

# The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power

*Thomas J. Christensen*

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Many see China as a rival superpower to the United States and imagine the country's rise to be a threat to U.S. leadership in Asia and beyond. Thomas J. Christensen argues against this zero-sum vision. Instead, he describes a new paradigm in which the real challenge lies in dissuading China from regional aggression while encouraging the country to contribute to the global order. Drawing on decades of scholarship and experience as a senior diplomat, Christensen offers a compelling new assessment of U.S.-China relations that is essential reading for anyone interested in the future of the globalized world.

*The China Challenge* shows why China is nowhere near powerful enough to be considered a global "peer competitor" of the United States, but it is already strong enough to destabilize East Asia and to influence economic and political affairs worldwide. Despite China's impressive achievements, the Chinese Communist Party faces enormous challenges. Christensen shows how nationalism and the threat of domestic instability influence the party's decisions on issues like maritime sovereignty disputes, global financial management, control of the Internet, climate change, and policies toward Taiwan and Hong Kong.

China benefits enormously from the current global order and has no intention of overthrowing it; but that is not enough. China's active cooperation is essential to global governance. Never before has a developing country like China been asked to contribute so much to ensure international stability. If China obstructs international efforts to confront nuclear proliferation, civil conflicts, financial instability, and climate change, those efforts will falter, but even if China merely declines to support such efforts, the problems will grow vastly more complicated.

Analyzing U.S.-China policy since the end of the Cold War, Christensen articulates a balanced strategic approach that explains why we should aim not to block China's rise but rather to help shape its choices so as to deter regional aggression and encourage China's active participation in international initiatives that benefit both nations.

## **The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power Details**

Date : Published June 21st 2016 by W. W. Norton Company (first published June 8th 2015)

ISBN : 9780393352993

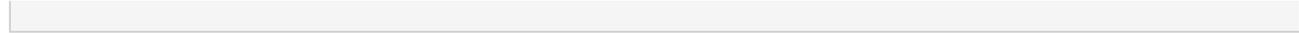
Author : Thomas J. Christensen

Format : Paperback 400 pages

Genre : Cultural, China, Nonfiction, Politics, History, Political Science, Asia, War, Military Fiction

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## **Sebastian Cook says**

An excellent analysis of the many schools of thought on US-China relations. Christensen delved into not only the diplomacy, but also the military and the domestic politics that effected this global relationship. Quite an interesting read for someone with an interest in the future of the Chinese economy in the global market.

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## **Stephanie says**

In an age when books titled “DESTINED FOR WAR” dominate the US-China literature, this book by Thomas J. Christensen is a grounded, balanced and interesting read. It is centred on the idea that China’s rise is inevitable and US foreign policy should be directed towards encouraging China to become a “responsible stakeholder” globally. China is too big to fail, but it is also too big to fail to pull its weight. How the US should manage this balance is the focus of this book.

Christensen is trained as a scholar, but worked as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs for the George W. Bush Administration. One of the things I appreciated about this book was how well it combined the insights of international relations theory with the very real world issues discussed in the book. In this sense it serves as an example for those in the academic realm that wish to write for a policy audience. So what does he have to say?

Christensen anchors his book around a speech given by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick in September 2005 which argued that “China needs to become a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the international system, contributing more actively than in the past to help shore up the stability of the international system from which it has benefited so greatly.” (xxi)

Given his fondness for the speech and his role in the Bush administration one suspects that he may have had some role in writing it. Nevertheless, it serves Christensen well in making several key points throughout the book. He notes that no one has an interest in a destabilized China – it is too well integrated into the global economy and the results would be disastrous. However, China’s rise means that it can play the role of “spoiler” in international affairs, preventing certain international actions it sees as antithetical to its interests. This includes humanitarian intervention, something the PRC views with great suspicion.

This is complicated by the tendency of China’s leading thinkers to take a zero-sum game view of power: China’s rise must require US decline and vice versa. Christensen notes with some regret that John Mearshiemer, with his zero-sum/realpolitik view of the world tends to be the preferred American academic in China – or certainly seen as the most honest. Christensen pushes back hard against this idea, noting that no other state has benefited more from the US-lead order than China and that the US has done the most to accommodate its rise.

