

***Under Beijing's Shadow: Southeast Asia's China Challenge.* By Murray Hiebert. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. Hardcover: 608pp.**

Southeast Asia is now often depicted as a region beneath China's waxing shadow. Many observers understand that metaphor to portend Chinese hegemony in the region. However, that outcome will hinge heavily on the responses of Southeast Asians residing where China casts its shade. Murray Hiebert explores that theme in *Under Beijing's Shadow*, an impressively comprehensive look at the many Southeast Asian perspectives about the region's relationship with China.

The book sets out "to provide a snapshot of how Southeast Asia experiences and perceives China today" (p. 4). The image it offers is panoramic—more an elaborate tapestry than a quick snapshot. Hiebert draws on decades as a journalist and policy analyst in the region to provide nuanced accounts of China's relations with each of the ten members of ASEAN, referencing the past to serve his focus on the present. Readers nostalgic for the rich coverage of Southeast Asia that Hiebert and his colleagues once offered in *The Far Eastern Economic Review* will recognize and appreciate the same qualities in the book.

The book's central thread is the "cocktail of hope and anxiety" (p. 13) which greets China's advances into Southeast Asia. Hiebert rightly avoids shoehorning the region's diverse local dynamics into a simple story of resistance or accommodation. To varying degrees, China's relations with each of the ten regional countries have an uneasy and unsettled quality as Southeast Asian governments and their citizens view and react to China's surging influence in different ways.

To capture some of that variation, he arrays Southeast Asian states along a rough spectrum and divides them into three clusters. The first consists of countries most vulnerable to Chinese influence: Cambodia, a "Beijing bandwagoner" (p. 7), as well as Laos and Myanmar, which respectively exhibit "frustrated" and "bristling" dependence on China (pp. 7–8). In the second group are Thailand and Vietnam. Both countries enjoy greater strategic heft and thus have greater scope to engage Beijing and Washington in a bi-directional balancing game. Thailand is a "partial hedger", while Vietnam is a "hard balancer" (p. 8). The five maritime ASEAN members form the third group, insulated to some degree by the waters that separate them from China. Their postures range from Indonesia's

“fiercely independent” behaviour to Singapore’s “hard balancing” and Malaysia’s “soft balancing” (pp. 9–10) to Brunei’s accommodation and the Philippines’ ambivalence.

While these rough labels and categories help provide a more organized picture of complex regional dynamics, Hiebert appropriately does not invest too much in them. The bulk of the text, and the book’s prime strength, is the granular discussion of each country’s circumstances. All ten states receive roughly comparable attention, including welcome details on Chinese relations with Laos and Brunei, the two states most frequently skipped over in scholarly tours of the region.

The book is analytic but not highly academic; Hiebert does not seek to advance a central theoretical model or claim. He draws on concepts such as hedging and balancing to provide a richer descriptive account of Southeast Asian behaviour rather than to refine those concepts or evaluate their explanatory power. For scholars, the main value of *Under Beijing’s Shadow* lies in its empirical breadth and depth.

In general, the chapters offer excellent reviews of state-to-state relations between China and its Southeast Asian neighbours, as well as public responses to China’s rising influence. Hiebert embraces the complexity and ambivalence which characterizes the many local relationships with China in the region. The Myanmar military continues to rely heavily on China for weapons and training, for example, but officers chafe at Chinese support for rebel groups along the border and raise eyebrows at China’s aspirations for a deep-water port on the Bay of Bengal. Vietnam hosts mounting Chinese investment even as it holds China’s signature Belt and Road Initiative at arm’s length and has to manage popular anti-China protests. Chinese Indonesians in Jakarta build commercial bridges to Beijing gingerly amid the rise of adversarial identity politics in Indonesia. These are just a few of the dynamics that Hiebert deftly captures in the book.

Some chapters offer lengthy descriptive accounts and offer less in the way of domestic political analysis—particularly with regard to the role that Chinese support plays in bolstering or undermining the control of incumbent elites vis-à-vis their challengers and the general public. Some would also benefit from greater discussion of how these ties to China relate to the roles of other major powers. Yet these are comparatively modest critiques of a well-researched, insightful and timely book.

Of course, the choice to analyse Southeast Asia’s relations with China through the lens of individual countries narrows the focus

on their respective bilateral ties to Beijing. As Hiebert notes, this is how Chinese officials generally wish to treat Southeast Asia—as a region defined increasingly by a lattice of bilateral relationships with China at its core. ASEAN arises often in the book, but Hiebert opts not to give it the pride of place it enjoys in many depictions of Southeast Asian engagement with external powers. The broader multilateral forums arrayed around ASEAN, such as the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Plus Three, receive little mention. The book thus implies subtly that, despite expending much ink and oxygen, advocates for multilateralism in and around Southeast Asia are losing ground in the struggle to define the regional order. Hiebert warns that “rifts and distrust” within Southeast Asia enable Beijing to “divide and conquer” (p. 537).

The analysis in *Under Beijing's Shadow* carries important policy implications. The complex and contingent nature of Southeast Asian relations with China, the diverse national perspectives and the disagreements among ASEAN members all contribute to an atmosphere of great uncertainty. Beijing faces a “patchwork of expectations” (p. 13) in an eclectic regional environment. In Washington, “uncertainties about what Southeast Asians want feeds the region’s uncertainty about and lack of confidence in the United States” (p. 549). Still, an environment characterized by risk and ambiguity has its advantages. Uncertainty is a near-antonym of determinism. It leaves Southeast Asians with “considerable agency” (p. 535) and the capacity to continue to shape their relations with China in the years ahead.

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