

4-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Singh, Gunjan (2015) "How will China shape the Global and Regional Order?," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 6: No. 2, Article 5.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1242

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol6/iss2/5>

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How will China shape the Global and Regional Order?

Review Essay by Gunjan Singh, Research Assistant, Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, Delhi Cantt, gunjsingh@gmail.com

Xiaoming Huang and Robert G. Patnam. (Eds.). *China and the International System: Becoming a world power*. New York and London: Routledge, 2013

Yong Wook Lee and Key-young Son, (Eds.). *China's Rise and Regional Integration in East Asia: Hegemony or community?* New York and London: Routledge, 2014

The rise of China has given birth to a slew of literature in international relations. This literature attempts to understand and explain the way China will behave once it has achieved the position it wants. The country's reform and "opening up"—an approach China adopted in 1980. This policy was adopted under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Under the opening up and reform policy adopted by China, the Chinese economy was opened to the outside investment. In addition to this a number of private sector industries were also encouraged. This policy of reform and opening up has completely transformed the Chinese economy and, as a result, China's place in the international world order. Today, China is a dominant international player, holding a crucial position in the international order. However, China, as a new entrant to the existing global order, is perceived to be one which may become a challenger rather than a conformer to the present international order. China is also seen as a country which will be keen to change the existing system in order to suit its own needs and demands, especially when it comes to issues of climate change and currency debates. The current world super power, the United States, is heavily integrated with the Chinese economy, as is almost every other country in the world today. Both these books attempt to explain and discuss how China will seek to serve its own interests as it becomes an equal player in the international sphere and how, despite fears, China will likely seek to integrate itself within—and not challenge outright—existing world order, to the benefit of itself and others. How China will behave in the future both globally and regionally will be an essential point in the overall international discourse (though most of the literature related to this subject still regards China as a regional power and not a global power).

China as a global power

China and the International System: becoming a world power

The United States has been the sole world superpower for almost 20 years—since the end of the Cold War. Today, China is challenging the international dominance of the United States even as it remains to be seen precisely how China will fit among world players. This phenomenon has been aptly summarized by Huang and Patman in *China and the International System: becoming a world power*. They argue, "The relationship between China and the international system is . . . often framed in terms of whether China will challenge, adjust to, or integrate into the international system, and how the international system shall constrain, engage, or accept China" (p. 1). In the same text, Canrong Jin discusses not only China's own perception of itself—particularly vis-à-vis being perceived as a threat to the dominance of other superpowers—but also China's perception of the strategies of other international players and argues that "the understanding of the Chinese people of the outside world also reflects their complex mindset. Surviving at the bottom or margins of the system for too long, China wishes to be recognized in its self-salvation and modern development. At

the same time, it is constantly wary of the intentions of other major powers with regard to China and of being forced to take on excessive international ‘responsibilities’” (p. 67). Of China’s self-awareness—particularly its cognizance of the exiting world order—Chan, Lee and Chan, argue, “[China] strives to learn and adjust to outside constraints rather than to redesign or reconstruct the existing system, much less to overthrow it” (p. 105). Regardless of how the world perceives China’s actions, Peter E. Robertson asserts that “what is [most] certain is that Chinese economic growth has been good for the Chinese, with massive reductions in poverty, and raising living standards” (p. 153). According to Xiaoming Hunag, in fact, China is not so interested in disturbing world order, as is commonly feared. Hunag claims, “As Chinese power and interests continue to grow, and its position in the international system continues to rise, it has increasingly found that its interests and stakes in the international system share and converge with those leading the existing structure and institutions” (p. 207).

Most of the arguments made by the authors in this text suggest that China will not counter or directly challenge the existing international system—a fear that the international community has expressed particularly as China grows more influential both economically and militarily. Despite these fears, the Chinese government has shown that it has no intention of challenging the existing system; it is more than happy and comfortable being a part of the system. For example, China was happy to change its domestic norms and rules in order to become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). In addition, China has also worked on its domestic discourse, changing it from “peaceful rise” to “peaceful development” in order to appease the fears of the international community regarding China’s rising power. China has also been an active member with regard to United Nations peace keeping and other efforts. It is one of the largest contributor to these efforts, in fact. This is another example which shows that China is keen to be an active member of the existing system. Furthermore, what sustains Chinese growth is international peace and stability. As such, it is in China’s own best interest to maintain international peace—a point that is hardly lost on China.

In terms of economic strength, what keeps the Chinese economy going and fuelled is the level of international trade. Today, China is one of the largest trading partners of almost all the countries in the world. Any kind of international disturbance would greatly affect its trading status. This in turn would affect the status of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), domestically. Indeed, if the government does not manage to maintain the existing economic growth levels, it may lead to an increase in the level of discontent among the Chinese people,¹ which the CCP would be last to want. Finally, Chinese economic growth is what fuels its military development. Though there is no denying that the Chinese military has seen high levels of growth in the last 20 years, any slowdown on the economic front would affect military growth as well, something else China would not desire.² As such, China’s own best interests include not overturning the apple cart too enthusiastically.

