

Where Great Powers Meet: America & China in Southeast Asia.
By David Shambaugh. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
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Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, insufficient attention has been directed towards the role Southeast Asia has played in both American and Chinese foreign policy. Having extracted itself from conflicts in Indochina nearly a half century ago, the United States has since devoted most of its attention and energy to Europe and the Middle East. A rising China and a burgeoning nuclear North Korea were Indo-Pacific exceptions. Meanwhile, China has worked assiduously to fill the Great Power vacuum in Southeast Asia created by oscillations in US economic and strategic engagements with ASEAN member states.

The above suppositions comprise what is regarded as the “common wisdom” and are generally accepted by many international relations analysts and observers. They fail, however, to adequately explain the concrete dynamics and complexities underlying Sino-American competition in Southeast Asia.

David Shambaugh’s new book, *Where Great Powers Meet: America & China in Southeast Asia*, represents a breakthrough effort to shed more light on comparative Chinese and American influence in Southeast Asia. One of the world’s pre-eminent authorities on the international relations of China and East Asia, he has generated, via numerous interviews and through the persistent cultivation of an extraordinary network of government officials, business leaders, academic experts in Southeast Asia and beyond, what must be viewed as *the* authoritative empirical work comparing Chinese and American influence and weaknesses in that region.

As his main argument, Shambaugh introduces the idea of Sino-American “comprehensive competition” as it applies to Southeast Asia between the superpowers in the region of concern. Comprehensive competition is not an uncompromising zero-sum or action-reaction contest between China and the United States. Rather it is a process adopted by both countries to advance and maximize their own respective positions in Southeast Asia without necessarily affecting one’s primary rival in every instance. Comprehensive competition is therefore viewed more accurately, argues Shambaugh, as “soft rivalry” with incidental “shadow boxing” between Beijing and Washington rather than a Cold War-like “hard rivalry” (pp. 3–4).

The author notes that both powers enjoy visible strengths and suffer from discernible weaknesses in their quest for greater power and influence in the region. China primarily uses economic tools to cultivate stronger ties with its Southeast Asian neighbours. However, it often displays an insensitive and nationalistic “tin ear” when pursuing mutual business and development projects, and Southeast Asians are often justifiably wary of China’s size and proximity when dealing with Beijing (p. 244). The United States is still militarily stronger than China throughout much of Southeast Asia—although the gap is clearly narrowing—and has a more compelling soft power and cultural appeal in most Southeast Asian countries. Yet because of its inconsistent regional involvement and its general scepticism towards multilateral institutions (the Obama administration was the major exception here), America is frequently perceived by Southeast Asians as indifferent to their own concerns and aspirations, especially as they are embodied in the “ASEAN centrality” concept. Shambaugh therefore posits a second key argument along with his comprehensive competition thesis: while America’s influence in the region has waned, it still has “deep roots” in Southeast Asia and exercises more “comprehensive” power in the region than does China. The United States is an “underappreciated power” while China is an “overestimated” one (p. 5).

Adding nuance to both his arguments, Shambaugh asserts most ASEAN member states have been pursuing hedging strategies relative to both the superpowers. In doing so, they preclude either Chinese or American complete dominance over Southeast Asia (pp. 248–49). But one could question the validity of this observation given his description of Southeast Asia’s “spectrum of relations” (pp. 243–44). Seven out of ten ASEAN member states are listed on China’s side of the spectrum; only the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam are listed as leaning towards the US orbit. The author explains this relationship configuration as “fluid and subject to change” (p. 244). Yet at other intervals in his book, he concludes that China exercises a form of “veto power” over ASEAN states because it has “so successfully co-opted and intimidated them that they quickly and quietly yield” (p. 181). A more sustained American diplomatic presence and economic involvement in Southeast Asia beyond its substantial foreign direct investment there, especially through regional trading arrangements and institutional architectures, would certainly go a long way towards neutralizing China’s intimidatory tactics. The acute polarization of US domestic politics, and the Biden administration’s

current focus on infrastructure, climate change and pandemic management, render any short-term resurgence of American energy and resources directed towards Southeast Asia more challenging. Nor is it likely that the US Congress, in its current protectionist and neo-isolationist mode, would support an American re-entry into a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)-type trading agreement any time soon.

Although acknowledging the roles of other external powers beyond China and America in helping to shape Southeast Asia's contemporary strategic environment, the book could have usefully offered a separate chapter developing this theme more extensively. In particular, more analysis on the potential impact of the Quadrennial Security Dialogue (or "the Quad" as it is commonly known) involving Australia, India and Japan would have added additional and welcome scope and breadth to the power balancing examination that Shambaugh develops throughout his narrative. Space limitations could well have overridden such analysis. Given that he declares his future work will continue to focus on various aspects of Southeast Asia, however, cross comparing the "ASEAN Way" with the burgeoning minilateral security and multilateral economic instrumentalities championed by the United States and China, would provide an excellent sequel to this volume.

At the outset, Shambaugh apologizes for his lack of familiarity and understanding of Southeast Asia. He is far too modest. The historical accounts of both the individual Southeast Asian states' relations with China and America, and of the two countries' interests and policies towards them, are masterful and should be required reading for any observer or student of Asian policy or students of international relations. This book further confirms the author's illustrious standing as one of the West's best Asian scholars and represents a first-rate contribution to the field.

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