



Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen : The Politics of US-China Relations 1989-2000*

Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2003, 556 p.

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- 1 As an American diplomat once observed, the United States tended to “pull its punches” with respect to the repugnant actions of its authoritarian allies during its global crusade against the Soviet Union. This observation applied with special force to America’s relationship with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) during the waning years of the Cold War. In stark contrast to the bold denunciations and criticism aimed at Moscow, Washington often was oddly silent when it came to Peking’s human rights abuses and other transgressions.
- 2 The end of the Cold War transformed the international system. The cement that had glued the Sino-American relationship together seemingly evaporated overnight. The first real test of the new relationship proved to be the violent events that rocked China on June 4th 1989—the Tiananmen “massacre”. The incident showed how fragile the relationship had become.
- 3 In his book, Robert L. Suettinger argues that the Tiananmen incident caused Sino-American relations to shift overnight from “amity and strategic cooperation to hostility, distrust, and misunderstanding”. Moreover, he contends that the relationship has never really moved “beyond Tiananmen”. Rather, the legacy of the bloody crackdown in Peking continues to undermine cordial relations between the two countries.
- 4 Suettinger’s book is only one in a growing number of ambitious works that seek to examine the current state of Sino-American relations. This book is different from most others, however, in the sense that the author seeks to explain how the events of 1989 and succeeding years have influenced decision-making in Peking as well as in Washington. Furthermore, Suettinger approaches the subject from the perspective of a policy practitioner rather than an academic or a journalist. For most of the years

covered in his book, he served on the National Security Council or the National Intelligence Council. This provides the author with an insider's perspective that is often lacking in other studies.

- 5 However, critics might argue that it has saddled him with an executive branch bias. Unlike Richard C. Bush's recent study, *At Cross Purposes: US-Taiwan Relations Since 1942*, Suettinger appears to take a dim view of congressional intrusions into China policy. Interestingly, Bush, who served as a congressional staff member before joining the executive branch as America's "unofficial" ambassador to Taiwan, is generally supportive of the legislature's efforts to influence US policy in the Western Pacific.
- 6 Suettinger's book examines the major episodes in Sino-American relations during the post-Tiananmen era. In this reviewer's judgement, the highlights of the book include his discussion of the Taiwan Strait crises of 1995-96 (an entire chapter is devoted to this affair), the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and President Bill Clinton's 1998 visit to China. As an insider, Suettinger is able to shed some new light on subjects that have been well covered elsewhere. His interviews with American officials serve to bolster his arguments and conclusions. However, much of his analysis of Chinese decision-making is based either on news stories culled from the popular press or conjecture and speculation.
- 7 All told, Suettinger has produced a good, balanced and interesting book. The chapters offer critical insights into the recent historical events that have shaped Sino-American relations. As such, it will appeal to anyone with an interest in this thorny relationship. Of course, one can find flaws in Suettinger's book as in any other study. This reviewer chief complaint is the pessimistic or perhaps even gloomy tone of the author's overall conclusions. Suettinger argues that "the record of US-China relations in the fourteen years since Tiananmen does not give much cause for optimism". Although he is obviously correct when he suggests that the sources for bilateral tensions remain (particularly the festering Taiwan question), he tends to underestimate how much the United States and China really need each other in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, both countries have a vested interest in managing this important relationship and, despite Suettinger's pessimistic assessment, it is likely that they will succeed in doing so.