As Christensen notes the number one priority of the Communist Party of China is stability: the Chinese people put up with certain restrictions on liberty so long as their standards of living continue to rise. As such the CPC must look stable, strong and mirror the narratives of the PRC’s founding – it cannot look as if it is

an instrument of the West. However, Christensen is careful not to lump the “PRC” into a single entity or actor. He notes that despite state censorship that there are many debates within China over both domestic and international policy. He notes for example that there are moderates who do battle with “hypernationalists”. Ultimately, many Chinese foreign policies and actions are driven by domestic priorities and the debate between these different actors.

Therefore, there is a tension in China between pragmatism and what Christensen calls “post-colonial nationalism”. Typically, this leads to China doing things that are only clearly in its interest. China will not “help” the US or global community of its own volition. Although the standard of living in China has improved dramatically, it is still a very poor country in many ways. In this sense it is also not surprising that there is very little support for foreign aid within China, unless it is tied to specific concrete goals that advance the state’s interest.

Unfortunately, this means that unlike the United States in the post-1945 period, this means that China is not eager to play a global leadership role where there may be certain costs involved. In particular, it rejects the post-Cold War military humanitarian missions, is suspicious of global forums and may be becoming more interested in creating its own institutions (AIIB, One Belt/One Road) than playing a greater leadership role in the ones we have.

This is where Christensen’s prescriptions come in. Noting US strengths in almost every sector vis-à-vis China, he argues that the US must come up with a strategy that is sensitive to Chinese anxieties, brings China into a global leadership role, but defends US allies from bullying. In short, he advocates finding ways to channel, not contain China’s rise, advance cooperation on global problems but also maintaining a regional military and diplomatic presence that is aimed at protecting states that may be victims of Chinese bullying on certain issues, especially over sovereignty disputes.

Christensen is clear that this is a tough task – in keeping with a zero-sum view, Chinese commentators view the call to global leadership as a ruse to get China to foot the bill for something that will benefit the West rather than China or help advance the US-lead global order. But this challenge (which gives the book its title) is urgent and vital for the US to manage successfully.

Ultimately, “The China Challenge” feels like two books in one. Unlike most academic books, Christensen wisely puts the policy advice and prescriptions at the beginning and (except for an epilogue and afterward to the second edition) the history of US-China relations in the back. This is not necessarily a criticism, but what is good for policy makers is that they can probably get what they want out of the book in the first 165 pages.

I would have liked to have seen more on how the US could work with other Western allies in the region to promote regional stability. Non-regional powers are not really discussed. Is that because they are not interested? Or not really represented in the region? Or just outside the scope of the book? Christensen is right to be cautious about creating the sense that China is being “surrounded” or “contained” (although he notes there are circumstances where this is an important diplomatic tool – especially on North Korea). Nevertheless, more on how the US should work with Western allies on achieving its goals in East Asia might have been interesting.

I also think there could have been more on the TPP as a regional instrument. Even if it is now dead (something he couldn’t have known at the time), how might it have been useful? What was at stake? Was it an economic or a security agreement? And should China have been eventually invited and involved? It was a pretty big thing to die on the rocks of the 2016 US election (even if it may live on in some form). I would like to have had more of Christensen’s perspective on it.

Nevertheless, what makes this book an important read is the authority with which Christensen writes. He has spent time in China, has good sources there and his experience in the US government make him well placed to write this book. While he is happier taking aim at Democratic administrations (Clinton and Obama) and praising Republican ones (Bush and Bush), he is extremely fair in his analysis and his moderate criticisms are well justified.

Also, usefully, Christensen is very good on the DPRK issue, even if the events of 2017 have overtaken parts of the book. But Christensen does well to explain China's alliance with North Korea in more than realpolitik terms – the Korean War has a special place in PRC history. Mao has received some criticism in the modern PRC, but the Korean war bolsters Mao's image as a patriot and strategist in helping to hold-off the US/Western aggression. These emotional ties are important to consider beyond narrow strategic considerations.