China as a regional power

China’s Rise and Regional Integration in East Asia: Hegemony or community?

Most of the discussion with regard to China as an emerging regional power is primarily centered on China’s existing and developing relationship with the United States. Three of

¹ China is currently facing high number of domestic protests and problems. If the government is not able to sustain the economic growth it may further complicate the domestic situation and further affect the CCP.

² The authors point out that it would do the other nations of the world some good to realize that despite relatively high rates of growth, the Chinese military is still at a nascent level and is not in a condition to get into any global or regional conflicts.

China's neighbors also share highly integrated relationships with United States; Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan all share very good and strong diplomatic and military relationships with the United States, which has led to the continued presence of the United States military within close proximity to China. This proximity makes China highly uncomfortable, as the US military presence within the region is generally perceived by Beijing as a means of implicitly controlling China and restricting its rise. The book *China's Rise and Regional Integration in East Asia: Hegemony or community?* attempts to look at this very factor.

While discussing ways to maintain stability in the region, Quansheng Zhao asserts that the region must work together with the United States in order to maintain optimal and mutually beneficial relationships. He argues, "It is absolutely clear that the United States and China must work together with other regional key players such as Japan, Russia, the two Koreas, ASEAN, and India" (p. 37). In fact, he says, it is imperative that no relationships become exclusionary or bind one or two regional powers, as such relationships preclude wider cooperation. For example, while discussing the relationship between China and South Korea, Jung-Nam Lee concludes that "the emergence of the G2 era³ functions as a hindrance in establishing the strategic cooperative partnership between South Korea and China" (p. 71). One of the most prominent assertions made in this book is by Xiaoming Zhang. He argues simply that if collaborative and authentically cooperative approaches are maintained, there is no way for China to loom as a "threat" to its collaborate partners. He says, "The task for China is to deal with its neighbors in an appropriate and creative way, such that its neighbours are assured that China's rise will not come at their expense" (p. 155).

These arguments clearly highlight the fact that the rise of China has greatly affected the way the regional countries perceive China. Today, all regional countries greatly benefit from China's increased the trading relations; however, it is China's growing military strength that worries them, as most of the countries in the region still have disputed territorial issues to settle with China, and the increasing disparity in the military terms between China and its neighbors leads neighboring nations to worry that China may decide to take unilateral action in order to resolve existing disputes. Thus, China's neighbors are simultaneously cautious about getting too economically involved with China. It is precisely this caution that pushes the countries in the region to get closer to the United States. There is a genuine attempt by China's neighbors to cooperate with the United States in order to somehow protect themselves against any hypothetical unilateral action undertaken by China. Ironically, it is this very act—forging close relations with the US—that greatly affects regional nations' actual relationship with China, as Beijing views their behavior as an attempt to prevent or curtail China's legitimate role in the East Asian Region. (Notably missing from the text in this discussion of perceptions and intentions is a detailed analysis of the developments with respect to China and Taiwan, specifically, given their particular history. How China and Taiwan decide to resolve their ongoing problems will be a very crucial development with respect to the East Asian Region.)

Conclusion

Looking at the debate surrounding the rise of China today, one can conclude that China today is some part global power and some part regional power. There are areas both in the global domain and regional domain which are still outside the control and purview of the Chinese interests. It is for this reason that China is not too keen on being dragged in international conflicts like the one surrounding North Korea, for example. Indeed, in spite of

³ G2 or Group of 2 refers to the United States and China. With the economic rise of China the United States wants it to play ever increasing role in the international system and undertake more leadership roles.

all its assertiveness, China has not been able to change the way North Korea functions or behaves, thus, highlighting the limit of Chinese regional influence. The eagerness that China showed towards joining the international organizations and bodies like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) only highlights the fact that China is keen to become a part of the existing global system. At the same time, with respect to the regional order, China is attempting to use its newfound economic and military strength in order to gain a degree of respect and influence, one that it feels it is due.

One weakness of the texts includes the fact that a discussion on South Asia or India is missing. The relationship between China and India and China and South Asia needs to be discussed and explored in detail in order to understand the evolution of the new world order. In addition, there is also a lack of discussion with respect to China and Latin America. The books also lack a full discussion with respect to the changing dynamics of the China-Russia relationship. In fact, both books tend to assume that the primary relationship that will be greatly affected by a rising China will be the one it shares with the United States, which ultimately limits their scope. Finally, the books also fail to discuss the existing domestic situations of China, which play a crucial role in directing the way the Chinese government functions and formulates its regional and global policies. The effects that growing Chinese nationalism and media debates have on the government agenda must also be given more in-depth analysis. China is no longer a simple authoritarian state and has undergone major transition since its adoption of economic reforms under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. With the openness that was introduced in the economic sphere, a number of actors today play a crucial role in the way the Chinese government functions. China may still be a one party state, but there are a number of external factors that influence the party when it comes to shaping its foreign and regional policies. Indeed, both books under review do help readers put the rise of China into perspective at both global and regional levels. The books can also be regarded as highly useful to scholars and students, as they do provide great deal of information and data.