

# Reviews of “China’s Quest”

As of 30 January 2017



[Foreign Affairs 95.5](#) (Sep/Oct 2016): 187-188.

## Abstract

[...]the Communist Party has yet to come up with a convincing rationale for oneparty rule that can simultaneously make the Chinese people, China's neighbors, and the world beyond feel comfortable with China's rise and also aid domestic stability and material progress.

## Full Text

Recent Books: Asia and Pacific: China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China BY JOHN W. GARVER. [Oxford University Press](#), 2016, 888 pp.

China's Quest lives up to the definitive comprehensiveness suggested by its subtitle. This superb, lengthy volume knits together thick descriptions of events in China from 1949 until today into a clear, compelling narrative. In Garver's telling, all of China's modern leaders-from Mao Zedong, who was guided by his leftist vision, to Deng Xiaoping, who prioritized marketresponsive economic modernization, to Xi Jinping, the current president, who has played great-power politics and built a strongman persona-have steadfastly pursued what they believed to be China's interests. Each leader saw his country as facing a deep domestic crisis of legitimacy, and their respective foreign policies were primarily attempts to shore up that weakness. But their efforts to legitimize the regime all had fatal flaws, which compelled their successors-or will compel them, in Xi's case-to reinvent the stories that the party told the people. With each reinvention, Beijing's external policies changed to fit the new line. But the Communist Party has yet to come up with a convincing rationale for oneparty rule that can simultaneously make the Chinese people, China's neighbors, and the world beyond feel comfortable with China's rise and also aid domestic stability and material progress. The struggle goes on. As Garver concludes: "There may be further detours."

DAVID M. LAMPTON

XX

# [newbooks.asia](http://newbooks.asia)

newbooks.asia

An indispensable tool for identifying, bookmarking, evaluating and purchasing new publications  
• Up-to-date listings of all recent and new academic English language books on Asia • Review, comment on, and debate new publications in your field • Take advantage of the personalised features of this site - such as bookmarking and alerting services • Contact us by e-mail at [info@newbooks.asia](mailto:info@newbooks.asia).

Reviewed by: [Jonathan Fulton](#)

## Reviewed item:

### [China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China](#)

John Garver's *China's Quest* is a major addition to the literature covering the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) diplomatic history. Until now there has been no comprehensive single volume text on the topic in English, and Garver is exceptionally qualified for this project, having published books on China's relations with the United States, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Iran, Taiwan, the Middle East, and India. In this book the focus is on China's relations with the five major Asian powers: the USSR/Russian Federation, Japan, India, Iran, and the United States. His conceptual theme is the connection between domestic and international pressures that drive the PRC's foreign relations. This is one of the most important features of this book; too often analysis of international relations ignores what is happening inside a state, focusing instead on geopolitical concerns. Garver's approach gives equal weight to both, and his history is the stronger for it.

The book is divided into three chronological sections. The first, Forging a revolutionary state, covers the Mao era, from 1949–1978. It provides an excellent account of the ideological project of trying to create a new Chinese society, a utopian communist one, and how this influenced the PRC's Cold War relations. The importance of personalities in foreign policy is emphasized, as well as the preferences and perceptions of decision makers. Describing Mao as "an idiosyncratic combination of ideologue and revolutionary realist" (p. 173), Garver's account explains how these traits, combined with tremendous ambition, explain many of the foreign policy decisions during Mao's rule. It also provides an excellent description of vertical authoritarianism in action; in a subsection about the deterioration of relations with both the USSR and India in the early 1960s titled The consequences of Mao's multiple rash decisions, Garver writes, "The swift way in which Mao arrived at these judgements suggests that they were not deeply reasoned. Had either or both of those judgements been submitted for consideration of China's more prudent leaders or their professional staffs, those judgements would almost certainly have been discarded or greatly moderated. But Mao's preeminence within the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] elite was such, and the fate of those who questioned his judgement grim enough, that once Mao rendered a judgement, that judgement was unassailable" (p. 161). His description of Mao's ideological and personal leanings also contributes to a fuller analysis of the PRC's foreign policy during the Mao era.

