

Book Review

Ian Storey, *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China: The Search for Security*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, 362pp. + xv.

One of the key issues occupying the attention of scholars of International Relations and Asian Security in the 21st century is the astounding rise of China as a great power. Against this backdrop, there have been numerous studies focusing on the sources, manifestations and consequences of Chinese growing power in the international system. Many of these studies have sought to examine the perceptions and responses of other states – particularly the smaller countries along China’s periphery – *vis-à-vis* Beijing’s growing economic and military might. Given Southeast Asia’s geographical proximity as well as its close historical and socioeconomic ties with the Asian giant, it is not surprising that a large number of articles and books have chosen to focus on the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), attempting to address how and why these smaller states have reacted to China’s growing power the way they have.

The book under review, which is about China’s evolving relationships with eleven Southeast Asian states (the ten ASEAN countries and East Timor) since 1949, is the latest and a welcome addition to the existing body of literatures. As highlighted by its subtitle, the book focuses primarily on the security dimension of Southeast Asia-China relations, although it also covers the political and economic interactions between the two sides. The author justifies his focus by noting that “the security implications of China’s rising power has been a constant preoccupation for the countries of Southeast Asia.” (p. 2)

Storey’s book makes important contributions to the scholarship on Southeast Asia-China relations and Asian security, in at least three major areas.

First, this well-researched book provides a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the development of Sino-Southeast Asian relations as an instance of asymmetric power relations in the contemporary interstate system. While there is no shortage of work on this phenomenon, few have approached the subject as thorough and as painstakingly as Storey did in this volume (exceptions include Bronson Percival’s 2007 *The Dragon Looks South*). Storey’s book is comprehensive not only in terms of its scope (security as well as political and economic interactions, as noted), but also in terms of time

span (both Cold War and post-Cold War periods) and geographical spread (all 11 Southeast Asian states).

It is systematic in its analysis and presentation. In trying to scrutinize the dynamics of Sino-Southeast Asian relations in an orderly manner, the author has chosen to firstly, trace the evolution of the asymmetric relations at the regional level (the focus of Part I), before moving onto analyzing the respective bilateral ties between China and each of the 11 smaller states (Parts II and III). The first part, which consists of three chapters, offers a chronological overview of the development of China-Southeast Asian relations since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949 until October 2010. The chapters show how the relations have been transformed from one plagued by mutual aversion during much of the Cold War period chiefly due to ideological differences and the "overseas Chinese" problem (Chapter 1), to one characterized by "engagement and hedging" in the 1990s (Chapter 2) and "charm offensive" in the first decade of the 21st century (Chapter 3). In these pages, Storey systematically analyzes how China's carefully calculated moves along with Southeast Asian states' responses and reappraisal in the light of a series of "game changing" processes since the early 1990s – such as the end of the Cold War, the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998, the growing intra-regional trade, the proliferation of multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific, and the perceived US' preoccupation with its "war on terror" post-September 11 – have led to the transformation *and* institutionalization of relations between China and ASEAN as a regional grouping over the past two decades. Towards the end of Part I, the author provides a brief analysis on how the friction in the South China Sea since 2007 has affected the relations.

The discussion on these regional dynamics offers useful macro insights to better analyze the bilateral interactions between China and the smaller Southeast Asian countries, which are the focus of Parts II and III of the book. The second part consists of five chapters (Chapters 4-8), which details the PRC's relations with each of the five mainland Southeast Asian states, namely, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma/Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. The third part (Chapters 9-14) completes the circle by looking into China's ties with each of the six maritime Southeast Asian countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Brunei, and East Timor.

This brings us to the second contribution of Storey's book. That is, by focusing on bilateralism and by devoting a chapter-length analysis to each of the bilateral ties, the book helps to fill a gap in the exiting literatures, which, by and large, have tended to study Sino-Southeast Asian relations on a regional- or ASEAN-wide basis. While the regional approach has the virtue of underscoring certain common characteristics and overarching concerns shared by most or all of the smaller states, it nonetheless has its own limitations. For

instance, it may leave the incorrect impression that there is a “common” or “united” policy among the Southeast Asian states vis-à-vis China. It may also obscure the nuanced approaches and perceptions held by the smaller states toward the rising power.

In contrast, focusing on each of the bilateral interactions between China and individual Southeast Asian states – an approach adopted by Storey – not only allows a more refined way of highlighting the distinctive patterns of each of the bilateral ties (ranging, for instance, from cyclical tensions, special relations to instrumental deference), but it also enables the task of comparing the similarities and differences across the smaller states’ policies toward certain aspects of Sino-Southeast Asian ties in a sharper manner. Storey himself has observed that, despite the growth of multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific, “bilateral interaction has been the most important facet of inter-state relations.” (p. 1)

The author’s detailed and fascinating analyses in each of the country-based chapters duly highlight how different Southeast Asian states had perceived and reacted to some issues in subtly different ways. These include: the legacies of their historical ties with China, the geopolitical meanings of an increasingly mighty PRC, the impact of China’s economic rise, the preferred approach to “manage” the giant-next-door, as well as the role of balance of power and regional multilateral institutions. Although the author may not have dealt with each of these issues in each of the country chapters, his focus on bilateral dynamics has provided valuable insights as to how and why the smaller states have come to cope with their giant northern neighbour the way they have.

