

China, the United States, and Southeast Asia

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China, the United States, and Southeast Asia, edited by Evelyn Goh and Sheldon W. Simon, is the result of a joint project by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NRB) and Singapore's Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), with support from the US Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) and the US Army War College. The project brought together leading experts from US and Southeast Asian countries, with a view to making an assessment of the implications for Southeast Asia and the US arising from the rise in China's status as a great power. As, in the past, the focus of China's rise led to emergence of literature mainly on the security aspects of Northeast Asia and implications for Southeast Asia which did not form a major issue for discussion. The aim of the project was to ascertain Southeast Asian and US perspectives on the phenomenal rise of China and identify the points of convergence and divergence in their respective understandings on China's rise.

This book is divided into three parts, containing eleven chapters, including a comprehensive and detailed introduction that carries at the end, a summary of major conclusions of the study. All the articles in this book are very well researched with citations of the quotes at the end of each chapter. The text is substantiated with figures, tables and diagrams where necessary.

The introduction clearly spells out the need for the study — that 'China's emergence as a major regional power is transforming the economic, political and security environment in Southeast Asia' and this process entails challenges and opportunities not only for the ASEAN region but also the US interests in the region.

The sub-themes, in each chapter are summarized, while giving the main findings and conclusions. The key point that this book raises is that China's emergence as a great Asian power is an established and undeniable fact; so far as its rise China is peaceful and China presents itself as a benign power striving to secure its national interests. The book also talks about 'what happens after China rises?' This key question generates the favorite US theory of 'China Threat' to sustain and further deepen its influence in the region, which Beijing sees as containment or hedging of China. In this geopolitical environment, ASEAN strives to create a fine balance in the interests of these two big powers while at the same time using both for the development and integration of Southeast Asia. The most viable option for ASEAN — to reduce dependence on any one power for regional security — is to engage both in multilateral frameworks such as ASEAN + 1, ARF, APEC etc.

Part I, containing four chapters, deals with the economic aspects of triangular relationship. This section highlights the ASEAN-China economic relations and how China earned trust and respect of the Southeast Asian countries during the 1997-8 financial crisis in the region by not devaluing its currency. As a result, China became the first country to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with ASEAN in 2002, which has helped the Southeast Asian economies to enhance bilateral trade and which is in favour of ASEAN. However, the contributors in this section point out the fact that the Chinese investment in Southeast Asia is negligible as compared to ASEAN investment in China, which is around US\$ 40 billion. China is giving a stiff competition to ASEAN in terms of attracting Foreign Direct Investments (FDI).

To balance China's influence in ASEAN region, ASEAN opened up negotiations with Japan, India, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. ASEAN wants to attain a stable regional security environment through the creation of economic interdependence and making all major players stakeholders in the stability of the region. Thus far, the US is the largest investor in ASEAN and this policy has been quite successful.

Energy security is assuming centre-stage in China's foreign policy, as the country has become second largest consumer of energy and oil in the world. Till 1993, China was selfsufficient in energy. It is estimated that China's oil import would increase more than 500 per cent by 2030 to over 11 billion barrels a day. This situation makes the security of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) a vital national interest of China. Currently, China has no mechanism to provide security of SLOC, and it has to rely on the US security umbrella. Any conflict with US over Taiwan could disrupt supply of oil to China. China is addressing these issues by building its naval forces and diversifying sources for its energy requirement such as Central Asia, Russia and Africa.

The Part II of the book deals with politics and consists of three chapters. This section focuses on the question of ASEAN's dilemma to seek balance in its relations with two great powers, the US and China. There exist apprehensions in the ASEAN region that any serious friction between China and the US would gravely impact on the region. The authors in this section point out that the Chinese contemporary grand strategy is based on four important factors: the US strength, China's own weakness, nervous neighbours of China, and finally the tensions over Taiwan. In all these factors, the US involvement figures prominently. They are also of the view that in recent years, the stature of China has considerably risen as compared to the US, due to its intrusive unilateralist policies post-9/11. However, the region's orientation remain US-centric, due to the fact that it is seen as the 'least distrusted power' in the region, with no territorial disputes or issues which could pose direct challenge to the regional countries' interests.

On the other hand, Chinese gestures to allay fears of the ASEAN states, especially over the disputes in the South China Sea, are considerably enhancing China's soft power status in the region. It is in the interest of both the powers, i.e. US and China, to maintain peace and stability in the ASEAN region, which serves the prime interest of the regional states, as they don't have to swing on one side or the other. The regional states find multilateral organizations as the best tool to neutralize intensity of competition between the two major powers, which also ensures their position at the helm of regional affairs despite comparatively being on the weaker side. Therefore, the new concepts of security, such as mutual security, common security or human security, are gaining appeal in the region. One interesting observation made in this section points to the desire and subsequent efforts by the ASEAN member states to shape China's future outlook. There is a consensus amongst the contributors of this section that despite China's rapid rise, the hard and soft power of the US in Asia will continue ahead of China. The contributors also make specific suggestions that the US needs to expand its involvement in the multilateral organizations in the region and also broaden its Southeast Asia agenda beyond counter-terrorism. For China, it is considered important by the Southeast Asian states to remain deeply engaged in multilateral security discussions or mechanisms but without seeking any dominance.

Part III of the book contains three chapters and focuses on the vital question of China's rise as a major military power in Asia and its strategic implications for regional security, the US and the Southeast Asian states. The contributors of this section argue that the ultimate objective of Chinese military modernization effort is to 'build Asia's dominant defence establishment'. They agree that there is no imminent external threat to its security but also point out that China remains concerned regarding US presence in the region, its efforts to contain China and the increasing gap in the military technological advancement between the armed forces of the two countries. The authors argue that though the Chinese military build-up is apparently geared to cater for any contingencies stemming out of the Taiwan issue, its enhanced military capability can be used in the arena of South China Sea. They believe that by allocating only 2-3 percent of its GDP, with a 5 percent annual growth rate – which China can sustain comfortably – China can create a formidable armed force within the span of twenty years.

China urges the Southeast Asian states to find innovative ways of looking at the issue of security and shun the traditional Cold War mentality by embracing the new concept of 'Cooperative Security'. The Cooperative Security concept is not aimed against any state or enemy rather it aims at ensuring mutual security through consensus. This concept also includes all forms of non-traditional security. To support China's positive intent on the concept of Cooperative Security, the authors of this section argue that 'China is not promoting a regional strategic vision, nor proposing alliance to balance the US. And, most important of all, there is no evidence that China is planning in the foreseeable future to replace the US as the regional security guarantor.' Southeast Asian states do not anticipate any military invasion from China.

Though the book is published in 2007, the statistical data's cut-off time-line is 2003, and the citations and references given do not cover events beyond 2005. The book is an interesting reading for understanding the US and Southeast Asian perspectives on the rise of China and how the Southeast Asians intent managing the strategic competition between the two big powers – US and China.