

# The rise of China

## Balancing influence and engagement



A welcome addition to the burgeoning literature surrounding China's international rise, the immediate thing noticeable about the book *China's Rise* is its subtitle 'balance of influence in Asia'. Whilst there are a plethora of books dealing with the balance of 'power' in Asia, there are few dealing with the wider and softer concept of 'influence'.

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Keller, William and Thomas Rawski, eds. 2007. *China's Rise and the Balance of Influence in Asia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 284 pages. ISBN 0 8229 5967 4 (paperback).

THIS BOOK 'analyzes the Asia-wide implications of China's rapid and largely unanticipated emergence as an economic, political, and military power' (p. 5). Economics and China's peaceful rise is prominent; 'the central theme of this book is to examine the hypothesis that Beijing's vision of China's peaceful rise represents a practical and realistic path for the protracted and intricate global ballet to which China's vast and prolonged economic boom provides a remarkable overture' (p. 4). The book also has particular American resonances, 'an animating concern of this book is apparent US disengagement from Asia at a time when China is recapturing its historical role as a great power, and positioning itself as a leading state in global affairs' (p. 5). Its methodology is eclectic, 'it employs a comprehensive, multidisciplinary analysis of the changing balance of influence in Asia' (p. 5)

### Overlapping economic interests

Part 1 reveals the economic dimensions of China's rise. Some of the material is well trodden, namely the chapters by Loren Brandt dealing with The International Dimensions of China's Long Boom, and by Joseph Fewsmith on The Politics of Economic Liberalization. Brandt argues that 'looking beyond short-term friction over trade balances and currency valuations, we see substantial overlap between China's economic interests and those of the United States' (p. 44). She goes on to say that 'China is emerging as an improbable tribune for open flows of commodities and direct foreign investment, objectives long espoused by the United States. As a big importer of natural resources, China, like the United States, will benefit from and may actively seek to promote stability in the Middle East and other resource-rich regions' (p. 44). The counter-argument is that China's increasing appearance in the Middle East, Iran and Central Asia for energy resources is spurring competition and something of a new Great Game between China and US companies-strategic planners. Brandt argues two interesting wider points: Firstly, that international engagement is a 'driver of domestic reform' (p. 41) in the political as well as economic arena within China. Secondly is her caution that China's goals encompass 'prestige and national honor as well as economic growth' (pp. 45-6).

Fewsmith emphasises resistance to political reform, with the PRC experimenting with economic reform but 'repressing the emergence of opposition forces' and 'vigorously asserting the ruling position of the party-state' (p. 94). The implications of this prognosis within the democracy = peace international relations

(IR) axiom perhaps deserve more explicit evaluation in the book. Other chapters deal with less well known areas of China economic rise; namely Ellen Frost's *China's Commercial Diplomacy in Asia*, and William Keller and Louis Pauly's *Building a Technocracy in China: Semiconductors and Security*. Keller and Pauly's chapter is interesting for its focus on what they term techno-nationalism. They posit that 'what remains extremely difficult to imagine, however, is conscious acquiescence on the part of the American government, and American society more generally, to a secondary position in key industrial sectors like microelectronics' (p. 72). They also ask, perhaps less reassuringly, 'is China not inherently too big, too complex, and potentially too powerful to be steered by other countries?' (p. 72).

### Influence rather than power

Part 2 deals with 'influence'. This is subtly distinct from just dealing with 'power', but a greater analysis of China's soft power credibility by Joshua Kurlantzick and others would have been merited. Ross' contribution on Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China deals with responses by others in East Asia, through the prism of accommodation and balancing by other secondary states, in the light of Chinese and US positions. Ross brings in economic factors, but argues that traditional balance of power theory remain an appropriate mechanism for understanding regional dynamics in East Asia. Ultimately Ross sees continuing balance between China's growing land superiority on the Asian mainland and US maritime superiority in the Pacific Waters off Asia, 'if the United States remains committed to maintaining its forward presence in East Asia' (p. 145). That 'if' is perhaps the biggest policy implication. Economics is to the fore in Segal's study of Chinese Economic Statecraft and the Political economy of Asian security. Conceptually, he reveals the 'overlap between security and economic concerns' (p. 147), with economic levers used vis-à-vis Taiwan (relatively unsuccessfully he argues), ASEAN and Korea. Segal makes an interesting point that 'the trick for Beijing (and in some parts Tokyo) is to balance nationalist public sentiment – feelings that are often nurtured by government propaganda – with the need to maintain stable economic relations' (p.156).

