

# WHEN GREAT POWERS TURN INWARD THE FAILURE OF ENGAGEMENT AND THE FOREIGN POLICY TEST FACING SIERRA LEONE

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The collapse of the United States policy of engagement with the People's Republic of China represents far more than a bilateral diplomatic reversal. It signals a structural transformation in the international system, one that reshapes power, expectations, and vulnerability. David Shambaugh's *Breaking the Engagement: How China Won and Lost America* offers a historically grounded explanation for why engagement unravelled. Read from a Sierra Leonean perspective, his analysis raises urgent questions about how small states can preserve sovereignty, pursue development, and uphold multilateral norms in an era defined by great power rivalry.

This article interprets Shambaugh's thesis through the IRLS framework (Issue, Rule, Logic, Synthesis), a method that allows legal obligations, political realities, and policy choices to be examined as a coherent whole rather than as isolated observations.

**\*THE ISSUE DISENGAGEMENT IN A SYSTEM DESIGNED FOR ENGAGEMENT\***

The core challenge confronting Sierra Leone is how to navigate an international order in which cooperation among major powers has fractured and been replaced by strategic competition. Shambaugh demonstrates that engagement failed not suddenly, but cumulatively, as expectations diverged, power balances shifted, and domestic political coalitions within the United States collapsed. The result was not merely a policy change,

but a redefinition of how Washington perceives Beijing and, by extension, the global system.

For Sierra Leone, the implications are profound. The country's foreign policy has long rested on the assumption that multilateral institutions, predictable rules, and engagement based diplomacy offer protection against coercion and marginalisation. When engagement collapses at the apex of the system, the stability of that protective framework is weakened. Small states risk becoming instruments or arenas of competition rather than autonomous actors pursuing nationally defined interests.

#### \*THE RULE SIERRA LEONE'S FOREIGN POLICY FOUNDATIONS IN LAW AND TREATY\*

Sierra Leone's foreign policy doctrine is neither improvised nor abstract. It is grounded in constitutional commitments and binding international instruments.

The Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991 commits the state to the promotion of international peace and security, respect for international law, and fidelity to treaty obligations. These principles implicitly support non alignment as a rational strategy for safeguarding sovereignty while engaging constructively with the international community.

At the global level, the United Nations Charter enshrines sovereign equality, peaceful settlement of disputes, and collective security. Sierra Leone's post conflict recovery, peacekeeping contributions, and development partnerships have been deeply embedded within this UN centred order.

Regionally, the Constitutive Act of the African Union affirms non interference, territorial integrity, and collective responsibility for peace and stability. It also recognises that sustainable development and security are inseparable. Sierra Leone's participation in African peace and governance initiatives reflects peace building as a central pillar of its external relations.

Within West Africa, the Revised ECOWAS Treaty binds Sierra Leone to economic integration, political cooperation, and collective security mechanisms. These obligations constrain unilateral alignment with external powers when such alignment undermines regional cohesion, but they also provide collective strength in negotiations with global actors.

At the continental level, the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community commits Sierra Leone to gradual economic integration, coordinated policy making, and collective self reliance. This treaty is not merely aspirational. It is a strategic response to global economic volatility and external dependence.

#### \*THE LOGIC WHY ENGAGEMENT FAILED AND WHY POWER MATTERS\*

Shambaugh's central claim is that engagement failed because it rested on incompatible assumptions. The United States expected economic openness to produce political convergence. China pursued integration while consolidating state power and strategic autonomy. As China's relative power grew, engagement generated anxiety rather than reassurance, triggering an action reaction dynamic akin to a security dilemma.

For Sierra Leone, the lesson is stark. Engagement is not inherently stabilising when power asymmetries widen and expectations diverge. Economic interdependence does not guarantee moderation. Nor does long standing cooperation ensure permanence. Small states must therefore operate on the assumption that great power cooperation is contingent, reversible, and shaped by domestic politics beyond their control.

Sierra Leone's treaty commitments both constrain and empower its response to this reality. ECOWAS and African Union obligations limit unilateral manoeuvres that could destabilise the region, yet they also enhance collective bargaining power and diplomatic insulation. Acting alone, Sierra Leone is exposed. Acting through regional and continental institutions, it gains leverage and legitimacy.

The Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community becomes especially salient in a fragmented global order. Its emphasis on coordinated development, harmonised policies, and reduced vulnerability to external shocks anticipates the very dynamics now

emerging, where trade, finance, and technology are increasingly weaponised by major powers.

#### \*SYNTHESIS A COHERENT SIERRA LEONE FOREIGN POLICY DOCTRINE\*

In response to the failure of engagement among great powers, Sierra Leone must articulate a clear and disciplined foreign policy doctrine.

Non alignment must be reaffirmed as strategic autonomy rather than passivity. Sierra Leone should engage all partners, including the United States and China, without exclusive commitments that compromise sovereignty or regional obligations.

Economic diplomacy should prioritise diversification, transparency, and sustainability. External partnerships must serve national development plans and debt sustainability objectives, not geopolitical loyalty tests imposed from outside.

Peace building should remain central to Sierra Leone's international identity. The country's experience with conflict and recovery equips it to advocate credibly for dialogue, mediation, and preventive diplomacy within ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations.

Regionalism must be deepened rather than treated as rhetorical. ECOWAS and African Union platforms should be used to articulate shared positions on external engagement, reducing vulnerability to divide and rule strategies.

Finally, diplomatic capacity and strategic literacy must be strengthened. Strategic empathy, understanding how major powers perceive their interests and insecurities, is essential for avoiding entanglement while maximising opportunity.

#### \*NORMATIVE CONSEQUENCES WHAT COLLAPSE MEANS FOR MULTILATERALISM\*

The breakdown of engagement carries serious normative consequences.

For multilateralism, it weakens consensus based governance and amplifies veto politics within international institutions. For peacekeeping, it risks funding instability, mandate paralysis, and politicisation of security operations. For development financing, it encourages fragmented lending practices, competitive standards, and heightened debt risk for vulnerable economies.

If engagement is replaced entirely by rivalry, the costs fall most heavily on states that rely on rules rather than raw power. For Sierra Leone, defending multilateral norms is not idealism. It is a matter of national interest.

The failure of engagement between the United States and China is not a distant geopolitical drama. It is a warning. It demonstrates how quickly cooperation can unravel when power shifts and expectations harden. For Sierra Leone, the path forward lies in constitutional fidelity, regional solidarity, economic pragmatism, and principled non alignment. Engagement did not fail because dialogue is futile. It failed because power was misread. Sierra Leone cannot afford that mistake.

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