The second section, The happy interregnum, examines the period between 1978–1989, bookended by Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power and the Tiananmen Square massacre. It emphasizes the necessity of squaring the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) ideology with a new approach to economic development before launching the Reform Era; the project remained building socialism in China. In order to accomplish this, the CCP first had to provide an ideological explanation of where the Party had gone wrong under Mao. The consensus decision was that in 1956, when Mao concluded that China still had antagonistic class enemies within, he had made a fundamental error; the problem facing China was not between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, but rather between the low level of development and the peasantry’s material needs. This ideological explanation drove the early Reform Era, and helps explain the seemingly impossible contradiction of a communist party ruling over the largest capital-driven development in history. This section provides an excellent account of the competing forces within China during this transitional period, with reformer and conservative factions both struggling for the soul of the Party, and Deng trying to strike a balance. In terms of how this shaped China’s foreign policy of the period, Garver’s analysis is especially relevant when describing the uneasy relationship between China and the USA, with American leadership expecting China’s economic reforms to lead to a form of liberal democratic capitalism, and the PRC’s determination to focus on economic development without political reform.

The third section, titled The CCP Leninist state besieged, covers the years between 1990 to 2015, a period marked by China’s deep integration into the liberal order, its incredible rise in global trade, and its perceived rise to great power status. However, it is a period also marked by domestic tension, as Chinese leaders see their continued rule as threatened by this same liberal system, dominated by liberal ideas. In the wake of Tiananmen, “a rapidly globalizing China was ruled by an anachronistic Leninist elite that saw its authority to rule profoundly threatened by the dynamics of globalization”(p. 464). Here again Garver provides a masterful account of the balancing act Chinese leaders must perform in navigating the international system and at the same time meeting myriad domestic pressures, all the while trying to maintain an ideological justification for the continued rule of the CCP.

Rich in detail but never overwhelming, *China’s Quest* provides an excellent historical analysis of the PRC’s foreign relations that serves historians, political scientists, international relations specialists, China and Asian studies scholars, and the curious non-specialist reader. Garver’s analysis of the international and domestic environment that shaped China’s foreign policy, as well as his description of elite perceptions and preferences and ideological considerations, give the fullest single-volume account of the PRC’s foreign relations published in English to date.

New Asia Books is an initiative of the International Insitute for Asian Studies

XX

**The China Quarterly, No. 227, September 2016, p. 825-826.**

China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China

John Garver has written the most complete, balanced and up-to-date account of the foreign relations of the People's Republic of China (PRC) available. It likely will remain so for a long time. This well written, lucid and lengthy volume should be a core component of all Chinese foreign policy reading lists. Because of its emphasis on the domestic political drivers of external behaviour, China's Quest also has considerable relevance for those interested in domestic politics. It should be understood that Garver's book is more about the content of China's foreign relations and less about the process by which it is made.

Garver's core analytic assertion is that Chinese foreign policy has been driven by the ongoing need for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders to overcome a domestic political legitimacy deficit by pursuing a sequence of broad foreign policies (three in number) that each, in its own distinctive way, has sought to provide a legitimacy to the CCP regime that its domestic actions alone could not provide. For Mao, it was a revolutionary foreign policy that could "mobilize positive elements" for domestic change (p. 145). For Deng Xiaoping, it was an economic foreign policy that anchored legitimacy in improved material conditions. To achieve this, he needed to pacify the outside world to the degree possible. And, for Xi Jinping, it now seems to be big power diplomacy anchored in making China great again – the China Dream – assertive nationalism.

Each of these three foreign policy legitimating principles had/has a fatal flaw/flaws. Mao's revolutionary policy impoverished China, cut it off from the world of comparative advantage, and created a hostile international environment that sapped China's strength and the will of its people. Deng's economic foreign policy anchored in globalization created inequalities, changed domestic socio-economic stratification, mobilized the citizenry in terms of rights consciousness, and created a popular impatience to flex the country's muscles internationally. And with respect to Xi's more assertive foreign policy, it runs the risk of exciting expectations that cannot be fulfilled and creating an international bandwagon against assertiveness. In short, Beijing has yet to find a stable equilibrium in which it has a compelling and stable domestic rationale for one-Party rule that simultaneously makes its region, and the world beyond, comfortable and that leads to domestic stability and material progress. The struggle goes on.

