

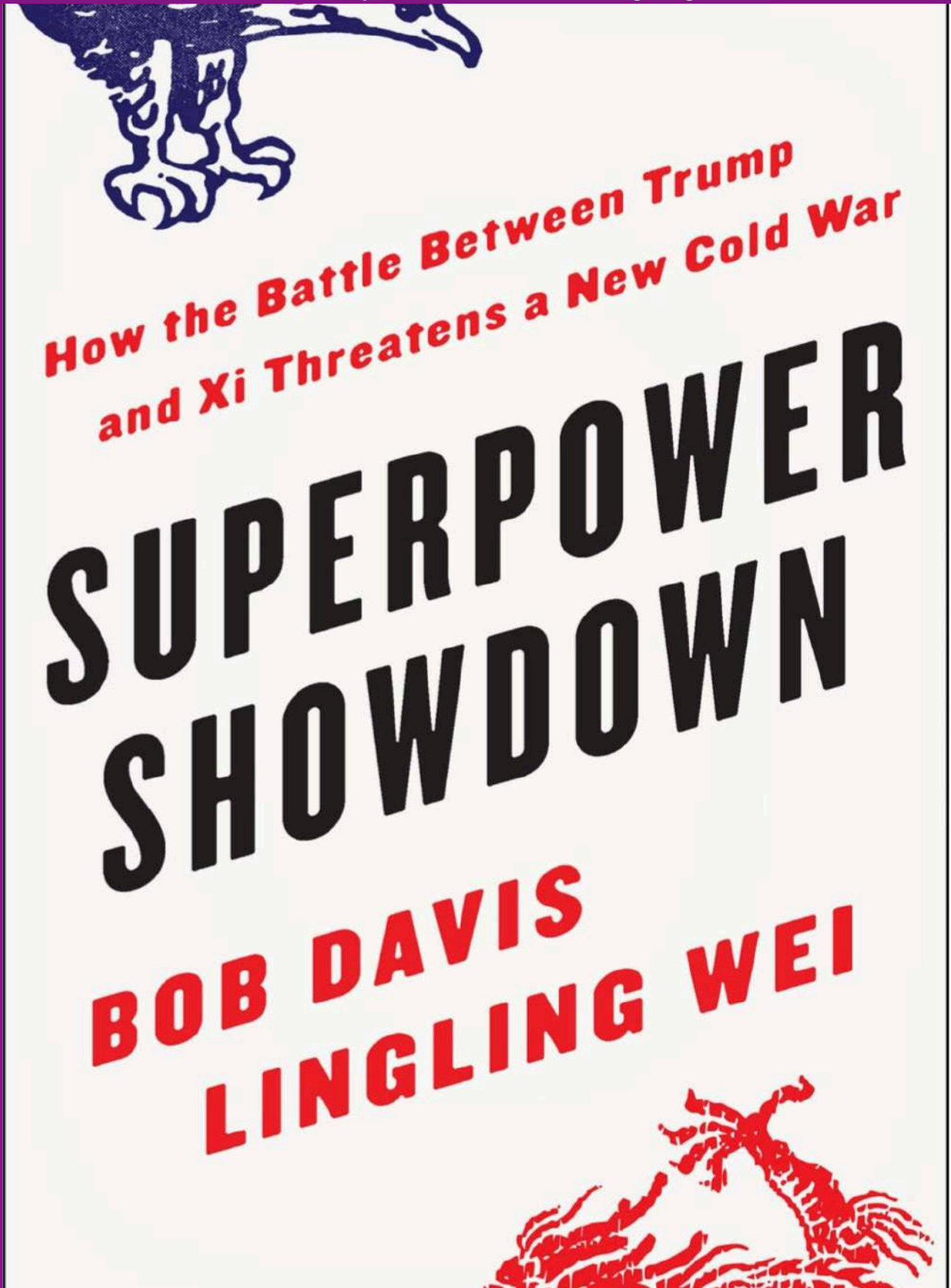


BOOK REVIEW

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**Superpower Showdown: How the Battle Between Trump and Xi
Threatens a New Cold War**

