As the United States de-industrializes in the first decade of the twenty-first century and China’s industry develops more, the importance of stable relations between these world powers grows. *U.S.–Chinese Relations: Perilous Past, Pragmatic Present,* by Robert Sutter, is a thorough analysis of the history of Sino-American relations up to the present. According to Sutter, despite the areas of contention between the two nations, the overall historical trend for Sino-American relations has been positive with little indication that the few points of contention between the two nations will have a meaningful impact on their larger foreign relations policies.

The relationship between China and the United States has always been one of mixed feelings. Despite being on opposite sides of the Korean War, the two powers realized that forging a relationship would strengthen both of their positions in the 1960s. Talks between the two nations stopped when President Nixon invaded Cambodia during the Vietnam War and were further delayed by the Watergate scandal.

Sino-American relations were officially established in 1978, though the U.S.–Taiwan relationship was still a point of contention between the two countries. Secretary of State George Schultz pushed for more distant relations with China, forcing the country to be more accommodating of U.S. interests. China’s harsh stance on Tiananmen Square and the fall of the Soviet Union were both factors that led the United States to move away from relations with China.

Recent Sino-American relations can be defined by a few key characteristics: the United States’ policy of containment on one hand and engagement on the other; China’s attempts to define the relationship on favorable terms; pressure from the United States’ for China to integrate into the world market and follow established western patterns for dealing with human rights and environmental issues; and issues regarding American support of Taiwan.

The relationship rests on both nations’ desire to avoid conflict, cooperate in areas of mutual interest, and prevent issues from damaging the overall relationship. Both nations desire a strong relationship and will not let differences on a few issues destroy a relationship that has taken so long to build.

Sutter’s experience as an analyst for various American government agencies shows in his work. He inserts his opinion of trends, points out the deficiencies with other scholarship in the field, offers analysis of the trends in Sino-American relations, and predicts future trends in relations. His argument is solid and founded on a bibliography that represents many of the best Chinese and American sources currently available.

*U.S.–Chinese Relations* is not without flaws. Weird phrasings and obtuse sentence constructions are not a common issue in the book; however, when they do occur, their presence is disorienting and breaks the narrative flow. Sutter assumes a basic understanding of Chinese history and of the arguments that other scholars have made.

Robert Sutter’s book does an excellent job of synthesizing the history of Sino-American relations in plain English and emphasizing important trends and key concepts. As a result, the book is imbued with a readability that is rare in historical writing. Sutter’s methodology is sound; by discussing each issue from the American and the Chinese perspective, he is able to create a highly informed, unbiased narrative that sets him apart from other scholars in the field.
The book’s impressive coverage of the history of Sino-American relations makes it the logical first step for graduate students and scholars writing on the subject; its readability, use of bullet points, and clear organization appeal to a much wider audience.

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