



DAVID M. MCCOURT

The End of Engagement.
America's China and Russia Experts and U.S. Strategy
since 1989

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reviewed by

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David M. McCourt's »The End of Engagement« offers a groundbreaking reinterpretation of the United States foreign policy towards China and Russia in the post-Cold War period. At its core, the book examines two divergent trajectories: on the one hand, the strategic shift in policy towards China from »engagement« – a policy designed to integrate China into a rules-based international order through economic interdependence – to »strategic competition« and, on the other hand, the continuity of U.S. policy towards Russia, rooted in the doctrine of containment. Departing from conventional narratives that emphasize external factors like China's military assertiveness or Xi Jinping's authoritarian consolidation, McCourt focuses on the internal dynamics of epistemic communities in the United States. Ideological divisions, institutional rivalries, and personal conflicts within expert networks, he argues, played a decisive role in shaping U.S. strategic decisions, often more so than external provocations.

Based on over 170 interviews with policymakers, scholars, and members of leading think tanks, McCourt's study provides a richly empirical and conceptually innovative examination of how expert networks shape foreign policy. By portraying these communities as active drivers of change, the book challenges traditional accounts of U.S. foreign policy-making, highlighting the role of internal contestations in steering strategic transformations. The book is organized into three parts: the first part investigates the ideological and institutional foundations of the policy of »engagement«; the second part examines polarization within the China-policy community, showing how fragmentation hastened the shift towards the policy of »strategic competition«; finally, McCourt compares the United States political strategies towards China and Russia, arguing that the cohesion of the Russia-policy community ensured continuity, while the divisions within the China-policy community precipitated a paradigm shift.

In the first section, McCourt examines the ideological and institutional foundations of the engagement policy, demonstrating that it was more than a pragmatic tool for managing U.S.-China relations. Engagement embodied a comprehensive paradigm rooted in the conviction that economic liberalization would inevitably catalyze political democratization. This belief,

entrenched in U.S. foreign policy for decades, culminated in China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Politically and economically transformative, this milestone was championed by figures like Robert Zoellick, who saw China's integration into the global economy as pivotal for its political transformation and adherence to a rules-based order.

While engagement initially appeared promising, McCourt highlights how, by the 2000s, skepticism about its assumptions began to mount. Whereas diplomats such as J. Stapleton Roy continued to champion the policy as indispensable, critics – labelled by McCourt as »strategic competitors« – argued that China exploited economic liberalization to enhance its power while avoiding political reform. Figures like Michael Pillsbury, whose book »The Hundred-Year Marathon« argued that China pursued long-term strategies to outmaneuver the United States, were supported by think tanks such as the Hudson Institute. This critique struck at the heart of engagement's foundational assumption: that economic integration would foster convergence with democratic norms and values. As McCourt shows, the »engagers« – a tightly connected network of diplomats, academics, and think tank professionals – initially maintained their dominance in the foreign policy discourse despite growing criticism. Institutional ties, particularly with the Council on Foreign Relations, reinforced the engagement paradigm while marginalizing dissenting voices. McCourt convincingly argues that these networks, while upholding the policy, also deepened ideological rifts, laying the groundwork for the polarization of the China-policy community and the eventual shift toward a confrontational strategy.

The second section builds on this argument by examining the growing ideological fractures within the China-policy community. McCourt convincingly argues that the shift to »strategic competition« was driven less by external developments – such as China's military expansion or assertive economic policies – than by internal dynamics, including ideological divides, institutional rivalries, and personal conflicts within epistemic communities. A defining moment in this realignment was the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy, which explicitly identified China as a systemic rival. This document marked a definitive break from engagement's premises, reflecting the culmination of long-standing ideological battles within expert networks. Central to this shift was former journalist and now security adviser Matthew Pottinger, who brought unique insights into his new role from his time as a correspondent in China. Pottinger's efforts extended beyond advocating a confrontational stance; he actively worked to consolidate support for this position within institutional networks by aligning with prominent think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the Hudson Institute, thereby facilitating the institutionalization of the »strategic competition« narrative. McCourt further shows how public interventions, notably the publication of open letters in 2019 and 2020 by prominent academics, analysts, and former diplomats, crystallized the ideological rifts within the China-policy community. Rather than merely reflecting existing divides, these interventions acted as turning points, intensifying debates and marginalizing the voices of »engagers«.

In the third section, McCourt examines the remarkable continuity of U.S. policy towards Russia, contrasting it with the sharp strategic rupture in China policy. McCourt argues that the relative stability of U.S.-Russia relations was rooted in the cohesion and ideological consensus within the Russia-policy community. Unlike the China-policy community, which was plagued by polarization and institutional rivalries, the Russia-focused epistemic network maintained a unified framework that enabled a strategy of containment and damage control, even in response to significant geopolitical challenges such as Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. McCourt identifies two primary factions within this community: the pragmatic »Russia-We-Havers«, who prioritized cooperation on shared global challenges, and the more confrontational »Russia-We-Wanters«, who sought regime change in Moscow. Figures like Fiona Hill, who held senior roles on the National Security Council under both the Bush and Trump administrations, exemplified the pragmatic approach, advocating collaboration with Moscow on critical issues like nuclear non-proliferation. By contrast, prominent critics like Anne Applebaum championed a more adversarial stance, emphasizing the existential threat posed by Russia to Western democracies. However, McCourt shows how the Russia-policy community's small size and institutional coherence fostered consensus-driven policymaking despite these internal differences. This structural unity

ensured that containment remained the guiding principle of U.S.-Russia policy, avoiding the ideological fragmentation that characterized U.S.-China relations. McCourt aptly describes this enduring stability as »policy stasis«, grounded in the consistent perception of Russia as a geopolitical adversary rather than a potential partner in a rules-based international order.

David M. McCourt's »The End of Engagement« offers a profound and intellectually stimulating reinterpretation of U.S. foreign policy toward China and Russia in the post-Cold War period. By shifting the focus from external drivers such as rising authoritarianism or changing power dynamics, and instead foregrounding the internal dynamics of epistemic communities, McCourt provides valuable insights into the interplay between ideological rivalries and institutional stability in shaping strategic policy. Yet, while McCourt's methodological approach allows for a richly detailed account, it also raises questions about its empirical limitations. By relying heavily on interviews, McCourt may overestimate the explanatory power of epistemic communities in driving U.S.-China policy, potentially underplaying broader structural factors. Future historical research drawing on a more diverse range of sources may be able to provide further context for the recalibrations identified by McCourt.

Despite this small reservation, »The End of Engagement« stands as a landmark contribution to the study of U.S. foreign policy. Its sociological lens challenges established narratives, providing nuanced insights into the intersections of expertise, power, and international strategy. For scholars, policymakers, and readers seeking a deeper understanding of the mechanisms shaping policy decision-making, McCourt's work is both essential and thought-provoking, opening new avenues for exploring how epistemic communities influence the architecture of global relations.

Zitierempfehlung

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