

***China's Asymmetric Statecraft: Alignments, Competitors, and Regional Diplomacy.* By Yuxing Huang. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2023. Hardcover: 274 pp.**

Yuxing Huang's latest book is driven by an astute observation: China's approach to weaker regional states appears to vary across time and geography even when those countries or the pertinent geopolitical issue remain relatively consistent. To explain this, Huang delves into primary sources and provides a close texture to the decision-making processes of major powers that is often absent in more abstract efforts to understand foreign policy.

Unsatisfied with existing interpretations of major powers' decision-making processes when competing with regional rivals—which tend to focus on the structuralism of power asymmetries, institutions, ideologies and domestic politics—Huang argues that major powers primarily consider the political conditions of the regions that are in contention. To do so, he examines the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in East Asia, South Asia and Indochina between the 1950s and 1970s.

Importantly, Huang treats the PRC like any other great power, thereby making his interpretations of its approach to regional competition more general and, potentially, comparable with other cases, while avoiding *sui generis* claims of Chinese exceptionalism. Huang argues for the wider application of his book's theoretical claims. If they are correct, Beijing's actions are simply variations of great power behaviour, despite what some proponents of a "Chinese" or "Asian" approach to international relations think.

His main argument is as follows: When there is a single rival in a region, the major power adopts dissimilar, selective approaches towards weaker allies but uniform strategies towards weaker non-allies. By doing so, it seeks to communicate consistency to its rival through its treatment of non-allies while addressing shared problems among its allies. If there is more than one major adversary, the major power treats weaker non-allies selectively and weaker allies uniformly. In this case, the major power in question aims to maintain an advantage over the non-allies and their backers while seeking to assure allies of its commitments to them.

A particularly fascinating section of *China's Asymmetric Statecraft* is Huang's account of the PRC's strategy towards Taiwan

between 1955 and 1965. He argues that before the appearance of the Soviet Union as a regional rival in 1959, Beijing adopted a uniform strategy towards US allies in East Asia, including Taiwan. After Moscow's emergence as a regional competitor, however, Beijing took selective approaches towards US allies depending on Soviet and US policies. Concessions on Taiwan's autonomy, he argues, were not ends in themselves but part of Beijing's broader calculations of strategic gain.

Another implication, if Huang's theory is accurate, is that for all the claims about wanting to "reunify" Taiwan, leaders of the PRC have historically treated Taiwan as an autonomous, albeit weaker, actor to be used during power competition—similar to how Beijing treats South Korea and Japan. Such an instrumental, rather than nationalist, view of Taiwan certainly conforms with statements made by Mao Zedong in the 1930s about support for Taiwanese independence. Huang's analysis therefore raises the important question of when Taiwan's status became an issue of nationalist importance to the PRC's leaders.

Impressive as Huang's archival research and his conceptualizing of regional statecraft may be, several loose ends remain. Perhaps most glaring is that Huang's account is one-sided; it rests on the interpretations of primarily the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as the various (supposedly) weaker regional actors. However, there seems to be little evaluation of how contemporary Chinese leaders considered the success or failure of their policies, which could provide an alternative explanation for Beijing's decisions.

Huang pits his regional competition theory for PRC statecraft against explanations that see either the role of external threats or ideology and domestic politics as drivers of major power approaches to regional competition. Yet, apart from mentioning the Great Leap Forward in his conceptual chapter (Chapter 2), it and the resulting famine do not feature with any real prominence in the empirical chapters of the book. The omission seems odd because, according to many political scientists and historians, PRC's domestic politics and Sino-Soviet competition lay behind a desire to mobilize for the Great Leap Forward that crystallized in the initiation of the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1958. In other words, conventional wisdom holds that domestic politics played a part in the PRC's strategy over Taiwan that year, suggesting a role for domestic politics in great power decision-making.

There are other areas where conventional wisdom seems too quickly overlooked, too. It is the opinion of many academics that, during the 1960s, Moscow's growing assertiveness along the Sino-Soviet border, as well as the build-up of Soviet conventional forces in Mongolia, was a major catalyst for Beijing's geopolitical recalibration. Some of the Cultural Revolution-era approaches of confronting both Moscow and Washington, as advocated by the likes of Lin Biao, began to wane as PRC leaders realized the reality of Soviet's military might. To ward off mounting Soviet pressure, Zhou Enlai and then Mao Zedong sought rapprochement with the United States that was itself eager to exit Vietnam.

Huang makes little mention of these events when explaining changes to Chinese foreign policy. However, the conventional argument that Soviet belligerence drove US-China rapprochement would indicate that policymakers in Beijing do see different regions are interlinked—and therefore do not treat them distinctly, as Huang suggests Beijing does. In the former postulation, in order to make strategic gains, great powers sometimes trade off interests in one region to gain interests in another. Beijing's support for North Vietnam, for instance, was exchanged for gaining US assistance against Soviet assertiveness along the long Sino-Soviet border after clashes in Manchuria and Xinjiang. The lacuna of this in Huang's account appears strange given that *China's Asymmetric Statecraft* cites several works that argue the conventional interpretation, including those by Thomas Christensen, Lorenz Luthi and Shen Zhihua.

Neither does Huang discuss Beijing's support for the Maoist-inspired Khmer Rouge in his Indochina case study. PRC officials not only offered political and material support to the Khmer Rouge, but they also remained silent when the Cambodian regime launched a genocide against its own population. That support appears to have been because of a shared ideology. That Beijing adopted differing policies towards communist Cambodia and communist North Vietnam would indicate an ideology-based differential treatment of allies in Indochina—all of which suggests ideology does matter for major power decision-making. Conventional wisdom may be wrong, but this has to be shown to be the case rather than simply asserted.

The value of *China's Asymmetric Statecraft* lies in its innovative approach to conceptualizing the strategies of great powers in regional competitions. Much of the literature on International Relations

and foreign policy focuses on grand strategy, rather than, like Huang's work, a region-specific application of strategies. Given the diverse nature of politics in different parts of the world, as Huang suggests, an approach tailored to a specific region is a completely reasonable way for a major power to operate. Where the book falls somewhat short, however, is insufficient consideration of domestic politics and ideology as explanations for decision-making, as well as of tensions between a great power's regional approach and its overall grand strategy.

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