Ravenhill's chapter on *China's Peaceful Development and Southeast Asia* is tellingly subtitled 'a positive sum game'. A rather technical contribution, perhaps not suited to the general lay reader, Ravenhill sees China's economic rise, and attractiveness in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), as complementary to ASEAN countries, rather than zero-sum competition. It is perhaps fitting that he argues that China's proposal to ASEAN for an early free trade agreement (FTA) 'was a diplomatic masterstroke both for its effects in assuaging ASEAN concerns about China's peaceful rise and in putting Tokyo on the defensive' (p. 192). This points to the final contribution, Keller and Rawski's treatment of *China's Peaceful Rise*, subtitled 'Road Map or Fantasy?' They stress long term trends on the growth and internationalisation of China's economy. Ultimately a positive enough consensus is pointed to, that 'China shows no signs of initiating an arms race with the United States' (p.198) and that 'China's future economic security will rest more on international cooperation and commercial diplomacy than on military strength or force projection capabilities' (p. 199).

### With the US in mind?

Ultimately the book and its conclusions have a policy direction for the US. Three competing worldviews are suggested by the editors, 'America as hyperpower (neoconservatism): a return to Cold War realism (ideological confrontation);

and economic interdependence (liberalism)' (p. 202). The thrust of the book is towards the third, reflected in the recurring presence of economic patterns and its ultimate prognosis that the US should remain engaged with the PRC. The book cover's pointer, that the writers have 'a shared goal of converting the image of China in the minds of the American policymakers to that of a mature, stable, constructive leader in the international economy of Asia and the entire world' is true enough in terms of direction of argument of the book. However, one might also consider how certain is China's internal socio-economic stability in the future, given the scenarios painted by people like Gordon Chang in *The Collapse of China* (2002). China may be playing a constructive role in the international economy, but does this apply to non-economic areas of security, and will it be applicable in the longer-term?

A question still remains. The logic of Peaceful Rise remains persuasive for China, and indeed for others, during the first half of the 21st century. However, as people like Avery Goldstein argue, Peaceful Rise is ultimately a strategy of transition that says little about what China will, or is likely to, do once she has risen. There could have been more treatment of China's Grand Strategy (and strategic culture) and longer-term post-rise dynamics. Certainly the book leaves open the question of what a post-rise China would be like. The book makes the case for pursuing engagement, yet as the only policy for US policy makers this remains incomplete, and not the whole story. In contrast, deliberate strategic hedging seems to be where others in Asia like Japan and India, as well as the US seem to be heading. The US is already following a mix of engagement (advocated by the book), internal balancing through building up its own military forces at Guam, and soft balancing through strengthening bilateral alliances with countries like Japan and established flexible strategic understandings with countries like India. This three-fold hedging is likely to be the ongoing response towards China, by the new American administration.

China's Rise is a structural yet also perceptual term. China's use of the term Peaceful Rise is intended as a reassurance term. One of the ironies, not really dealt with in this book, is the way in which Peaceful Rise was rolled out as a priority term in 2003 by the influential foreign policy advisor Zheng Bijian, and was adopted by the Chinese leadership during that year. Yet within a year, it had encountered criticism from within China over precluding force vis-à-vis Taiwan, and from the outside world concerned with the implications of any China 'rise' inherently meaning other's 'fall'. As a term, Peaceful Rise is itself a reflection of the interest, and challenges, surrounding China's growing presence in the international system.

Overall this book contains a good and interesting collection of essays. They are worth reading for bringing out the varied economic, and sometimes overlooked, aspects of China's rise more into light. The style is clear and coherent, suitable, in the main, for the intelligent layperson, as well as for the academic arena.

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