

***Southeast Asia and China: A Contest in Mutual Socialization*. Edited by Lowell Dittmer and Ngeow Chow Bing. Singapore: World Scientific, 2017. Hardcover: 285pp.**

Southeast Asia and China: A Contest in Mutual Socialization, edited by Lowell Dittmer and Ngeow Chow Bing attempts to provide a comprehensive approach to analysing Southeast Asia–China relations. The book’s twelve chapters are thematically categorized into three broad sections: political, economic and normative dimensions.

The editors’ introductory chapter lays out the fundamental ideas of the book. They argue that while China has never been threatened by its southern neighbours, Southeast Asian countries have, to varying degrees, harboured concerns, and even fears, about their northern neighbour due to military invasions in the distant past and, more recently, Beijing’s support for regional communist movements during the Cold War. Moreover, since 2010 China has become more assertive in the South China Sea, fuelling concern in a number of Southeast Asia capitals and exacerbating divisions within ASEAN.

Chapter Two, by Ngeow Chow Bing, seeks to explain the implications of the rise of China as a Great Power and Beijing’s changing approach to Southeast Asia, noticeably its more assertive policy towards the South China Sea dispute. Ngeow posits that it is a fusion of China’s new identity as a Great Power and its old one as the champion of the developing world that helps explain Beijing’s incoherent foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. As Ngeow argues, public criticism of China will likely be seen by Beijing as “sufficiently disrespectful of the Great Power” (p. 49). On the other hand, however, adopting quiet diplomacy may be interpreted as appeasement or bandwagoning. To maintain their political autonomy and protect their sovereignty, Southeast Asian countries therefore have to nimbly reconcile these two approaches.

Similarly, in Chapter Three, You Ji attempts to link China’s ascendancy as a Great Power to its new strategy in the South China Sea. He argues that Beijing has recently adopted a more proactive policy in the disputed waters using a “controlled retaliatory and escalatory strategy” (p. 68). However, this reviewer tends to see China’s assertiveness as a strategy designed to undermine US supremacy in the region. Due to America’s domestic difficulties and its military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, Beijing believes —

and has attempted to convince other countries in the region — that America's commitment to Asia is weak. If this conviction grows, Southeast Asian countries will have to readjust their foreign policies accordingly and adopt a more accommodating approach towards China. We can already see signs of this strategic recalibration since President Donald Trump took office in January 2017.

Chapters Four to Seven discuss Southeast Asian responses to a more assertive China by examining the strategies of four countries: the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. As shown in Chapter Four by Reynaldo C. Ileteo, the Philippines under President Benigno Aquino took a more confrontational approach towards China vis-à-vis the South China Sea dispute by strengthening its alliance with America and challenging the legal basis of its expansive claims at The Hague. Aquino's successor, Rodrigo Duterte, has, however, pursued a more accommodating policy towards China. In the next three chapters — by Alexander L. Vuving, Ayame Suzuki and Lee Poh Ping, and Donald E. Weatherbee respectively — the authors argue that Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia have adopted a "hedging strategy", which can be defined as "a behaviour in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects, under the situation of high uncertainties and high stakes" (p. 118). As the three chapters note hedging includes multiple options: (1) strengthening ties, noticeably economic relations, with China; (2) enmeshing the United States and other major powers in the region and; (3) strengthening ASEAN's role in the evolving regional architecture. ASEAN's role and active engagement with the major powers creates push-and-pull effects that provide Southeast Asian countries greater freedom and flexibility. Taken together, these three chapters seem to suggest that all Southeast Asian countries have adopted hedging as their main strategy towards a rising China. However, this reviewer respectfully disagrees with this premise for two main reasons. First, from a conceptual perspective, using "hedging" as a term to describe the foreign policy behaviours of smaller states towards China lacks nuance. The literature on hedging is not specific enough. Even stalwart alliances can be part of broad hedging strategies if accompanied by robust political and economic engagement. Second, Southeast Asia is a diverse region in which individual countries' historical experiences and threat perceptions differ quite markedly. Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar seem to have limited strategic manoeuvrability due to their imbalanced

relations with China and the United States. For Cambodia, China is the Kingdom's largest foreign investor and economic benefactor. Moreover, in the eyes of Cambodia's leaders, China does not pose a threat but acts as a protector of the country's sovereignty. Hedging, therefore, is not the best option for Phnom Penh, at least for the foreseeable future. Thus, more case studies related to mainland Southeast Asian countries should have been included in this book in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of Southeast Asian responses to the rise of China.

Chapters Eight to Ten examine the economic dimension of Southeast Asia–China relations, and assess the geostrategic and geoeconomic implications of China's growing financial clout. Chapter Eleven, by Anthony Milner, addresses the need to investigate the impact of norms in International Relations on China–Southeast Asia relations. Interestingly, he discusses the concept of sovereignty and how differences in the claimant states' understanding of the concept might help resolve the South China Sea dispute. For instance, Malaysia's conceptualization of sovereignty is subtly different from the Westphalian concept. It emphasizes the authority of the sovereign over his subjects instead of territorial boundaries, and the acceptance of hierarchical order rather than equal sovereignty (pp. 237–40). Such an understanding of sovereignty, Milner asserts, allows Malaysian leaders to pursue a relatively more accommodating approach towards China, including over the South China Sea dispute.

In Chapter Twelve, Cheng-Chwee Kuik, Li Ran and Sien Ngan Ling highlight the importance of connectivity for both China and Southeast Asia. They conclude that while there has been considerable progress in improving the physical connectivity between Southeast Asia and China, policy connectivity lags behind partly due to mistrust between China and its southern neighbours as a result of ongoing tensions in the South China Sea. Another key issue, which is not discussed in this chapter, is ideational connectivity. Lowell Dittmer, in Chapter One, points out that “China's vocabulary of win-win cooperation, common destiny, harmonious world” fits in well with the ASEAN Way (p. 17). Moreover, China's phenomenal economic story has inspired a few leaders in Southeast Asia to follow China's developmental model. Some regional leaders have even looked towards Beijing for guidance not only on economic development but also governance.

Southeast Asia and China is a thought-provoking book which attempts to explain Southeast Asian–China relations from political, economic and normative perspectives. It is an important source for scholars, policymakers, journalists and students who are interested in the international relations of the Asia-Pacific region.

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