

***Asia's Quest for Balance: China's Rise and Balancing in the Indo-Pacific.* Edited by Jeff M. Smith. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018. Hardcover: 323pp.**

Explaining China, its role in the region and the world, and the appropriate responses to its rising power, has been a cottage industry for scholars for at least the last three or four decades. This book adds to the genre, and does so usefully in part but less so in others.

This is really two books in one. The first part is a discussion of balancing as a concept, and its relationship to the rise of China and the effects of that rise on the region. The second part is a series of country case-study chapters that explain the approach towards China taken by the selected countries in terms of their balancing behaviour. The second part is stronger and more interesting than the first, although the absence of chapters on South Korea and Thailand is a serious shortcoming. The other major regional powers — India, Japan and Australia — are included, along with most Southeast Asian countries. The United States is present implicitly throughout, and explicitly as a section within each of the country chapters.

The country chapters are very useful, largely because the editor has assembled a very strong team of contributors. Each chapter uses a common framework to discuss the issues and it is therefore easy to compare and contrast the selected countries and their respective relationships with China.

However, there is one significant gap. There is almost no mention in any of the chapters of the range of formal “strategic partnerships”, “comprehensive strategic partnerships” and “partnerships of friendship and cooperation for peace and development” held with China by all of the countries discussed except for Singapore and the Philippines. These partnerships might be shams, but they should have been discussed in terms of the “balancing against China” focus of the book.

The definition and discussion of balancing in the first part of the book is not completely persuasive. Balancing is defined as a “form of state behaviour that involves activities and initiatives designed to increase a state’s defenses against aggression or coercion from a potential, often more powerful, threat” (p. 243). That definition sounds more like “defence” than “balancing”. This reader would have preferred a definition that emphasized the need for balance

within the system, with states taking action to ensure that balance. Fortunately many of the authors implicitly do this anyway.

In addition, the book largely fails to deliberate on whether many regional countries' actions defined as "internal balancing" (against China) through increased military capabilities are because they can afford to upgrade their armed forces, or because obsolescence requires their armed forces to be modernized. Where one observer sees, for example, military expenditure being used as "internal balancing", another might merely see routine equipment modernization. In other words, what is defined here as internal balancing might well have occurred with or without China's rise.

Similar comments might be made about external balancing. To be sure, states are increasingly working to broaden and deepen their ties with other regional states. But many of the activities described seem to come under the heading of routine defence diplomacy, a long-standing activity and one in which China is an active participant. There is, in other words, too little discussion of motivation for the actions of a number of countries and a blanket assumption that military expenditure and military relationships with countries other than China are examples of balancing against Beijing.

The discussion of balancing does not contrast it with bandwagoning — as normally seen in similar theoretical discussions — but rather places balancing against engagement on a spectrum from alliance at one end of the scale to conflict at the other end. While this is acceptable, the overlap between balancing and engagement shown in Chart 1.1 (p. 8) is such that a specific state behaviour might be defined as either "hard balancing" or "limited engagement" according to the needs of the writer. As the editor notes, states "can, and most often do, adopt elements of Balancing and Engagement strategies simultaneously" (p. 8). Just so, and shown in most of the chapters. This is problematic, however, in a book specifically about balancing.

The editor's conclusion is that between 2009 and 2015, "a diverse array of Indo-Pacific capitals registered an uptick in China-related Balancing activity" (p. 235). Although the evidence is clear that the states discussed have increased their military capabilities and developed relationships with their neighbours, whether that should all be ascribed to balancing behaviour is not so clear. If this reader were to take a position and generalize about the region — in itself problematic given the diversity of the states represented — he would argue that balancing, hedging and bandwagoning are all present in the region. Indeed, for Singapore these activities are described as

“strategic imperatives” rather than alternatives (p. 53). They might not be strategic imperatives for all the countries under analysis, but most are using all the instruments rather than just that of balancing.

This is then an interesting book in part because of the update on the state of relationships within the region and in part because of the way it forces the reader to think about fundamental concepts. Perhaps if the starting point that “China’s path to regional, let alone global, hegemony is far from assured” (p. 2) had framed the discussion in the country study chapters as analyses of how regional states are navigating the new(ish) regional order, rather than as analyses of what they are doing about China and its rise, the conceptual component of the book would have jelled more clearly with the substantive analysis.

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