Finally, although *The China Challenge* was written in the pre-Trump era, its discussion of problems, future challenges and potential prescriptions and strategies remain relevant. Even if the Trump White House is likely to do the exact opposite of everything that Christensen says, this doesn't make his diagnosis or advice any less relevant. Indeed, it's just a shame that the gang at 1600 is not going to be likely to listen.

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### **Chad Manske says**

How does China's rise fit into the global order? How does China's relationship within its hemisphere, region, allies and others bear in that order? What does China's industrialization and appetite for growth mean for the environment? These and other questions are expertly tackled by Christensen, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State expert on China and east Asia writ large. A fast, readable account, and insider's view perfect for international affairs practitioners and anyone interested in understanding China's place in the world.

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### **Chuck says**

Well written in my view, but already so dated as to be irrelevant.

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### **Andrew Carr says**

There's a quite useful series of books called *Physics for Future Presidents*. Thomas J. Christensen's *The China Challenge: Shaping the choices of a rising power* feels something like a 'China for future Presidents'.

Christensen is well placed to offer such insight. He is a leading scholar on China and US Cold War policy. He also worked in the Bush Administration as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 2006-08, focused on China, Taiwan and Mongolia. Given this reputation I had been looking forward to this book for a while.

Christensen's essential thesis is that while everyone knows about the security problem — avoiding a conflict between China and the US and its allies in Asia— there's also a governance problem. This one 'is arguably more difficult to solve: how do we persuade a large but still developing country with a nationalist chip on its

shoulder to contribute to the international system' (p.288).

Where we have a proliferation of theories on how to stop conflict, our experience about how to encourage governance and co-leadership is much thinner. The subtitle notwithstanding, the book demonstrates that everyone should stop thinking of China as a 'rising power'. It has risen, it is here, and every major global issue requires its support, consent or at least acquiescence. This is not just aimed at nervous westerners. According to Christensen, China's own sense of still developing is a significant handbrake on its contribution to international affairs

This is a strong and engaging theme, but there's not much beyond the set up. We get a consistently solid but hardly original or persuasive analysis of the current debates about China and global challenges. If you wanted to know what the general trends of opinion were, this is a good start. But this seems somewhat of a waste given the flood of books and material on this subject, and the opportunity Christensen had given his scholarly and policy basis.

The book also suffers from a somewhat chaotic organisation. We get chapters saying "This time should be different", then "Why Chinese power will not surpass US power anytime soon" and then "Why China still poses strategic challenges". These are all interesting, but seem odd ways of organising and developing an argument. It's only with Chapter 5 that we get back to the set up idea of Global Governance.

The second half of the book is even odder, posing as a potted diplomatic history of China on key issues of US concern such as non-proliferation – especially North Korea— climate change, Iran, Taiwan, and so on. But this ends up overlapping and repeating much of what was covered earlier. This led me to put down the book several times, so my reading took place over a month, with some long gaps in between. But on flicking through it again, I still struggle to see the threads that bind it, and the justifications for telling me about these issues and at this level.

Christensen is a great scholar, but this book feels much more like the former Administration official held the pen. It's not that important whether he worked for Bush or Obama, rather he struggles to separate US interests from the global governance problems he wants to talk about. There are aspects of criticism of the US — he rightly shows the confused nature of Obama's approach. But ultimately the book ends up falling between the two styles of analysis. Neither an inside beltway tome with new details about big events, nor an outsiders scholarly objectivity.

Notably, while the book begins by saying the problems are so big, the degree of policy changes it urges for the US are actually rather small and uncontroversial. A little more clarity, a little less liberal idealism, a bit more resilience, and she'll be right it seems. Christensen seems to believe China will come to embed into the global system in a way that doesn't fundamentally challenge the role or actions of the United States. It might be that is true, but this book doesn't properly justify that view. It's just sort of assumed, as so many Americans do.

The other strange thing about this book is that for someone who has spent so much time in China, and knows the country so well, I never got the feeling of real insight into the place. It's always China as an object, to be pushed, pulled and directed, but never as a mass of humanity with its own views, needs, desires and emotions.

