Although I was familiar with court intrigue, I was not prepared for the National Security Council’s intrigue. One might enter as an editor in the Executive Secretariat and then leap into a role as a senior adviser for a deputy national security adviser. Others held court in deputies’ or principals’ meetings for many years, deftly staying above the fray. Still others fell, finding knives in their backs as other strivers seized their spots. While this court intrigue is tame compared to the murder and magic of William Shakespeare’s plays, Professor Eliot Cohen shows how much we can learn from the Bard. Indeed, one need not squint hard to see that courts continue to run most human organizations today.

*The Hollow Crown* effectively explores Shakespeare’s political insights into how leaders evolve. While never explicitly stated, Cohen draws on Shakespearean examples to advocate for an ideal arc. Leaders should acquire power legitimately or seize power when a ruler is weak. They should rule through inspiration and manipulation (with only the occasional murder). Then, rulers should depart the stage in their prime. Cohen explores this arc through an expertly organized book divided into parts on acquiring, exercising, and losing power, subdivided into three appropriately named chapters.

Readers will become familiar with the book’s rhythm. In each chapter, Cohen first defines the chapter’s subject, provides motivating modern examples, pivots to illustrative lessons from Shakespeare, and concludes by applying the lessons to recent cases. In the chapter on murder, Cohen explains that murder might literally mean killing others (see Pol Pot, Joseph Stalin, for example), or less literally, the unexpected departure of senior executives to new and undefined opportunities elsewhere. Examples from *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, and *Macbeth* show the early benefits and ultimate risks of ruling through murder, which Cohen compares to the individual rises of Adolf Hitler and Xi Jinping. This effective structure allows chapters to stand on their own while remaining part of a cohesive whole.
A deep appreciation for Shakespeare’s works is not required to enjoy the book. Readers familiar with Shakespeare will enjoy how *The Hollow Crown* integrates and explains his plays related to power. Readers like me, with a passing familiarity from plebe English and high school, will find much to appreciate—and might also find themselves inspired to reread *Macbeth* or *Henry VI*. *The Hollow Crown* occupies an unusual literary space but would rest easily on a bookshelf alongside biographies and excellent leadership texts. Its most direct parallel is likely *Lincoln and Shakespeare* by Michael Anderegg (University Press of Kansas, 2015). Readers will find much in common, however, with books like Robert A. Caro’s *Master of the Senate* (Knopf, 2002), which explores Lyndon B. Johnson’s manipulative leadership style. *The Hollow Crown* also offers a more cynical counterpoint to more affirmative leadership books like John W. Gardner’s *On Leadership* (Free Press, 1990) or Elbert Hubbard’s classic 1899 essay, “A Message to Garcia.”

At its best, *The Hollow Crown* helps readers see common challenges in new ways. Cohen deliberately tackles a common belief that leaders improve with time. Through the examples of *Henry VI* and *Macbeth*, he shows that isolation, arrogance, and poor selection of subordinates can undermine initially savvy leaders. Also relevant to military readers, Cohen expertly explores perceptions of strength and weakness in *Richard III* in his chapter on murder. Richard most admires those willing to murder on his behalf, as these hard men mirror his lack of sentimentality. His reliance on these hard men, however, is his undoing, leaving Richard unhorsed and dead on the battlefield. Leaders today would do well to abide by these lessons.

Cohen’s prose is also a delight. Lines like “Kings who wish they were carefree shepherds often end up as slaughtered sheep” and “Leaders who are lions, however, do not have to tell their underlings that is what they are” demonstrate Cohen’s inspiration from Shakespeare’s excellent writing (188, 194). Most readers will see themselves as courtiers instead of kings, and *The Hollow Crown* focuses more on these “kings,” despite Cohen’s claim that “courts are the central point in the vortex of power” (23). Short sections on court politics and evaluating subordinates are helpful but insufficient for those courtiers on the sidelines.

Eliot Cohen’s *The Hollow Crown* gave me insights into the rise, rule, and fall of members of the National Security Council, and it will help readers understand power, leadership, and the dynamics of courts. Students in scholars’ programs at the Command and General Staff College and US Army War College, anyone preparing to serve on a high-level personal staff,
soldiers with a literary bent, or the ambitious among us would benefit from the book’s unique perspective and insights.

