

Book Reviews

***Interpreting China's Grand Strategy, Past, Present and Future.* By Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis. Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2000. 283pp.**

Has China a grand strategy for its national security? If yes, what is it? Does Chinese leadership from Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di to Mao and Jiang consciously follow such a grand strategy? These controversial questions are taken by Swaine and Tellis as the key starting point in their ground-breaking study of China's security behaviour over the *longue duree* of over two millennia. For the authors, such a study contributes to "accurately understanding and effectively responding to the rise of China" (p. ix).

Like many others in the current debate on the rise of China, Swaine and Tellis start from the assumption that China is increasingly becoming a serious national security concern for the United States (Chapter 1). Unlike others, however, they argue that China's strategic behaviour can only be made comprehensible with an adequate understanding of fundamental problems in China's security environment, which transcend time and space (see Chapter 2). In Chapter 3, Swaine and Tellis make a brave attempt to offer a sweeping review of China's historical strategic behaviour to establish what they call "the historical context". The historically contextual hybrid of weak-strong state security strategy adopted by the Chinese state, the authors claim, informs our understanding of the contemporary security strategy pursued by the current Chinese Government.

If the characterization of current Chinese security strategy as "calculative" is less controversial, and full discussions of it in Chapter 4 are more conventional, the assessment of the longevity of such a strategy, believed to be between 2015–2020, is nevertheless provocative. In the authors' words, "Chinese-state initiated revisionism" of the international system "will be minimal" before

2015–2020 (p. 142). Beyond 2020, three scenarios of China's grand strategy — a chaotic China, a co-operative China, and an assertive China — are presented in Chapter 5. Swaine and Tellis are, however, unequivocal as to what is the most likely scenario to emerge with their immediate dismissal of the possibility of a chaotic China and a co-operative China. Historically, this assessment is informed by the record of China's strategic behaviour conditioned principally by its geopolitical vulnerability and rise and fall of Chinese power, and by the trajectories of rising "Western" powers in the recent past (pp. 218–28), the authors claim. Conceptually, the assessment derives its strength from a Realist analytical framework.

Swaine and Tellis, in fact, profess at the very beginning that the perspective of their study is explicitly Realist. True to the Realist paradigm, they look at the Chinese state largely as a rational unitary actor, and examine China's geopolitical primacy/vulnerability, its state capabilities — military, economic, and political — the power configuration in China's relations with the outside world, and the structural distribution of power as key and timeless variables in determining China's security environment, and by the same token, strategic behaviour over the millennium. For the authors, therefore, Realism provides timeless wisdom for at least understanding China's strategic behaviour.

What stands this study apart is that its analyses are embedded in a deep historical context. The sweeping and comprehensive survey of China's strategic behaviour in the *longue duree* of Chinese history in Chapter 3 has never been attempted anywhere else before. More provocative is the authors' proposition that out of such meta-historical review, it is possible to identify China's core security objectives, broad pattern of strategic behaviour, and basic features of China's grand strategy which "have persisted to the present day". Transformations in world politics, including the demise of the traditional Chinese world order and the incorporation of China into the Westphalian international system, the authors argue, only brought major changes in the "specific definition of China's security objectives and concerns" and "specific means by which such objectives or concerns could be addressed in the modern era" (p. 97). History is not only entrenched in the present, but will also be inevitably present in the future in shaping China's grand strategy (see, in particular, pp. 231–33).

By going beyond the narrow contemporary perspective and locating their discussions of China's grand strategy in a meta-historical analytical context, Swaine and Tellis undoubtedly make a major contribution to our understanding of China's current strategic behaviour. It is also here, however, that many of their claims are open to

contestation. Radical transformations of the Chinese polity, from Imperial to Nationalist and to Communist, and social and economic changes associated with them, in Swaine and Tellis's narrative, do not seem unimportant, but they are certainly not as important as the tyranny of history and geopolitics in determining China's grand strategic behaviour. However, to simply project historical grand strategic culture into the contemporary Chinese polity risks being ahistorical. Furthermore, if no Chinese leadership group in history could escape the Chineseness of its grand strategy, how do we expect possible democratic changes to affect China's grand strategic outlook?

There is also the question of China and the contemporary international system. The suggestion that China's incorporation and socialization into the Westphalian international system in the last 160 years matters little in altering or reformulating China's strategic culture is problematic. If the modern concept of state sovereignty and territoriality, the legitimate use of force by the state, the functions of war and diplomacy and the conception of an international order, have not intervened to significantly modify China's grand strategy, then how relevant is our encouraging China to accept changing norms of an international society moving towards a post-Westphalian constitution?

The Realist analytical framework, adopted by Swaine and Tellis, is also susceptible to constructivist critiques. The key variables identified by Swaine and Tellis, such as geopolitical vulnerability, state capabilities, and conception of power and its function and structural distribution of power, are after all subject to interpretations of the agent concerned in different historical periods, and from its own perspective. How do different interpretations by different agents then alter China's grand strategy? These are among the questions that are not addressed in the book, but are likely to be asked by those who are reading the book.

Anticipating China has never been easy and has often proven a hazardous enterprise. Whether the maturation of China as a great power will inevitably lead to "a power transition at the core of the global system" (p. 183) is sure to invoke further debates. Swaine and Tellis's book makes a unique contribution, particularly at a time when China's international relations community and policy establishment are in search of China's grand strategy in the post-Cold War international context. Even more importantly, Swaine and Tellis have opened a wider space for discussion of the idea of history in strategic and security studies, and more broadly in international relations.

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