Authored by Bob Davis and Lingling Wei



The geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China today confronts us as one of the most unsettling issues of the 21st century. Once seen as close economic allies and trade partners, so much so that academics referred to them as “chimerica” (Davis & Wei, 2020, p. 11), the risk of a brewing trade war now seems imminent between them as tariffs are being imposed in an increasingly confrontational manner (Meredith, 2025). Against this backdrop, the book titled ‘Superpower Showdown’, penned by two former Beijing correspondents at the Wall Street Journal, namely Bob Davis and Lingling Wei, takes an interesting take on the issue. Centered around the theme of a “romance gone bad”, the book is a granular journalistic account which primarily seeks to examine the question of how the relations between two nations, which once seemed to be “wrapped in a permanent embrace” of economic interdependence, deteriorated into a shooting trade war.

Addressing an issue of far-reaching global impact, the authors have conducted a comprehensive temporal study of US-China bilateral relations to explain this shift. While acknowledging the broad scope of the subject, such as the consequential role played by domestic politics and popular opinion in shaping national policies, the book largely focuses on the economic dimension. It sheds light on the recent financial turmoil and escalating trade disputes between the two states, especially under the administrations of President Donald Trump in the United States and President Xi Jinping in China.

The book is organized into twenty chapters that follow a broad thematic arc. It begins by establishing the historical context of China’s rise (Chapters 2-7), moves into a deep dive of the personal ideologies of Trump and Xi (Chapters 8-10), and concludes with a comprehensive account of the escalating trade war (Chapters 11-20). The authors’ insights from an extensive collection of interviews provide a well-informed perspective on the key considerations and rounds of deliberations that have historically crafted the actions of both parties involved. By elaborating on the reforms instituted by Deng Xiaoping in China and policy developments which transpired in the US under the Clinton administration, the authors lay emphasis on certain crucial episodes which have determined the stage where we are today.

They highlight how, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident, some key policy decisions made by the “great globalizer” President Bill Clinton paved the way for China’s eventual inclusion in the World Trade Organization (Davis & Wei, 2020, p. 52). They present compelling evidence illustrating how the pressures from a robust industrial lobby (which at that point was deeply enthralled by China’s market potential/growth prospects) and strategic negotiations led by Premier Zhu Rongji were instrumental in shaping Clinton’s decision to delink human rights concerns from trade policy.

Furthermore, the authors astutely identify the underlying rationale driving the then-US policy, which also aided the cause of China in being granted the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status. At the core was the belief that the extension of economic freedoms, i.e., economic liberalization would inevitably lead to political liberalization and hence democracy in China. Under this favourable policy, while China's exports soared "27-fold from 1978 to reach \$266 billion in 2001" (pg. 45) with Xi almost tripling the overseas FDI in his ruled province of Zhejiang to \$10.4 billion in 2007 from 2002, the prospect of democracy remained improbable (pg. 50).

In a similar vein, the authors also explain how, ultimately, even the Chinese policy was recrafted and came into direct conflict with the US in the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis. China soon realized the strength of its system and the leverage it held over the US finances. Xi later took this as an "opportunity" to step "into the sunlight" and bid an abrupt farewell to Deng Xiaoping's approach of ensuring a peaceful rise by hiding capacities and biding time (Davis & Wei, 2020, p. 92). Actions such as the creation of an Asian Development Bank, etc., were aimed directly at challenging the US-dominated World Bank's hegemony.