Garver has made excellent use of the memoirs of Chinese leaders, the Soviets/ Russians, a broad range of secondary sources, recently opened archives in China and Russia, and documents declassified in the West. China's Quest is full of fresh insight about many periods and specific events in the history of the PRC's relations with its neighbours and distant powers. Among the areas where Garver brings new insight and detail, one would include: a long and intricate discussion of Deng Xiaoping's return to power, the 1974 push to assert Chinese sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, Beijing's toughened attitude toward Hanoi just as American involvement in Vietnam was winding down, and the subsequent "pedagogic war" of early 1979 (chapter 14); the long, post-1989 internal debate in China over the intentions of Washington, its strategy of peaceful evolution, and the mounting crises of 1995/96 in the Taiwan Strait, the 1999 mistaken

US/NATO bombing of China's Belgrade Embassy, and the ratcheting up of tension over US coastal reconnaissance first glaringly obvious in the 2001 air collision off Hainan Island; and finally, a long and illuminating discussion of the similarities between the foreign policies of Bismarck in Germany and Deng Xiaoping, on the one hand, and Wilhelm II and Xi Jinping on the other.

If there is one area where I would place a different emphasis than the author, it is the era-shifting importance Garver attaches to the 4 June 1989 violence. I get a sense from the analysis that the author believes that the slide toward higher levels of distrust and friction between China and the United States, and China and its neighbours, has proceeded in straight line fashion since that time. In my view, what has happened since 1989 underscores the centrality of leadership. The Jiang Zemin, Zhu Rongji, George Herbert Walker Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush era was a period of net Sino-American cooperation in which one saw China's entry into the WTO and Jiang was talking about broadening the composition of the Party and changing its internal processes. There was nothing pre-ordained about the frictions we now see. Instead, current frictions reflect bad choices, importantly, but not exclusively, in Beijing. Today's tensions reflect the strategic calculations of particular leaders in particular circumstances. There was, and remains, room for choice and wise leadership, though as Garver said in concluding his book, "[t]here may be further detours..." (p. 785).

DAVID M. LAMPTON

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

---

**International Affairs**

(The Royal Institute of International Affairs, UK)

**vol. 9, no. 4 (2016), p. 126-127.**

**Book reviews**

China's Quest: the history of the foreign relations of the People's Republic of China. By John W. Garver. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2016. 888pp. £33.00. isbn9780190261054. Available as e-book.

John Garver's magisterial work is the summation of a career spent teaching about and engaging with the diplomatic development of the People's Republic of China. He is right to point out in his introduction the anomaly of such an important country having had no recent single-volume comprehensive overview of its foreign relations. He is also right to acknowledge that this is despite the fact that Chinese and non-Chinese scholars have all produced excellent works on specific aspects of

China's relations with other countries.

To have in one place a single overview of the key events and actors in China's diplomacy since 1949 assists in drawing out some aspects of this history that would probably get easily buried in detail. For example, one feature of the supposedly introspective Maoist period, from 1949 to 1976, that Garver highlights is Mao's underlying international pretensions. He often saw his views and actions as positioning China not as undertaking a purely indigenous experiment in development but also as profoundly important and meaningful to the outer world. Even during the Cultural Revolution from 1966, Red Guards stationed in overseas missions were mandated to undertake revolutionary struggle in order to inspire leftist groups in host countries to follow the path of self liberation China believed it was treading. It is a frightening thing to contemplate, but Mao probably sincerely believed that there might have been a world wide version of the Cultural Revolution.

The other powerful aspect of the book is the number of times, and the variety of ways, makers of Chinese foreign policy, both before and after 1978, simply misunderstood or misinterpreted the outside world—often to their country's detriment. The case of relations with Vietnam is among the most striking. China generously assisted the communist north in the early phases of the war, only to see a unified country emerge which, as Garver acidly notes, was anything but grateful to its erstwhile patron. Later on, during the negotiations over Hong Kong with the British, Garver eloquently describes how Chinese foreign policy was guided by paranoia and distrust, which had more to do with the Beijing elite's response to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre than to any British aims to use Hong Kong as a launching pad for destabilizing the mainland. Garver argues that the British were anxious simply to preserve the profits of their companies in the territory—regime collapse in Beijing would not have achieved that. The 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre and its impact loom large in this book, far beyond Hong Kong. It figures as the moment when latent suspicions of the US came fully into the open, an attitude that has never entirely disappeared even to this day.