The third contribution of the book is that, it has unequivocally identified a range of key causal factors shaping the smaller states’ policies toward the rising power. The author identifies his explanatory variables at the outset by stating that: “In examining state responses to the PRC, account is taken of external stimuli as well as the influence of domestic political and economic factors.” (p. 2) Throughout the country chapters in the book, the author highlights and analyzes how a variety of external and domestic factors have driven the Southeast Asian states’ policies. In his final analysis, Storey, a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), concludes that “each of the 11 countries took a different path in their relations with China”, because of “an eclectic mix of elite perceptions, state ideology, geography, security concerns, economic aspirations and responses to changes in the geographical environment.” (p. 286)

Future studies could build on Storey’s work to further explore – on comparative basis – how external and internal factors have interacted to shape the individual Southeast Asian countries’ *perceptions* of China, their *prioritizations* of “national” interests and policy instruments, and

their eventual *decisions vis-à-vis* Beijing. Comparing the differences and similarities across the states' responses will highlight a range of themes that are of crucial policy importance. They are, *inter alia*, the smaller states' relative perceptivity about China's charm diplomacy and economic statecraft, their respective views on the efficacy of engagement policy, their individual stance about the instrumentality of US presence, their preferred approach to manage the Spratlys disputes, etc. These are all crucial policy questions for analysts and policymakers, not least because of the recent developments in the South China Sea. The convergence and divergence of the Southeast Asian states' views on these issues will not only affect the states' respective relations with the major powers, they will also have important bearings on regional institutional building and regional order.

My main disagreement with the book is its conceptualization and operationalization of the term "hedging". As a matter of fact, Storey is probably one of the earliest to use the term to describe Southeast Asian states' strategic responses toward China, along with C.P. Chung (2002 & 2004), but before Evelyn Goh (2005 & 2006), C.C. Kuik (2008 & 2010), and John Ciorciari (2009). In a chapter analyzing Singapore's China policy in a book titled *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality* (co-edited by him and Herbert Yee), Storey (2002: 219) describes the ASEAN states' responses as "a hedging policy" that is "designed to maintain the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region and provide a limited deterrence against the PRC." In the present book, Storey deploys the term in various places. For instance, on page 2, he refers hedging as policies that are aimed at "safeguarding against a more assertive or even aggressive China". Elsewhere, on page 47, he uses the term as "a prudent measure of strategic insurance should China fail to respond positively to Southeast Asia overtures". On page 30, he writes that "in an uncertain strategic environment, the United States' military presence underpins regional stability by acting as a counterweight to a rising China. By hedging, the ASEAN states could keep their strategic options open against the possibility of a future security threat from the PRC." Along the same line, he notes that the states "hedged by actively supporting a continued U.S. military presence and, in some cases, strengthened their air and naval forces." (p. 62)

These conceptions and operationalizations of hedging are correct but incomplete, for four reasons: (i) the conceptions did not fully reflect the two-pronged nature of the behaviour – hedging is not a single-directional act of safeguarding against certain dangers, but an act that entails two sets of *opposite and counteractive approaches* aimed at minimizing all perceived risks while simultaneously still trying to maximize all possible benefits; (ii) the conceptions did not specify how hedging is distinguishable from and related to other forms of state strategies, such as "balancing" and

“bandwagoning” as discussed on page 47 – is hedging “partially-balancing”, “partially-bandwagoning”, and/or somewhere in between the full-fledged version of the two strategies? (iii) in terms of operationalization, one can argue that *the goals* of the smaller states’ hedging behaviour are not necessarily just to safeguard against the risk of an aggressive China, but rather to safeguard against *multiple and all potential risks* that may stem from the problem of uncertainties in the international system – these include, but not limited to: the strategic risks of a retreating US as the key provider of regional security, the political and military risks of entrapment, the economic risks of being excluded from a huge market, the economic and political risks of becoming too dependent on a certain actor, as well as the long-term geopolitical risks of antagonizing a neighbouring giant; and (iv) along the same line of reasoning, one can also argue that *the means* of hedging are not confined to military tools of statecraft (US military presence and the states’ own armament), but also include non-military statecraft like multilateral institutions, geopolitical coalitions, economic partnerships, etc. Different conceptions of the term would lead analysts to focus on different variables in describing and explaining the smaller states’ hedging behaviour.

These notwithstanding, *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China* should be recognized as an important and thoughtful work. It should be an essential reading for everyone who wishes to have a better understanding of the dynamics of Southeast Asia-China relations. This book, along with Storey’s earlier scholarly writings and policy analyses, has established him as one of the leading authorities on the subject matter.

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