towards the United States and the international system and the responses of other countries towards China. Indeed, the publication of Sutter's book coincides with assertions of Chinese interests on a broad range of issues, including the international financial system and climate change policy, demands for the termination of US arms sales to Taiwan and Beijing's claims for a virtual sphere of influence over both the Yellow Sea and the South China Sea. It is as if those impatient Chinese elites who want to start reaping the fruits of China's newly enhanced relative power have gained ascendancy over

their colleagues who want to continue following Deng Xiaoping's advice that China should lay low during this period of "strategic opportunity". Sutter's book may do readers a service by offering a calming historical perspective. It is possible, however, that the book takes stock of an era that is rapidly drawing to a close, and offers few lessons for a fundamentally changed future.