

BOOK REVIEW

**Embracing Communist China:
America's Greatest Strategic Failure**
By James E. Fannell and Bradley A. Thayer
Published by: War Room Books
ISBN: 9781648210594
2024, 251 pp.



RADHEY TAMBI

There is no doubt that the global international order is undergoing its roughest and toughest phase since the end of the Cold War in the twentieth century. The most consequential relationship undergoing metamorphosis comprises the U.S.-China ties, which will have a ripple effect not only in the Indo-Pacific region where they are directly involved, but also otherwise. In this context, James E. Fannell, former director of Intelligence and Information Operations for the U.S. Pacific Fleet, and Bradley A. Thayer, an American Professor of Political Science have written an excellent narrative building book on

Ms **Radhey Tambi** is a Research Associate at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

the failures of Washington to recognise the rise of a country that has shaken the pillars of the U.S. hegemony in the twenty-first century.

The book is divided into five chapters, with a foreword written by Stephen K. Bannon, a former Republican Party White House strategist. While *Chapter One* attempts to provide the central argument that delves into the strategic miscalculation by the United States regarding the possible rise of China and its potential implications, which include the risk of the U.S. losing its dominant position in the post-1991 global order. *Chapters Two* and *Three* provide a detailed answer to the pertinent questions like why and how the U.S. embraced China, what steps were taken by China to this end, the stakeholders involved in the making of this as a strategic failure, and its likely impact on the US interests. The recommendations for the U.S. policy-making and the strategic community are covered in *Chapter Four*, followed by a question: Which side are you on—the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) or America's? similar to the Cold War question: whether a country was with America or not.

The answers to the above questions can be broken down into a few broad categories, beginning with the understanding of the various theoretical concepts invoked, like 'threat deflation', 'end of history', and the engagement policy. According to the authors, threat deflation refers to the consistent underestimation of the threat that one state poses to another. In the case of the United States, despite some reports of the Department of Defence and a few other assessment reports, the rise of any near peer competitor after the Cold War victory was nearly impossible. Francis Fukuyama's concept of the end of history, which believes in the triumph of liberalism after the disintegration of the USSR, further added to Washington's complacency in acting towards China. All this was marinated by a firm belief among different sections of the American society in the engagement policy that would allow the U.S. to manage a communist China by encouraging market reforms and trade. To this end, Washington allowed yearly renewal of Beijing's Most Favored Nation (MFN) status and supported its entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Secondly, the book adequately covers the role of different stakeholders like the avarice of corporate America, strategists, military personnel, scientists, think-tanks, and even the academic

community that supported the engagement policy under different American presidents, from the Clinton administration up to the most recent, the Biden administration. Outsourcing manufacturing and the loss of American intellectual property have robbed Americans of the American way of life, and led to the fading of *Pax Americana*. On the other hand, Beijing also played the political warfare strategy through great strategists like Deng Xiaoping, capturing American elites by promoting business models that benefited Beijing at the cost of Washington in the long term, influencing the U.S. personalities running different think-tanks, etc.

The third important aspect that has made the U.S. uncomfortable about the rise of China is of losing its grip over the global international order that was mainly tilted in its favour. A weak America also means compromising with the global international order, undermining of the free trade market, and the protection of the U.S. allies. All three of which remain questionable, especially after the coming of Trump 2.0 to the White House, where the allies are losing faith in the U.S. umbrella, and the concept of free trade which had once been the pillar of U.S. hegemony is being questioned under the spiralling rounds of restrictions and tariffs imposed by President Trump.

Recommendations given by the author include, first, identifying that the U.S. has made a mistake and then involving a whole of government approach, from the leadership at the highest level to the scientists, strategists, military officials, educational institutes, and especially the industrial class of the US. Second, a continuous increase in the relative power. The third and most controversial one, to allow nuclear proliferation of South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, which will complicate the strategic calculus for China and maintain a strong deterrent. Last, but not the least, there is a dire need to understand the behaviour and objectives of the Communist Party of China, which is the fuel behind the rise of China. This is in contrast to the comparison that is found throughout the book between the Communism in Beijing and in Moscow. While Washington was successful in handling the latter, an understanding of what makes it different in the former is missing from the book.

While the book holistically covers the reasons, it lacks a detailed analysis of the options left for America to take a U-turn in its foreign

and domestic policies to deal with the threat from China. Despite a few steps mentioned, it lacks a balanced approach in putting forward any one of them. The book also lacks a forward-looking approach as to how China will behave in the coming time. In the whole array of partners and allies that Washington has, only four have been mentioned—Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and India—which will allow the U.S. to deal with the imminent threat from the rise of China. Unlike New Delhi, Tokyo and Seoul are treaty allies of the U.S. Therefore, instead of understanding India's foreign policy approaches and objectives, regarding its continental neighbour, China, with which it has a long standing unsettled boundary, the U.S. assumes that New Delhi has the ability and the willingness to temper the Sino-American rivalry. Further, it also remains to be seen how it aligns with the principle of strategic autonomy, which remains the guiding star of the Indian foreign policy.

Overall, the book is a valuable read for academics, the armed forces, and policy-makers, for understanding various nuances of the US-China relationship.