

***China's Search for Security.* By Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. Hardcover: 406pp.**

China's Search for Security presents the anti-alarmist perspective within the American debate concerning the rise of China. While many other commentators describe China as calculatingly assertive and bent on driving the United States out of Asia to make way for a revival of Chinese domination, Nathan and Scobell portray Chinese security policy as a reflection of China's fundamental weakness and defensiveness: "Vulnerability to threats is the main driver of China's foreign policy" (p. 3), they write.

Their theoretical approach is "mostly realist", augmented for "nuance" by borrowing from Constructivism, Institutionalism and Liberalism. Somewhat oddly, the authors define the latter as domestic interest groups driving foreign policymaking (p. xvi). Most sections of the book contain ample historical background, which helps stretch the length of the book to over 400 pages. As the authors are American, there is a heavy focus on US-China relations. The book also has very good summaries of the economic and domestic political aspects of China's security as well as the challenges posed by Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan. In contrast, the book has only one paragraph on China-Australia relations and one paragraph on China-Thailand relations.

The authors argue that China's leaders do not have a "fixed blueprint", but rather Beijing's decisions will depend on how other countries treat China (p. xxii). Chinese foreign policymakers lack "free choice", but respond to "tasks imposed by the facts of demography, geography, and history". One might object that the authors' view takes away Beijing's responsibility for bad international citizenship, as if Chinese leaders cannot help but condone massive cyber-theft, make unjustifiably excessive territorial claims in the South China Sea, insist on Chinese Communist Party sovereignty over Taiwan or shield North Korea from the consequences of its rogue behaviour.

Nathan and Scobell make the case that China is too weak and preoccupied to be an international trouble-maker. Globalization and engagement with the international economy and institutions, they say, have opened China to "penetration" by foreign people, institutions and ideas, which "required China to alter its domestic legal, administrative, banking, and judicial systems; subjected China to deep surveillance and adverse judgment by and pressure from

foreign organizations and governments” and “generated disruptive change” (p. 12). The authors emphasize that China is the more vulnerable partner in the US-China economic relationship, whether through intentional punishment by Washington or through economic mismanagement by US leaders. Despite the fear of many Americans that China could undermine the economy by selling off its US Treasury Bonds, Nathan and Scobell say this would be economic suicide on China’s part. The authors more or less say that foreigners have substantial control over China as international engagement “involved a yielding of [Chinese] autonomy” (p. 275). China faces what the authors call three “time bombs”: a rapidly aging population; a worsening environmental pollution crisis that will require a deep cut in GDP to address; and water shortages as Tibetan glaciers melt. As a consequence, there is no Chinese hegemony in the offing. The problems of controlling affairs on or near its borders consume resources that China might otherwise use to expand its influence more broadly. The authors say that although Chinese military power is growing and has now made the scenario of an easy US victory in a Taiwan Straits war obsolete, for the foreseeable future the People’s Liberation Army will be unable to match the military forces of other major powers in the region, unless these countries decide to stop competing. Nor can China force its will upon Southeast Asia.

In some cases the authors seem to press the “vulnerability” argument past the point of credibility. China is vulnerable because of its many shared borders with both formidable states and near-failed states. But China is also vulnerable where it has no contiguous neighbours — along its 9,000 miles of sea coast — because “all along this coastline, the Han heartland lies exposed” (p.15). This is quite a departure from fellow Realist John Mearsheimer’s idea of “the stopping power of water” (see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* 2001). The authors also play down the fact that China’s army is the largest in the world by pointing out that it would be outnumbered by “the aggregate militaries of its six main regional neighbors” (p. 16). One could say something similar about US defence spending, but this is a distraction from the real point, which is that “China is surrounded by smaller countries that fear Chinese domination” (p. 17), as the authors recognize. In my view the authors mischaracterize cross-Straits relations as “mutual vulnerability”, which implies a Taiwan threat to China comparable to the reverse. In fact the danger to China of Taiwan “being used by others as a base for hostile action” (p. 239) is amply outweighed by the existential threat Taiwan faces from China.

Nathan and Scobell say China's territorial claims are not a worry because they "appear fixed.... we see no signs of preparations to lodge claims to additional irridenta" (p. 21). This argument is highly problematic. First, Chinese territorial claims are already excessive and unjustified even without "additional" claims. Second, China's alarming determination to employ coercion and intimidation to enforce these claims is unique among the claimants. Third, government-connected Chinese analysts have raised questions about Japan's ownership of the Ryukyu Islands, and a few years ago the Chinese government published documents that seemed to imply part of the Korean Peninsula was historically Chinese.

The view of China as vulnerable and defensive seems to colour the authors' policy recommendations. They uncontroversially call for an "equilibrium" that preserves the current world order and maintains vital US interests while giving China "a larger role" (p. 356). The feasibility of such an equilibrium rests on the assumption that "core American interests do not threaten Chinese security" (p. 358). Many readers will find that assumption questionable, especially given the authors' advice that "the US must maintain its military predominance in the western Pacific, including the East China and South China Seas" and "act so as to maintain its credibility when facing challenges" (p. 357). For reasons the book well explains, the Chinese see American policy as "containment". The Chinese also have an expansive definition of security and a knack for convincing themselves that all Chinese security policies are defensive by definition (co-author Scobell has done excellent prior work on this subject. See, for instance, Andrew Scobell, "The Chinese Cult of Defense", *Issues & Studies* 37, no. 5 [September/October 2001]: 100–27). As avowed Realists, the authors should expect that a Great Power's demand for security will grow along with its relative capabilities. This is a recipe for conflict, not equilibrium.

Nathan and Scobell are senior scholars who know their subject matter well. This is the rare security studies book written by Sinologists. Their analysis is thorough and generally judicious. *China's Search for Security* is useful in its systematic deflation of common fears about the rise of China, even if it perhaps pushes this agenda too far.

DENNY ROY is a Senior Fellow at the East-West Center, Honolulu. Postal address: East-West Center, 1601 East-West Road, Honolulu, HI 96848-1601, United States; email: royd@eastwestcenter.org.