

***Meeting China Halfway — How to Defuse the Emerging US–China Rivalry.* By Lyle J. Goldstein. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015. Hardcover: 389pp.**

*Meeting China Halfway* is a must read for anyone concerned about the current trajectory of US–China relations. It has much to say about how America and China might build greater strategic trust, and thus avoid the risks of a Thucydides trap. It puts forward constructive policy proposals about how these major powers might move from an “escalation spiral” in their relationship to a “cooperation spiral”.

Recognizing that Chinese and American interests coincide over many global problems, successive chapters address major global issues, such as the environment, the Middle East, Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula, and how a “cooperation spiral” might proceed. For each issue it identifies a mutually reciprocal progression of steps that would promote cooperation and trust. Such a “cooperation spiral” would start with small steps and move on to more difficult initiatives.

Associate Professor Lyle Goldstein was the founding director of the China Maritime Studies Institute at the US Naval War College, and has considerable expertise on China, with the language ability to analyse Chinese language sources, including military publications, not otherwise available to Western experts. Goldstein’s basic concern in *Meeting China Halfway* is the increasing levels of distrust between Beijing and Washington. This is aggravated by the lack of appreciation on the American side of China’s history, especially US imperialism, and the wide extent of anti-American sentiment in China. Goldstein notes that “Most Chinese foreign policy and defense specialists are convinced that Washington seeks to contain and even derail China’s rise” (p. 355). With this background, it is not surprising that China responds robustly to US initiatives, especially those of a military nature, in the South China Sea.

As Goldstein reminds us, there are “hawks” in both Beijing and Washington. In his view, “Most troubling of all, the military establishments in both the United States and China each appears to hold that they must earnestly prepare for rivalry and even direct conflict” (pp. 330–31). Given developments over the past year, with China’s artificial island-building in the South China Sea and the US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), if anything these sentiments have increased since the book was published.

This review focuses primarily on the chapter which addresses US–China relations in the South China Sea. The title of this chapter is “The New ‘Fulda Gap’” using the metaphor for US–China rivalry first introduced by Robert Kaplan in a 2009 *Foreign Affairs* article on the Indian Ocean. Given the depth of anti-American sentiment in China, Goldstein believes that it is Washington’s responsibility to initiate the first steps of each “cooperation spiral”. With the South China Sea, the first step would be for Washington to invite China’s participation in the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) series of naval exercises. Subsequent steps by Washington might include promotion of regional coast guard cooperation, public recognition of China as a claimant in the South China Sea, and the scaling back of military activities in the region. The last step involves terminating US military cooperation with Vietnam, believing that “recent overtures toward military cooperation between Hanoi and Washington have violated reasonable principles of geopolitical moderation” (p. 290). Similarly, Goldstein is opposed to the US encouraging India’s entry into the South China Sea.

The reciprocal steps by Beijing might include proposals for combined counter-piracy patrols in the Malacca Straits (unlikely to be well received by the littoral states), clarification of the nine-dash line, joint resource development on the principle of equality and ending its own initiatives for regional military cooperation. Goldstein is highly critical of the militarization of the South China Sea, believing that all parties are to blame. He claims that the most damaging aspect of Washington’s Asian rebalance is its tendency towards militarization, and that “the policy has served to justify an impressive parade of weapons programs, as well as an intensified regimen of military exercises” (p. 354). He is often sceptical of the benefits of military cooperation noting, for example, that “Military exchanges between the United States and China are frequently symbolic and stilted — and almost uniformly lacking in substance” (p. 210).

Goldstein is strong on “soft power” and coast guard cooperation. He suggests that the United States should be making more use of its coast guard in fostering maritime cooperation in Southeast Asia. In this way, it would help demilitarize maritime security issues in the region and draw on the very prestigious position of the US Coast Guard, recognizing especially its high reputation in China.

Some steps in Goldstein’s step-by step approach to building a “cooperation spiral” could be questioned, but such nit-picking should not detract from the basic aim of the book, which is to

suggest proposals for ending the current levels of distrust between Washington and Beijing. He knows what he is talking about. His familiarity with China and his understanding of the historical background to the bilateral relationship give authority to his imaginative proposals. Although many will not agree with his proposals, or find them impractical, overall Goldstein has written a book that is refreshingly different.

In the last pages of the book, the author relates an incident from Richard McKenna's 1962 novel *The Sand Pebbles* concerning the activities of USS *San Pablo*, a fictitious river gunboat, deep inside China's rivers in the 1920s. Goldstein quotes in full an incident from the book when a landing party from the *San Pablo* confronts a unit from the Chinese Kuomintang Army that is occupying an American church mission. The Americans try to force the Chinese to leave, but the Chinese commander reminds them that times have changed and the landing party has no authority on Chinese soil. After a tense stand-off, the Chinese commander finally says "if you mean to have a war, let it begin here", leaving the Americans with the only options of opening fire or returning to their ship. They take the retiring option!

As Goldstein concludes, "The United States' difficult relations with China in our own time are certain to promote similarly tense standoffs and will require comparable restraint — not to mention another painful psychological adjustment" (p. 364). It is not too difficult to visualize a situation in the South China Sea involving a confrontation between a US warship conducting a FONOP and a Chinese armada of fishing vessels and coast guard units. Like the *San Pablo's* landing party, the rules of engagement for the American vessel would likely not allow it to open fire, and it would have no option but to back off. Times have changed in East Asia, and as Goldstein concludes "for America, there is no viable alternative to meeting China halfway".

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