In a historical account like Garver's, it is interesting to find the early roots of many current attitudes and convictions. Chinese insecurity first reared its head in the fractious relationship with the USSR, despite the country borrowing so many ideas and structures so many of them negative in terms of its impact on China, was the one that the USSR least wanted China to buy into: its failed, state-dominated economic model from the 1930s. Even the most malignant of Soviet leaders would have probably counseled China against using methods which had already so signally failed at home. As Garver's lengthy account of this period shows, in terms of technology, aid and intellectual assistance, the USSR was generous. It as good as gave China the capacity to make a nuclear bomb and shared the best military technology it had at the time. Its reward was to be the prime target of the Cultural Revolution, with China constructing its famous détente with America from the early 1970s as a wall against Soviet aspirations in the Asian region.

America and the liberal West ironically became a new kind of USSR for China after the economic reform and opening up of the 1980s. In some areas, such as non-proliferation, after initial opposition mid-1990s, China proved to be a positive and cooperative partner. In others, such as intervention to prevent humanitarian crises, it has a more mixed record. China was strongly opposed to NATO action in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, and its priority in North Korea has been keeping the US out, rather than trying to deal with the country's increasingly unstable and bellicose leadership.

North Korea is always an interesting case to look at when considering the effectiveness of Chinese foreign policy. It is the one country (perhaps apart from Pakistan) where China has real clout and some form of control. And yet, it is also the one country that seems to prove that Chinese might is far more striking in words than in actions. Garver's history allows us to go right back to the moment when this profound ambiguity first appeared: during the Korean War, which led China to commit troops to fight on its borders again only a few months after emerging from a bloody civil war. Without Chinese intervention then, North Korea would most likely not exist. This contribution is all the more impressive when considered in the context of Garver's important point: that without the unwanted interruption of the Korean War, the People's Republic at the time was in an excellent position to take Taiwan, and end the Republic of China's existence there.

China would never again have such a convenient moment to finally achieve its modern dream of reunification. The crucial part North Korea played in spoiling this gives added emotion to Chinese comments about this small but endlessly ungrateful and troublesome neighbor. It also makes the impotence that China often shows on North Korean issues, particularly North Korea's recent mission to nuclearize, all the more worth pondering, because it seems to show chronic indecision rather than the sort of clear, ruthless prosecution of objectives many impute to Chinese diplomacy.

This is a magnificent treatment, and one full of new insights and angles. Even at 800 pages, it does not treat in any detail China's relations with Africa, Latin America; nor, for that matter, does it stray into the new areas of the Arctic and Antarctic, or Australasia. In a sense, it is focused on China and its Asia-Pacific region. But this is fair enough, as it is the place where China exists, the place where it most wants to have some kind of dominance, and the region where it most truly reveals its ambitions and intentions.

*Kerry Brown, King's College Lau China Institute, UK*

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

## Global Atlanta

January 1, 2017

Reviewer: **Nancy Hollister**

The most remarkable nonfiction book I read this year was [\*China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China\*](#) by John W. Garver, a life-long China scholar and Georgia Tech professor whose knowledge of the Chinese language and vast research background on the country primed him to write this astoundingly ambitious work, the first to trace the history of China's complex foreign relations since the Communist regime took power in 1949.

While an 850-plus page book may at first appear daunting, actually more than 60 pages are endnotes that give credit to many scholars and their research. With these pushed to the back, the book is very readable, despite the fact that Dr. Garver doesn't shy away from complex issues.

Dr. Garver identifies three distinct time periods: 1949-1978 Mao Zedong's destruction of capitalism and the establishment of Chinese communism; 1979-1989 where **Deng Xiaoping** established a new course—"opening and reform"—which led to improved conditions for the people and rapid economic development of the country; and the third stage 1990-2015 with internal uprisings, as well as the democratic movement and collapse of Communism throughout the world, which led to the Chinese responses of patriotism indoctrination domestically and an assertive foreign policy posture abroad.

Dr. Garver has noted several domestic drivers of foreign affairs in China over time—foremost being the communist regime survival. This is especially apparent as he highlights the conflicts and periods of cooperation with five countries: the **U.S.**, the **Soviet Union/Russia**, **Japan**, **India** and **Iran**. All throughout, Dr. Garver maintains a consistently objective stance and yet at the same time provides hard evidence which may support his own views.

