

***New Zealand's Geopolitics and the US-China Competition.* By Reuben Steff. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. Hardcover: 352pp.**

Strictly speaking, this is not a book about Southeast Asia; it is primarily about New Zealand (and for a New Zealand audience) and how it has responded to the great power confrontation unfolding within and around the Indo-Pacific. Still, it offers useful insights into how security is conceptualized and how regions such as Southeast Asia are attempting to remain prosperous and free.

Its central focus is US-China rivalry, which Reuben Steff argues began in the early 2010s with China's desire to create a sphere of influence and its military modernization, and with the United States' responses to these developments (pp. 138–40). According to Steff, China's goal is to ultimately secure control of the South China Sea and all three "island chains" (pp. 151–54). Through military consolidation and the extension of its influence, Beijing seeks to "project force outward across the Pacific" and exploit the natural resources within the maritime area (p. 153).

Quoting Kenneth Waltz, Steff holds the view that in any international environment, "conflict, sometimes leading to war, is bound to occur" (p. 23). Almost nothing is said about cooperating states working towards mutual benefits because, as Steff puts it, "states can and do co-operate", but they "must ultimately rely on themselves for security" (p. 22). Steff's view is essentially that the United States is good but flawed, and China is bad but increasingly powerful. He notes the 2017 US National Security Strategy's framing of great power competition as "between those who favour repressive systems and those who favour open societies" (p. 141).

Of course, Southeast Asia differs from New Zealand, and solutions that work for Wellington in managing the superpower rivalry do not necessarily work in Southeast Asia. Still, Steff's main thesis is that all Indo-Pacific states need to prepare for the consequences of this great-power competition and adopt a coherent, comprehensive strategy to address it.

Although Southeast Asia is not the book's main theme, it plays a significant role in the narrative: sometimes as a pawn, as in the 1950s and 1960s, when US intervention was justified in terms of the domino theory and attempts to "roll back" communist influence; sometimes as a subregion with a clear role as the nexus or gateway between the Pacific and Indian Oceans; and sometimes as an area susceptible to China's influence—for ill, as Steff sees it.

The narrative does cover individual Southeast Asian states. For Steff, the Philippines, a US treaty ally, will play a key role in any conflict over Taiwan. Singapore is presented as a critical component of the United States' regional power because it allows the US Navy access to its naval facilities, enabling the city-state to "punch above its weight" (p. 33). Other Southeast Asian states are discussed in terms of their role in ensuring (or otherwise) regional stability, rather than for their support for the United States or China specifically. Because Steff regards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as lacking depth (p. 24), he spends little time discussing the organization itself. For him, the ability to exert military power is paramount. Since ASEAN is not a military pact, he is (perhaps overly) dismissive of its role.

This book's strengths lie in the meticulous detail with which it charts China's rise and New Zealand's approach to its own security. Of the book's nine chapters, non-New Zealanders would likely find most interest in Chapter Two, which focuses on the book's "realism" construct, which is useful for those new to the theory, and Chapter Five, which traces the history of US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific region. This material is important, less for direct policy relevance than for insights into how small states think about strategic uncertainty.

However, the book has three main weaknesses. The first is the lack of recognition of alternative ways of thinking about security. In Steff's formulation, smaller states have a binary choice: accept China's ambition for dominance or resist it. Neither, in the abstract, is palatable for most countries. But other analytical perspectives offer alternative approaches. Indeed, Steff's "realism" is not the only legitimate perspective. Interdependence theorists would argue that states need to work towards non-zero-sum approaches, in which cooperation is more profitable than conflict or acquiescence. Such thinking, rather than overt realism, could be more usefully applied to ASEAN's approach to future relations with China.

The second problem is an editing issue. Facts, data and insights are included, it seems to this reviewer, purely to demonstrate that the research has been done. Considerable space could have been saved by rigorous editing to remove extraneous material not directly related to the topic.

A bigger question is its relevance. Published in late 2024, it may be dismissed as already outdated. The actions of the second Trump administration could lead to the conclusion that, instead of more intense US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific, the trend

in world politics is towards great powers (explicitly or implicitly) transforming the globe into spheres of influence. If that is the case, it would suggest that Washington could concede to China's claims of influence in the Indo-Pacific. Alternatively, and more likely, world politics is increasingly revolving around spheres of functional cooperation, with bilateral cooperation primarily determined by the needs of the moment.

Overall, this book is for readers interested in perspectives that highlight major themes in regional and international relations. It could also serve as a springboard for thinking about a different geostrategic future.

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