

2023

## Getting China Wrong

David Adamic

Aaron L. Friedberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Adamic, David and Friedberg, Aaron L. (2023) "Getting China Wrong," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 76: No. 3, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol76/iss3/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

the product of a single personality but was built by generations of leaders who demonstrated and modeled what was possible. Few can be a fleet commander in the mold of Nimitz, but Hone reminds us that every naval leader has a hand in enabling those who are.

DALE C. RIELAGE



*Getting China Wrong*, by Aaron L. Friedberg. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2022. 196 pages. \$27.49.

With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan essentially complete and the long-vaunted pivot to the Pacific finally coming to fruition, the China challenge has moved to center stage. As defense professionals and policy makers in Washington, DC, seek to derive new policies to address the challenge that China poses, students at the Naval War College, such as myself, seek to gain a deeper understanding of China and its often tumultuous relationship with the United States. This is no easy task. A rash of “China experts” have come to the fore offering a variety of policy recommendations, thus widening the gap between thoughtful and poorly constructed analysis. Good advice has never been harder to find.

However, Aaron L. Friedberg fills that gap with *Getting China Wrong*, a thought-provoking, timely, and critical analysis of the relationship between the United States and China. Dr. Friedberg is a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University and the author of several works on China. His latest work delivers a compelling argument that U.S. policy makers fundamentally have misunderstood the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP), resulting in flawed policies that have accomplished the exact opposite of what they sought; China increasingly is repressive at home yet aggressive abroad, and its values have failed to converge with those of the world’s liberal democracies.

In the first of *Getting China Wrong*’s six chapters, Friedberg examines the underlying ideology that resulted in the U.S.-led West embracing China in a strategy of engagement—predicated on the idea that China could be shaped by greater economic connectivity with the West. This strategy of engagement has enjoyed bipartisan support in the United States, with its goal of connecting China more closely to a larger international order. Despite the 1989 Tiananmen protest and massacre, the U.S. government has believed that, with greater engagement, Chinese values would converge with those in the West, resulting in a more democratic China less likely to disrupt the post-Cold War order.

The book’s next two chapters consider the CCP and its resistance to change. Well aware of the liberalizing goals of engagement, the CCP took steps to preserve its grip on power. Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of “reform and opening up” co-opted market forces as a tool in service to the party-state. The CCP was willing to open up in terms of economic practice—but only so far as would not threaten its hold on political power.

Another chapter aligns the CCP’s goals with its worldview. The reconfiguration of the international system following the collapse of the Soviet Union was seen as a threat to the party’s existence. In turn, the CCP acted to solidify its hold on power while advancing two goals: regain China’s position as the predominant power in East Asia, and

eventually replace the United States as leader of a new international order. Through successive leaders and several decades now, China's goals and actions have remained incredibly consistent. Friedberg maintains that Xi Jinping's rhetoric and actions do not represent a departure from the past; rather, Xi hopes to attain the same objectives as those leaders who came before him.

The book's final chapter and conclusion lay out a framework to meet the China challenge. While some of Friedberg's prescriptions may seem hawkish or overly antagonistic, he makes clear that a change of approach is necessary to avert direct confrontation and to preserve an international, rules-based order. Friedberg recommends a four-pronged approach to deal with China. First, liberal democracies must mobilize their soft-power resources and popular will to compete head-on with China. Second, he urges partial disengagement, arguing that previous engagement has been of asymmetric benefit to China. Third, the United States must work globally with partners to maintain a military balance sufficient to discourage and challenge Chinese aggression. Finally, liberal democracies must realize that this is an ideological struggle. As during the Cold War, the "free world" must contend for the superiority of its system in words and deeds.

*Getting China Wrong* is a must-read for anyone who wishes to understand the relationship between the United States and China, with something to offer everyone. It is important that all citizens, not only those at the Naval War College or within the defense establishment, understand the threats and opportunities that arise from an ascendant China. An informed

citizenry goes a long way to prevent a war that will serve the interests of neither China nor the United States.

DAVID ADAMIC



*To Risk It All: Nine Conflicts and the Crucible of Decision*, by James Stavridis [Adm., USN (Ret.)]. New York: Penguin, 2022. 323 pages. \$28.

Among the qualities of a military leader, the ability to make decisions is perhaps the most important. On the battlefield, as in life, making the right decisions is essential if one wishes to survive. As Admiral James Stavridis, USN (Ret.), shows in his new volume *To Risk It All*, making decisions requires understanding. In an extraordinary collection of stories, Stavridis manages to produce what few others have: a manual of practical leadership.

As Stavridis asserts in the introduction, decision-making is at the heart of naval leaders' duty at every level. Whether in combat or highly stressful peacetime conditions, what goes on in the mind of a naval leader in the moment of the decision is the secret Stavridis aims to discover. The volume follows a simple structure of one example per chapter, totaling nine case studies spanning the entire history of the U.S. Navy and highlighting the intricate thought process that has guided these pillars of the American naval community. From the legendary captain John Paul Jones to the recent case of Captain Brett E. Crozier at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Stavridis offers an insightful look into the mind of a naval leader when his or her decision well could mean the difference between life and death of the leader and the crew.