

A Contest for Supremacy

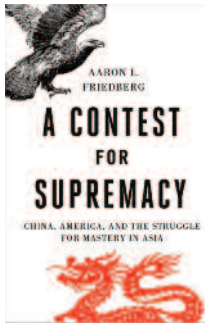
China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia

BY AARON L. FRIEDBERG

NEW YORK: W.W. NORTON & COMPANY, 2011

384 PAGES, ISBN 978-0393343892, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Arthur Barbeau



Aaron Friedberg's *A Contest for Supremacy* is an addition to the spate of books of the past couple of decades which examine the competition between the United States and a People's Republic of China that continues to grow economically as well as militarily. Unlike most of its predecessors, though, Friedberg's analysis does not predict a totally dire outcome for both America and the world.

Friedberg is a professor of politics and international law at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. Labeling himself as a "thinking hawk," he focuses on the past sixty years of relations between the two nations before he offers his conclusions. With this background, it comes as no surprise that he does lean toward pessimism. This stems from the fact that he sees that underlying the competition is not economics or military power but because the two contenders have inimical political systems, liberal democracy vs. one party authoritarianism

The slim thread of hope, according to the author, rests on the transformation of Chinese politics into a democracy. This could come through evolution, revolution or pressure from outside China. Then, the two nations will be able to cooperate rather than remaining contenders. Thus, the present global hegemony of the United States presents no major obstacle to peace, but if China becomes even a regional hegemon without political change, the chances of a peaceful future are reduced. This is a central point of the author.

The arguments advanced by Professor Friedman should not be dismissed; especially given that China is a one-party authoritarian government; at least at the national level. The author also correctly points out the enormous stake that the Peoples' Republic has in the continued economic viability of the United States.

Friedberg is proud that he is neither a "China hand" nor a "China watcher." If he were either, he might be prejudiced or influenced by pre-existing biases. He is a policy analyst. Thus, he examines a paper trail to determine which documents are trustworthy and which are disingenuous. In every case, from the author's perspective, it is the American position which is valid and honest while the Chinese must continually be tested.

There is a downside to the author not having observed first-hand the vast economic changes of the past thirty years. Many Chinese, with the notable exception of some segments of the rural population, have seen their lives become incomparably better. Many young contemporary Chinese have never known tight times. Thus, there is a strong case to be made that uncountable millions of Chinese will defer any major political changes for fear those might jeopardize

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better times. This has both potentially positive and negative implications.

A couple of examples might illustrate contemporary Chinese attitudes about economics, politics, and life that are not captured in this book. I know a young professor of Marxian Economics (still a required course) who cannot wait for his teaching day to end so that he can rush off-campus to open his tiny free market restaurant. In a remote town in Ningxia, I sat smoking with some small businessmen. They were far more interested in their "singing club" and their new motorcycles than they were in potential political reform.

Although the author focuses more on politics and US-China relations, China faces potentially serious economic problems that can impact the US-China situation. Despite a high rate of savings, I have reservations about the long term viability of the banking system with questionable loans to the wrong individuals. In some areas, there are far more workers than are needed. Non-ferrous metals probably has more than half a million surplus workers. Coal mines suffer because of delayed payments from both railroads and hydroelectric plants. Without a good system of social security, many plants are faced with a growing number of retired workers almost totally dependent on a shrinking pool of workers. In Henan, Kaifeng, a printing house now has more pensioners than active workers. The author neglects the plight of the rural poor. Modest increases in agricultural productivity through mechanization could send large numbers of immigrants to the cities which could destabilize urban centers. These criticisms notwithstanding, those interested in contemporary US-China relations should find this book thought-provoking. ■

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