So, if you want a good overview of the current western debates about China, then Christensen offers a handy primer. But for someone who had the potential to break new ground, this public refresher seems a missed opportunity. It's unlikely any of the 20 or so individuals running for US President will ever read this. What

we need more from those like Christensen who have seen so far, is new and better theory and knowledge to help deal with the problem, rather than primers on what we already know.

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### **Jacob says**

The book is out of date but offers a nice insight into how to properly use coercive diplomacy to promote US interests in East Asia and encourage China to take on a larger role in global governance.

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### **HY says**

The debate over how the United States should respond to the rise of China is usually based on the premise that a power transition is taking place. But Christensen characterizes this idea as at least premature and probably flat wrong. He draws from his academic research and policy experience as a deputy assistant secretary of state under President George W. Bush to present an exceptionally clear and subtle analysis of the evolving U.S.-Chinese relationship. Although China is “nowhere near a peer competitor,” its “reactive assertiveness” presents a real risk of conflict, which has to be countered by a strong U.S. presence in Asia. This presence, however, must be balanced by assurances, expressed more in actions than in words, that the United States does not threaten Chinese security. Christensen gives examples from recent administrations of some moves that succeeded in walking this fine line and others that failed. He argues that an even more difficult challenge is to get China to bear its share of the costs in managing global problems such as climate change and nuclear proliferation. Beijing is likely to cooperate on such issues not in response to moral preaching but when it sees direct benefits from doing so. Washington should not panic about the rise of China, but it needs a steady and nuanced strategy to shape Chinese behavior.

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### **Trish says**

This is the last book on my college syllabus... amen to that.

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### **Beth says**

I read this book after Trump won the election and the whole time I was reading I kept thinking "Is any of this relevant anymore?"

I thought the book was extremely well written. It seemed, at least to my amateur viewpoint, to be mostly nonpartisan, concerned more with the author's perspective as a long time China expert about what China's world view is and what is effective in managing that world view for America's benefit.

The author does not shy away from how hard the task is (or would be if we are still interested in this task). He is also quite clear about where China's hard lines are and why that is so.

I really feel like I have a better understanding about why China responds the way they do about certain

situations now, especially in light of the author's explanations of their, i.e. China's, own domestic politics.

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### **Phillip says**

4.25 / 5.0

THINK THIS IS PROBABLY THE BEST OF THE BOOKS I HAVE STUDIED ON CHINA RELATIONS. EXCELLENT BALANCE OF CHINA AND US STRATEGIC THOUGHT VALUES AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE. RUNS SEVERAL ACTION REACTION CHAINS TO WORST CASE LOGICAL END.

MAKES CASE FOR STRONG ASSERTIVE CHINA POLICY THAT IS SENSITIVE TO CHINESE SENSIBILITIES AND COOPTS THEM TO MUTUAL ADVANTAGE.

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### **Hunter Marston says**

Unfortunately, moderate perspectives on US-China policies can be rather dull these days. In fact, this book is so balanced, moderate, and all-encompassing that it fails to surprise in any way that sets it apart from the majority of literature on the subject. That said, Christensen's overview of his time in government during notable friction between Beijing and Washington provides a very useful guide to anyone seeking to find a more restrained voice. The book illuminates Beijing's more nefarious deeds, which undermine international stability, as well as its more positive contributions to global order. A couple weaknesses I would take issue with are: 1) I think he downplays the potential for conflict in Southeast Asia, or Northeast Asia, between China, Washington, and middle powers, such as Japan or Vietnam, etc. And 2) I think he fails to really examine deeply the implications of China's rise for international order -- whether Beijing seeks to displace America as the global hegemon, and if so, what a China-centric order might look like, warts and all. I would commend Christensen for clarifying a paradoxical (or at least problematic) double-correlative: American power is needed to deter Chinese aggression; but too much US force in the region may only exacerbate US-China friction and lead to conflict.

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### **Ross Harrison says**

The long term improvement in US China relations has been remarkable. It's important not to flippantly pursue resets or pivots.

