

***China's Asia: Triangular Dynamics since the Cold War.* By Lowell Dittmer. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. Softcover: 289pp.**

Lowell Dittmer's book comes at a critical time when regional actors are learning to cope with a rising and assertive China. According to Lowell Dittmer's interesting book, China is seeking to revive the old China Dream of exercising dominance over what it considers to be its "natural region". However, the region has been resisting such attempts, and "China finds its way to its prized Asian leadership role frustrated" (p. 2).

Dittmer suggests that the best way to understand the geopolitical dynamics between China and its Asian neighbours is by mapping them onto a triangular model of relationships with the United States as the third actor. This creates what Dittmer calls a "strategic triangle", in which each participant is presumed to be a sovereign and rational actor. Each actor in a strategic triangle takes into account the third actor in managing its relationship with the second. Each actor is also essential to the game in the sense that its defection from one side to the other would affect the strategic balance. For Dittmer, "the rules of the game are to maximize national interests by having as many positive triangles and as few negative triangles as possible" (p. 11).

With the inclusion of the United States in the strategic triangle, China's asymmetrical power advantages over its Asian neighbours are mitigated, much to Beijing's chagrin. This explains why China seeks to depict the United States as "a country outside of the region" and cast its foreign policy in the region as "interference" or "intervention" (p. 17). China also warns its smaller neighbours to "not take sides" between the two major powers (p. 13).

The book examines six strategic triangles: Russia, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, ASEAN, India (with the inclusion of two smaller embedded triangles involving Pakistan) and Australia.

For Dittmer, the Russia-China-US triangle poses the worst possible configuration for the United States. In recent years, the Sino-Russian partnership has grown stronger, placing the United States in a disadvantageous position. Dittmer describes how President Barack Obama made a strategic choice of engaging China, even "downplaying short-term disagreements over the South China Sea" (p. 99). However, under President Donald Trump, US bilateral relations with China and Russia have deteriorated, while Beijing and Moscow

have grown closer to each other, putting the United States in the worst triangular position.

Dittmer describes the Japan-China-US triangle as an arranged marriage “consisting of the Japan-America Security Alliance on one side facing an opposing Sino-Russian alliance on the other” (p. 132). Increasingly, however, especially after 2012 when the United States could no longer easily play a pivotal balancing role due to China’s more assertive foreign policy, the China-Japan-US triangle has further entrenched the importance of Japan and the Japan-US alliance.

The author assesses that, in their respective strategic triangles with the United States and China, Taiwan and South Korea pursue bifurcated foreign policies in the sense of being oriented both to outside powers and to their “other half”, i.e. China and North Korea respectively. Both countries have tried (inconclusively) to bring them into “alignment” (p. 162). Between 1995 and 2005, “Taiwan fell into the worst possible position of a pariah facing a Sino-U.S. marriage” (p. 151). However, given current US-China tensions, Taiwan’s prominence has now risen in American foreign policy. Dittmer thus argues that “we may stand at the threshold of a brave, perilous new era in cross-Straits relations” (p. 154). While China has repeatedly given reassurances that it has no intention of pushing America out of the Western Pacific, it considers the US alliance network in the region and the Taiwan Relations Act as antithetical to its core interests. The triangular configurations involving Taiwan and South Korea serve a different purpose compared to other cases. While it may provide some measure of protection to smaller powers, Dittmer argues that “it cannot heal national division” (p. 165).

With respect to Southeast Asia, Dittmer depicts ASEAN as a monolith occupying one leg of the triangle. This is a drawback since ASEAN lacks coherent strategic interests at the institutional level. Nevertheless, Dittmer points out the transformation of the grouping since the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, the five founding members of ASEAN aligned with the United States in an effort to counter communism in the region. Dittmer notes that today, ASEAN-10 is a more neutral actor that could benefit from the increasingly competitive relationship between the two other legs of the triangle, the United States and China.

The chapter examining the triangles of South Asian countries is the most densely written. Dittmer introduces a useful map of “smaller triangles” involving Pakistan that is embedded within the larger India-China-US triangle. Unfortunately, the chapter fails to do justice to the complexity of these relationships, which are characterized by

a myriad of issues such as border disputes, geostrategic competition, ambivalent economic relations, nuclear rivalry and identity politics. Similarly, the chapter on Australia appears to be narrowly drawn from views of the Australian strategic thinker Hugh White. The Australian strategic triangle could have been the most straightforward case to clarify the triangular models involving other Asian countries. However, the discussion of Australia only brings more confusion than clarity.

Beyond the role that these strategic triangles play in mitigating China's growing power, a question remains as to whether the power transition in Asia will lead to war. Dittmer suggests three conditions that need to be met to ensure a peaceful power transition. First, the challenger should not attack the incumbent's core interests. Second, the incumbent must gracefully yield to the challenger's reasonable demands. Third, they both must share a determination not to let their differences become kinetic (p. 263).

Dittmer's book represents a commendable attempt to capture the complex and rapidly evolving sets of relationships involving China, the United States and major Asian countries. However, some readers may be dissatisfied with some of the author's over simplifications. Dittmer, however, defends this approach because "sometimes oversimplification is useful" (p. xx).

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