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**International Relations**

**Cold Rivals:**
The New Era of US-China Strategic Competition

edited by Evan S. Medeiros

Reviewed by Dr. Jeffrey Reeves, associate professor, Naval War College, Naval Postgraduate School ©2024 Jeffrey Reeves

American analysts, policymakers, and strategists increasingly tend to define US-China relations as a new “Cold War,” where the international system’s two dominant powers compete for status and influence across multiple regions and domains. While some academics resist this characterization and argue that the Cold War was distinctly ideological and that the US-China competition is primarily material, they agree with its overall premise that US-China relations have become internationalized.

As a result, many of the recent best books on US-China relations have eschewed the study of the two states’ bilateral relations for analyzing aspects of their global rivalry. Books like Keyu Jin’s *The New China Playbook* (Viking, 2023), Chris Miller’s *Chip War* (2022), Ali Wyne’s *America’s Great-Power Opportunity* (Polity Press, 2022), and Hal Brands and Michael Beckley’s *Danger Zone* (W. W. Norton, 2022) come to mind.

Found throughout American policy, a similar reconceptualization of US-China relations concerns itself more with maintaining the US-led international order than the countries’ bilateral relations. Then President Donald Trump first codified this shift in perspective in his *National Security Strategy*, identifying global great-power competition with China as the primary focus. President Joe Biden maintained this view and developed the concept of “integrated deterrence” with Beijing in mind. While Trump and Biden dealt directly with Beijing, they also expanded their approaches
to China to include alliance relations, outreach to the “Global South,” support for Taiwan, expansion of multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, the development of a global industrial strategy, and policy coordination with the Group of Seven (G7) economies.

Within these new analytic and policy parameters, Evan Medeiros has edited and published Cold Rivals: The New Era of US-China Strategic Competition—an expansive, textbook-like volume that presents an almost entirely bilateral account of US-China relations, despite the title’s reference to the Cold War. While comprehensive (and even repetitive) in its coverage, the book’s lack of international contextualization results in an artificial sense that US-China relations exist in a vacuum—or that Medeiros made the editorial decision to direct his contributors to ignore global affairs, international security, and other indications that great-power relations, in particular, occur within a global order. Regardless of Medeiros’s intent, the book systematically—and dryly—chronicles US-China relations (rather than analyzes them) and is more concerned with documenting the policies, meetings, events, and personnel involved in US-China affairs than commenting on their significance within global affairs.

A counterargument to this critique is the importance of such scholarship, particularly as it provides a historical account of US-China relations and chronicles its evolution. Conceding this point, the question becomes what value Cold Rivals adds to the existing body of scholarship on bilateral US-China ties, such as Robert G. Sutter’s US-China Relations (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), Andrew T. H. Tan’s Handbook on US-China Relations (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016), John Pomfret’s The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom (Macmillan, 2016), or Lyle Goldstein’s Meeting China Halfway (Georgetown University Press, 2015), among many others.

One contribution Medeiros makes is the inclusion of three Chinese authors who offer insights into Chinese outlooks on US-China relations, including contemporary issues. Aside from their different perspectives, they provide an important dissenting voice to the volume’s otherwise American scholars. Including additional perspectives from international scholars would have significantly increased the volume’s utility.

Among the other contributing authors, Arthur R. Kroeber’s and Paul Triolo’s chapters stand out for their treatment of two of the most critical areas of modern-day US-China competition—economics and technology. Their chapters provide important insights into the priorities, policies, and developments underpinning US-China relations during the Biden-Harris
and Xi Jinping administrations. Both authors have published extensively elsewhere on the same issues they cover here.

It is unclear what audience Medeiros envisioned for this edited volume. If it was the Chinese studies community, the book offers little new insight into the nature of US-China relations or how they might evolve. If it was policymakers, the volume falls short, as it almost entirely ignores the broader strategic environment in which US policy must be made and executed—an environment the Biden-Harris administration considers carefully in its policy-making process.

Medeiros likely edited the volume as a potential textbook for university students interested in learning more about US-China relations in all its manifestations, including its contemporary history. Nevertheless, the book’s main fault lies in its overly clinical and dry prose. Rather than exciting the next generation of US-China scholars, the book’s tedious language will likely put them off.

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Keywords: US-China relations, policy, great-power competition, deterrence, Indo-Pacific
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