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### **Lawrence Grey says**

Good history lesson but found this book slow going and tough to get through but free from the local public library

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## **Dennis Murphy says**

The China Challenge by Thomas Christensen is something of a master stroke, deftly identifying and recounting modern Sino-American relations, their associated problems, and approaches to solve them. Much effort is given to understanding China, China's Rise, and what that means for the United States.

Realists, who believe in a struggle for power under anarchic conditions, are regarded as overly pessimistic by the author, and are called by that name. He devotes a great deal of time to raising their viewpoints, and then arguing to a degree that may be bordering on the unnecessary to disavow the relevance and practicability of their arguments in modern times. Optimists fall into the Economic Liberals who believe that through trade and diplomacy all of our problems will be solved, which Christensen dismisses out of hand with far greater ease and with less voluminous rebuttal. As such, it is clear that this book is made to challenge a particular audience and viewpoint, one that has significant sway over the minds of several policy makers and their constituent.

Extensive effort is given to understanding the Chinese rational, with Susan Shirk being mentioned explicitly for her work on describing China as the fragile superpower. This is an assessment he readily agrees with, noting that the PRC is best characterized by careful uncertainty and the need to manage instability at home, while appearing confident and strong as a powerful nation beyond its borders. Recently, in the post financial crisis era, China has found that its domestic audience has lost confidence and faith in the strength of the West, and wants China to act more assertively in defense of its own interests. This potentially explosive situation needs proper redressing and handling, but things need not end badly. A number of Chinese authorities are mentioned who offer more moderating advice, and the pessimistic worldview is far more common among Chinese circles than among Western ones. Even in this regard, one need not fear war or conflict as my own professor, Yan Xuetong, is mentioned explicitly as stating that China could vie for moral authority in its potentially hegemonic rise.

The book ends with a rather high note, stating that with capable diplomatic efforts, appealing through multinational organizations, and recognizing that regime change should not be the first refuge of our diplomatic menu can result in a peaceful transition as China becomes a more developed and more international power. A lot of it was hinting at TPP and a potential Clinton presidency, though this was never explicitly stated once in the text. Odds are Mr. Christensen will have written a few articles somewhere on the changing nature of the Sino-American relationship in the Trump era, but it is too soon to see the ramifications of this course of action.

Overall, this book is fantastic, and at the same time deeply meaningful. I recommend you take a look.

A (96)

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## **Adrian says**

Thomas J Christensen, a career diplomat and China hand, lays out a broad ranging analysis of Chinese foreign policy that transcends ideological prejudices and presents one of the most informed analyses of China available.

Christensen distinguishes from the pessimists, who believe in the Thucydides Trap, and explains how China and United States interests are broadly aligned, and the main obstacles to a closer alignment are that essential

currency, trust.

Christensen offers a broad sweep of Chinese foreign relations, mainly through the prism of United States interests, but also with sufficient attention provided to domestic and ideological factors shaping the decision making capabilities of both countries.

In contrast to pessimistic news coverage, Christensen outlines how China has adopted more pragmatic and conciliatory postures on matters ranging from North Korea, to Iran, to Sudan and the Gulf of Aden, to other multilateral matters such as Syria and Libya.

Christensen identifies China's foreign policy doctrine of non-interference, and has illustrated how this is not a rigid straight jacket, as many believe, and that China has taken unexpected steps, such as voting in favour of the UN Security Council resolution that referred Libya to the International Criminal Court.

Additionally, the book also covers key issues such as China's evolving posture on climate change, but sadly lacks much analysis of One Belt One Road, mentioned only in the afterword.

A particular strength of the book is the analysis of China's North Korea posture, illustrating why North Korea is an important ally to China, and the role of China in the Korean War is a continuing symbol of national pride, but also the evolving nature of China's North Korean policy, such as stating that the security alliance is conditional on North Korea's good behaviour, and Christensen's insight that Xi Jinping is far less tolerant or indulging of North Korea's Kim Dynasty than his predecessors.

In all, this is a very well informed and comprehensive overview of China's foreign policy, and a much more positive view than other titles, such as *The Hundred Year Marathon*.

Christensen has provided a well informed and scholarly analysis, that is recommended to all China watchers.

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