This is a "must-read" book for all those interested in China, especially given the country's increasingly prominent role in global affairs and the seeds of regional conflict sprouting in **Asia**.

XX

## **Journal of American-East Asian Relations**

Vol. 23, issue 3, (2016) p. 287-288

Professor John W. Garver has written a sweeping history of Chinese foreign policy from 1949 to 2015. He directly states that "the premise of this book is that China in 1949 adopted a deeply dysfunctional political-economic model from the USSR and that this fact has deeply influenced the foreign relations of the People's Republic of China [prc] ever since" (p. 1). Garver argues that the survival of the revolutionary state has been the driving force in the development of China's foreign policy. To explore the linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy, he also pays notice to regime legitimacy and nationalism. The author applies this interpretative framework to three periods—the Mao Zedong era (1949–1978), "the happy interregnum" (1979–1989), and "the [Chinese Communist Party] CCP Leninist state besieged" (1990–2015).

In his first section, Garver perceptively shows how China's alliance with the Soviet Union placed the prc on the path to becoming a great power. Mao's acceptance of Mongolian independence, for example, facilitated the transfer of thousands of Soviet specialists and a swath of military and industrial technology to China. This aid enabled the prc to assist Kim Il Sung during the Korean War and Ho Chi Minh during the First Indochina War. Garver writes that "the prc and the USSR cooperated closely to expand the frontiers of the socialist camp in Asia" (p. 91). This close cooperation, however, fell apart in 1960. Although China and the Soviet Union came together briefly during the height of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the prc remained isolated for years thereafter. During this period of seclusion, Garver maintains that "Mao faced down Soviet threats from a position of vulnerability and weakness" undergirded by his belief that "no nation could defeat the Chinese people" (p. 285). China finally pivoted toward the United States in the 1970s because—according to Garver—Mao feared that Soviets and hidden Chinese reactionaries would collude to reverse the effects of the Cultural Revolution. One can describe Chinese foreign



policy during the Maoist era as one of both brinkmanship and survival. Garver terms the second period “the happy interregnum” since it signaled the abandonment of Mao’s utopian ventures, the expansion of personal liberties, and closer ties between the PRC and the United States. The author does a superb job in portraying how high politics affected the lives of ordinary people. As examples, he sheds light on a key CCP directive that allowed foreigners to operate businesses in Guangdong Special Economic Zones and an agreement with the United States that addressed the brain drain of Chinese students studying abroad caused during the 1980s.

The book’s final section concerns how the CCP narrowly avoided liberalization in 1989 and how it began its march toward future superpower status. Garver notes that through withstanding both sanctions imposed by the West after the Tiananmen Massacre and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, China reaffirmed its stance as a country that could not be coerced by foreign powers. As such, the CCP fanned the flames of nationalism and self-determination in the years that followed. Nationalist sentiment flourished with Britain’s handover of Hong Kong in 1997 and reached a fever pitch with the 1999 accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. The author shows that fervent nationalism has also played a major role in drumming up popular support for CCP policies toward Japan. Garver correctly argues that the PRC has used confrontation in the East China Sea to simultaneously placate the Chinese public and achieve control over disputed islands. Furthermore, within the last decade, the PRC has deployed warships throughout the Indian Ocean. Rapid economic and military development in the last two decades has enabled China to project its power in ways unimaginable during Mao’s rule.

*China’s Quest* serves as an excellent textbook for students of Chinese diplomatic history, as well as international affairs. Garver’s writing is clear and succinct, which makes this work an accessible reference for researchers in political science and Asian history. Moreover, the author’s minimizing of theory gives the central argument added nuance across myriad contexts. The book may have benefited from a broader source base, however. The author cites *Wikipedia* and relies heavily on publications such as the *Renmin ribao* (*The People’s Daily*). The use of archival sources would have given a “behind the scenes” account of how the People’s Republic operated in the international arena.

Another drawback of such an all-encompassing opus is a lack of detail in places. Topics such as Sino-Burmese border negotiations and contemporary Sino-African economic relations receive only brief attention. Nevertheless, Garver readily admits that it is a challenge to cover in-depth all possible aspects of China’s foreign policy. He instead emphasizes that the purpose of the book is to examine the “logic and practice of PRC foreign policy” (p. xiii). To this end, he indeed has succeeded.