

BOOK REVIEWS

***Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World.* By Joshua Kurlantzick. Yale University Press, 2007. Hardcover: 306pp.**

***The Dragon Looks South: China and Southeast Asia in the New Century.* By Bronson Percival. Praeger Security International, 2007. Hardcover: 200pp.**

The books under review are the latest entrants in what is becoming an impressive list of book-length studies dealing with the topic of China's recent rising influence in Asia and its implications for the United States. Both books deal heavily with the situation in Southeast Asia. The Percival study does so explicitly while the Kurlantzick book, despite its stated global scope, devotes about half of its discussion to Southeast Asia. China's rise seems likely to remain a hot topic in international affairs and both of these books have numerous insights and strengths that recommend them to a wide audience.

A common refrain in media coverage and several recent scholarly assessments is that China's rapid rise is creating a new order in Asia with China at the centre that coincides with, and takes advantage of, a widely perceived decline in America's leadership position in Asia. The Kurlantzick book conforms strongly to this view, emphasizing the strengths of China's soft power. He defines China's soft power very broadly to include all aspects of Chinese international influence other than the military, and he depicts an array of US weaknesses under the broad rubric of soft power. Kurlantzick views the implications of this situation with considerable concern and some alarm.

Percival's study is more balanced in assessing both the strengths and limitations of China's rise in Southeast Asia, and the strengths and

limitations of the United States and its position in Southeast Asia. His analysis adds an important argument that China's rise in Southeast Asia actually has little negative impact on core US interests in the region. He therefore is not seriously concerned that China's rise has affected or will likely affect negatively what he sees on balance as a continuing strong US position in Southeast Asia.

Like many other authors who emphasize the power and strength of China's new diplomacy in recent years, both authors portray Chinese leaders as increasingly confident as they stride the international stage in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the early years of the twenty-first century. Their analysis shows little sympathy with those specialists who stress the fragility of China's leadership as it deals defensively with world problems that could severely impact China's authoritarian political order. Nor do they agree with some US policymakers and other analysts who think that the US government has been taking important and effective actions that have strengthened a security and policy environment in Asian and world affairs that has influenced, and to some degree compelled, China's rise to follow constructive paths that accord more with international norms supported by the United States.

The analytical and writing style of the two authors is notably different. Kurlantzick musters data, analysis and a wide range of anecdotes of his personal experiences as a journalist in Southeast Asia and elsewhere to make an argument that what he calls China's charm offensive is fundamentally changing the order in Southeast Asia and arguably the world to the detriment of US interests. The organization of the chapters is clear and the writing is interesting and often entertaining. The book seems designed to appeal to a large audience, impressing them with vivid examples of China's effectiveness and influence, and US ineffectiveness and decline.

Specialists and scholars may be put off by the lack of precision in the analysis. The book seems weak in defining and measuring the various elements of the author's broad view of China's soft power. Following lines of argument in the book is complicated by the frequent use of anecdotes. The data used sometimes is of questionable reliability. Notably, the author appears to exaggerate China's role as an international aid giver.

By contrast, Percival shows the kind of clarity and precision in analysis seen in the best government reports. He is determined to provide the reader with a clear view of what China has been doing in Southeast Asia in recent years, the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese efforts, how well or badly the Chinese efforts conform

to the interests of Southeast Asian governments and other concerned powers, and what all this means for the United States and its position in the region. The organization and scope of the study are clear and comprehensive. The writing is cogent and contains useful summations that aid the reader in following the assessments.

Percival's major findings and arguments flow from and do not drive his assessments of the various components of China's strategy in Southeast Asia. His review of these components provides important insights on why specialists and other readers need to be wary of trade, and especially aid and investment, data that can make China's influence seem more important than it actually is. His assessment of various limitations seen in prevailing US "schools of thought" about China's rise is sobering and seems justified. His careful review of what is reliably known and less reliable in our knowledge of China's actions in Southeast Asia provides an important foundation for later work in this field. His critique of the use of the concept of soft power in assessing China's rise seems particularly relevant in reviewing the Kurlantzick book.

In their respective chapters on the implications for the United States, Kurlantzick argues for immediate and stronger US government efforts in public diplomacy and image building. Percival argues that American planners first need to have a clearer idea of what they want in Southeast Asia and what their priorities are before they begin programmes to improve the US image or take other actions in the region.