

Gray Sergeant

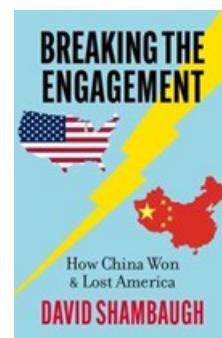
November 23rd, 2025

## Book Review | Breaking the Engagement: How China Won and Lost America

*In Breaking the Engagement: How China Won and Lost America, David Shambaugh tracks the US-China relationship, from the early Cold War origins of engagement to a more confrontational relationship after 2012 when Xi Jinping took power. He argues that with Xi's China becoming more illiberal at home and revisionist abroad, the rationale for US engagement disappeared. Gray Sergeant comments that the changing relationship between the US and China discussed in the book mirrors Shambaugh's own with China.*

- Shambaugh, David. *Breaking the Engagement: How China Won and Lost America*. Oxford University Press. 2025.

David Shambaugh is no stranger to China – but he might as well have been. Despite his annual visits and extended periods of residence since 1979, he found his stay at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences between 2009 and 2010 “frustrating”. After receiving little help facilitating his research, he asked the vice-chancellor why the university had been so obstructive. “We”, began the blunt reply, “no longer feel we need to assist American scholars like we used to...”



Such a response no doubt confirmed Shambaugh's view that anti-American, even anti-foreigner, sentiment was on the rise in China – a trend, he contends, that intensified as Xi Jinping took power in 2012. And it was this trajectory which informed his 2015 *Wall Street Journal* article warning of the country's atrophy. A piece that resulted in him, an “old friend of China”, becoming *persona non grata*.

The experience of David Shambaugh – Gaston Sigur Professor of Asian Studies, Political Science & International Affairs and Director of the China Policy Program at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University – neatly mirrors the broader relationship between the

United States and the People's Republic of China. His China journey took off in the era of engagement, which began in the 1970s, and ended as ties between the two countries deteriorated over the past ten years.

## Between amity and enmity and China's illiberal turn

In *Breaking the Engagement* (2025) Shambaugh seeks to explain why this fracturing occurred in a relationship that, over the decades, has fluctuated between amity and enmity. The book's subtitle, *How China Won and Lost America*, indicates where Shambaugh believes the origins of confrontation lies. That is, with China and the change in its behaviour under Xi.

From 2012 onwards, power accumulated in the General Secretary's hands, while repression of domestic dissent intensified. American businesspeople, scholars, NGO workers, who had traditionally pushed for better relations with Beijing were caught up in this as the state began curtailing their activities. The engagement coalition, the book claims, was a victim of its own success – the more China opened-up, the more paranoid the ruling Communist leadership became. The book also notes other changes including the People's Liberation Army's buildup and Beijing's attempts to reshape the international order in its own image.

This change, Shambaugh argues, only posed such a serious problem for the US-China relationship because Beijing's behaviour failed to conform to American expectations. It is this paternalistic instinct or missionary complex, he argues, which has long dictated Washington's approach to the Middle Kingdom. Changing China, modernising, socialising, and liberalising (though not democratising) the country, were for successive US administrations, from Richard Nixon onwards, the goals of engagement – even if some Americans pursued exchange for its own sake.

With Xi's China becoming more illiberal at home and revisionist abroad, the rationale for engagement evaporated. Advocates for the approach taken over the past several decades dissipated, and a Counter-China coalition rose on Capitol Hill, as opinions of Beijing soured beyond the Beltway.



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## Competition with China becomes the consensus under Trump

The election of Donald Trump, Shambaugh contends, was not decisive. For one thing, concerns about China in Washington emerged towards the end of the Obama years. For another, Trump himself – trade deficit aside – was largely indifferent to China and in fact began his presidency with “an astonishingly soft and accommodating set of policies”.

The people around Trump, however, were more consequential. It was these more hawkish voices who, in early 2017, set about crafting the National Security Strategy which, published at the end of that year, **labelled** China a “revisionist power” in an “era of great power competition”. Shambaugh highlights the role of the National Security Council’s head HR McMaster and Asia director Matt Pottinger in reorientating Washington – claiming of the latter: “no single individual ... had ever had such an impact on the federal bureaucracy”.

It is difficult to see how, without changes in China and the corresponding breakdown of the engagement coalition, that this redirection of United States policy could have been so decisive. Let alone how it could have been sustained under the Democrats. And survive it has. It is not just that the Biden Administration continued competition with China but that this approach has become the overwhelming consensus; today, as Shambaugh lays out, the real policy debate lies between managing and comprehensively pursuing competition with Beijing in all domains.

It is also difficult to see how relations can revert to how they were. In previous incarnations of this love-hate cycle there had been a vast power imbalance. Yet China today no longer depends on Washington for its security or prosperity. In several domains, it has become, or is close to becoming, a peer – it need not sublimate itself to American desires.

## Competitive coexistence may lead to assertive competition

One wonders if it is not China's rise itself – its new capacity to challenge United States *interests* globally – that offers a better explanation for today's confrontation. Washington's problem is not so much that China did not change enough, or that its recent closing-up demoralised the Engagement-Coalition, but that China can and, they believe, wishes to change the world. Such a clash, then, might have been inevitable regardless of the expectations or sensibilities of the American domestic constituencies on which Shambaugh places greater emphasis.

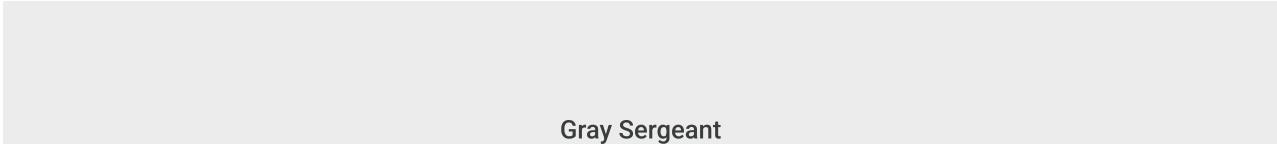
Or, on the flipside, was the fallout inevitable at all? Shambaugh's account, charting China's illiberal turn after 2012 and the American reaction from 2017 onward, leaves little room for contingency. Were there moments during this period when the downward trajectory of relations might have been slowed or even reversed? Exploring such possibilities would be valuable, even if the answer proves to be no. Indeed, as it stands, prospects for détente appear dim.

"Competitive coexistence" – an equilibrium that keeps strategic competition cold (non-kinetic) while allowing for limited cooperation – is, Shambaugh believes, the best that can be expected in the years ahead. Indeed, it is a framework he embraces, given the geostrategic, economic, technological, and ideological challenges that China poses. As such, the concluding pages of *Breaking the Engagement* outline a strategy of "Assertive Competition". The "old friend of China" has become a rival; America's story is Shambaugh's too.

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### About the author



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Gray Sergeant is a PhD student in the International History Department at the London School of Economics. His research focuses on Anglo-American relations towards China during the early Cold War. He is also an associate fellow at the Council on Geostrategy, a London-based foreign policy think-tank.

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