Through a historical retracing of the relationship this way, the authors apprise an uninformed mind of just how the seeds of enmity between the two states bloomed and actually preceded the era of Trump, who otherwise is wholly held accountable for the end of this affair. This chronological detailing then advances into the more contemporary times, where authors provide evidence to back their claim of how receptive communication and miscalculation on both sides resulted in the erosion of good relations. They highlight how the Trump administration lacked careful planning on its part, which is apparent from acts like Trump engaging in a telephonic conversation with Taiwan leaders, thereby disregarding the One-China policy. Furthermore, there were also ideological fissures within the administration as to the projection of identity visible from Mnuchin's conception of "Wall Street Trump vis-a-vis Navarro's 'Blue Collar Trump'" (Davis & Wei, 2020, p. 177). Even China had its own fair share of shortcomings, as its misjudgment and unwillingness made it incapable of reciprocating and fostering a stable and trustworthy relationship with the Trump administration. In an attempt to over-leverage their position, the Chinese ended up creating a mess which even their own corporate lobby couldn't help them with. In this way, the authors illustrate how simple tactical mistakes by policymakers and leaders can end up triggering huge chaos at the global level.

A notable mention here is that throughout the book, the authors maintain a commendable commitment to the principle of neutrality in their writing and analysis. Even in their characterization of Trump as someone for whom - “trade is more about attitude, swagger, and grievance than it is about policy” (Davis & Wei, 2020, p. 118), they acknowledge how his perception was driven by his dealings in “real estate development, marketing, and television” where “he didn’t have to compete with imports” (Davis & Wei, 2020, p. 119). While they do attribute a significant share of the present-day problems to his inefficient policies, they also recognize his role in “challenging the easy assumptions about China that had guided American Policy since at least the Clinton administration” (Davis & Wei, 2020, p. 330).

Additionally, by providing a glimpse into their backgrounds, the authors further enhance the qualitative credibility of the book as readers are made well aware of their positionality and reflexivity from the very outset. Wei’s “roots and her family” in China, exemplified by the fact that her grandfather was associated with Mao’s entourage, offers us an insider’s perspective on the nationalist stance of the country in the initial stages of planning post-independence. Similarly, Davis’ account of the “impact of foreign competition on US companies”, supported by his family lineage in the luggage industry, goes on to provide a personal and anecdotal dimension that further enriches the narrative in the book. Altogether, an amalgamation of their journalistic interests results in an incisive collection and presentation of crucial insights into the strategic considerations and perspectives of both regimes. It is something which may otherwise usually remain elusive to the common folk and thus hugely adds to the merit of this book.

Another praiseworthy point of the book is how lucidly it communicates intricate concepts to readers. Some of the common misconceptions surrounding terms like tariffs, devaluation and inflation are effectively dismantled by the authors and the rationales behind these policies are served to us in a palatable manner. As a result, the book breaks free from the clutches of a specialized readership of say students, academics or policy experts and emerges as accessible to anyone with a general interest in the geopolitics of US-China relations. Throughout the book, the writers employ a uniform writing style following a well-paced, consistent flow while ensuring smooth transitions all across, thereby carefully integrating facts with narrative, rendering this book a great reading experience.

However, at some level, it feels that a major strength of this book, which lies in the authors' meticulous attention to and articulation of details, could inevitably result in the problem of information overload for the readers. The depth at which the authors describe some of the episodes that transpired during the early 2000s, or say the trajectory of Donald Trump, seems rather unnecessary and might just make it difficult for readers to retain and synthesise all the key information. In essence, while the writing is certainly accessible, the book in itself does not qualify as a leisure read. Rather, it offers a detailed account of some complex events which would require the readers to revisit the text a couple of times to actually familiarize themselves and retain facts.

From a geopolitical perspective, a major shortcoming which I felt in the book was the complete absence of other significant actors such as the European Union (EU) or ASEAN states. Although it is clear that the book primarily tackles the bilateral trade relationship between the US and China, slightly greater attention could have been given to the roles of these international actors in shaping this dynamic, the references to which we do find at some instances, but in a highly fleeting manner.

Overall, this book is still an extremely gripping and insightful read, which I would highly recommend to all young people who are even mildly interested in learning more about the nature of the US-China relationship. Considering the uncertainties that surround us in the boiling geopolitical rift between the two largest economies in the world, this book offers some intriguing food for thought that may help us chart our predictions more accurately for the future course.

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