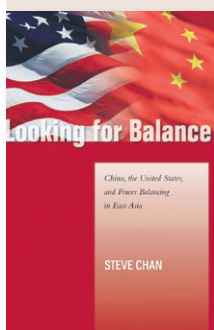


Power balance

Perhaps few international actors had their standing in global life as profoundly altered by the end of the Cold War as the United States and China. Almost overnight, Washington became the capital of the sole surviving superpower. It took Beijing longer to vie for a similar status. However, China's expanding outreach and diversifying roles have provided a novel context for the ongoing reconsiderations of world affairs. Steve Chan's investigation assesses the likely patterns of interactions between the American hegemon and the Chinese contender in the context of East Asia. The emphasis is on the deepening and widening engagement, which does not necessarily banish power politics from the policy equation, but makes it highly unlikely by engendering a complex network of "interlocking interests, stakes, and ideas".

Emilian Kavalski



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 Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, ISBN: 9780804778206

IT HAS TO BE STATED FROM THE OUTSET that while detailing the positions of the two sides of this relationship, the Chinese stance takes the limelight. And this is understandable. Beijing's external outlook has drawn attention both because of its agency and because of the particulars of its individual engagements. The dominant view is that it is the complex interaction between the very turbulence of the post-1989 period and the ability to maintain consistent levels of economic growth that have allowed China to demonstrate an enhanced confidence and ability to fashion international relations. In fact, a number of commentators have interpreted China's growing prominence as one of the clearest indications of a palpable shift to the East in international life.

Interpreting international affairs

For at least 200 years, the rivalry over structural power in global politics has been presented as "the great game" of Western actors. Yet, China's growing external outreach has demonstrated that non-Western actors are just as skilled and willing to engage in the global playground as Western ones. This shift appears to attest both to the transformations in and the transformative potential of Chinese foreign policy attitudes. At the same time, such changes have backstopped the growing interest in (as well as anxiety about) the prospective trajectories of Beijing's international interactions. And this is where Chan's book is most incisive. His account debunks number of (especially, American) misconceptions about China's international interactions. In fact, the title of his book—*Looking for Balance*—can be read as an appeal for more balanced and thoughtful interpretations of the nascent dynamics of international life.

In fact, Chan is quite blunt when it comes to outlining the prospective patterns of Sino-American relations. As he says, whether the relationship is conflictual or cooperative is not up to the whims of fate, but choice—a choice, which is "fundamentally tied to an elite's strategy for garnering and sustaining domestic popularity and control". In other words, the onus is on the decision-makers on both sides of the Pacific Ocean to steer the relationship away from the extremes of confrontation. And this is what Chan does in the book—he traces the courses that Washington and Beijing have charted in their Asia-Pacific interactions. The suggestion is that dominant interpretations tend to overemphasize the adversarial logic of Sino-American interactions.

To balance or not to balance ...

Chan's emphasis on the choices made by decision-makers is a major innovation in the literature on balance. Usually, commentators indicate that the foreign policy of any

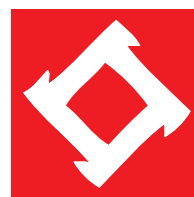
country is determined by the constraints and possibilities of its external security environment. In other words, a country's international outlook is very much conditioned by the particular geopolitical locale where it is situated. Chan however claims that that this is not the case. On the contrary, it is the specific choices taken by state elites that frame the horizon of foreign policy possibilities. Such emphasis rests on a rare acknowledgement of the coexistence of adversarial and associational elements in international politics. In other words, it is rare that two states are just friends or foes—usually, it is much more complicated than that.

In this respect, the book's analysis of the Sino-American relationship demonstrates the veracity of Chan's proposition. It offers a detailed process tracing of the history, preferences, economy, interests, and security dynamics informing the strategic outlook of both Washington and Beijing. At the same time, the book presents a thoughtful and perceptive analysis of the emerging dynamics of East Asia. As Chan demonstrates, while there has been a dearth of formalized institutional arrangements, the Asia Pacific has nonetheless been increasingly defined by "less noticed but more important progress in constructing regionalism based on burgeoning financial and economic interactions".

Looking towards the future

Chan's book makes an important and valuable intervention in both the explanation and understanding of the international relations characterizing the current patterns of Sino-American interactions. What emerges from the book's prescient examination is that the US position of hegemony in East Asia is seriously undermined (if it has not already become a thing of the past). Yet, this does not necessarily portend a military confrontation. On the contrary, Chan aptly evidences that "suggestions to the effect that a rising China presents a threat to be balanced sound suspicious to other states [in the region]". This suggestion offers a stimulating framework for the discussion of the prospective trajectories of Sino-American interactions in East Asia. In this respect, the book will be welcomed by students and scholars alike. At the same time, Chan's thoughtful process-tracing of this complex topic of current global politics provides a compelling perspective on the intricate pattern of relations between Washington and Beijing that is bound to attract policy-makers and pundits interested in US and Chinese foreign policy.

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