Animal Cunning, But on Which Side?

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

As China's relations with most of its southern neighbors deteriorate, there is a crying need for a detailed, nuanced study to explain why. The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century, edited by Donald K. Emmerson and published by Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2020, 386 pages, $29.29 (Paperback)

AS CHINA'S RELATIONS with most of its southern neighbors deteriorate, there is a crying need for a detailed, nuanced study to explain why. The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century, edited by Donald K. Emmerson, is the book we have been waiting for. Its diverse points of view, depth of research and sophistication of analysis make it a book essential reading.

The editor Donald K. Emmerson, a leading Southeast Asia scholar, chose the title not just to highlight the obvious asymmetry of China and its small neighbors. It is meant to be aspirational, reflecting Southeast Asian folklore in which the pint-sized but smart mouse deer “Sang Kancil” manages to trap the mighty but dumb dragon. Twelve well-researched chapters in this volume provide a host of new information and analysis showing the complexity of the relationship, but they do not add up to the hopeful narrative hinted at by the title.

Putting together a collection of essays on a vast subject is always a challenge, and especially one giving a bird’s eye view of the vast region. Editors of such a compendium often resolve the problem of thematic unity by asking contributors to answer the same series of questions from different perspectives. Emmerson has avoided that traditional approach by inviting multiple bird’s eye views of China’s relations with Southeast Asian countries. With a few exceptions, the approach works remarkably well, illuminating many sides of a Rubik’s cube of relations.

The chapters reflect different shades of opinion on Chinese motivation, its policies and assessments of the future. The weakness that marks some essays is their historical approach and single-minded reliance on statistics to make political points.

The strength of the book is in Emmerson’s own overview of Chinese relations with its neighbors, and his chapter on China’s strategy in the South China Sea. His brilliant enumeration of the eight-fold tactics employed by Beijing to turn the South China Sea into a Chinese lake will serve as a field guide to all students of this maritime dispute. Beijing’s long-range planning and shrewdness outlined in this chapter ironically dashes the hope that the dumb dragon will stumble before the Southeast Asian deer.

Thomas Fingar moves away from geopolitical explanation to a more down-to-earth approach involving regime security. He attributes Beijing’s aggressiveness in Southeast Asia to its growing concerns about domestic security and its desire to address those concerns by playing the nationalism card.

Mingjiang Li, in his fascinating essay “Southeast Asia through Chinese eyes,” shows the domestic background to China’s hardline position on the South China Sea. As he says, “A consensus situation have emerged in China that it is time for toughness in the defense of threatened Chinese interests.”

Other chapters show the region’s ambivalent relations with China — great dependence combined with anxiety. Surveying public opinion in the region, some authors conclude that “China’s authoritarian model remains controversial,” and despite some erosion in its influence, “the United States will not be eclipsed in its soft power if it can rescue its presently dysfunctional system and offer an alternative to economic reliance on China.”

Anne Booth, on the other hand, digs deep into China’s economic relations with ASEAN to debunk the theory that China’s rise was at the expense of the region. While some fear the future and lean towards the Indo-Pacific, she says, others might “seek even closer ties to Chinese markets, investors, and funds.”

Daniel O’Neill’s essay, “Who Wins in China’s ‘Win-Win’ with Cambodia,” deconstructs the popular Chinese phrase to show the cast of unsavory characters who are the real winners of the China connection. His analysis could be a model for studying the winners in other Southeast Asian countries. Yohanes Sulaiman offers a corrective to the general perception of Indonesia’s antagonistic relations with China. Loathe to antagonize China, Jakarta wants to have “a thousand friends and no enemies.” “That is not a foreign policy,” Yohanes notes. “It is wishful thinking.”

This and other chapters give a plethora of new information and insightful analysis showing known events in a new light.

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John D. Ciciori makes a persuasive argument that what he calls the decision by the northern tier of ASEAN — Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar — to accept heightened Chinese influence has more than geographical proximity as a factor. It also reflects what he terms their “vulnerable distance” from other nodes of power — especially the US. This political and ideological distance enabling China to gain influence was, though, the inevitable consequence of the authoritarian and repressive approach chosen by many Southeast Asian countries for their domestic politics. Their greater “vulnerability to Chinese influence” was in many ways of their own making. But, for American policymakers, Southeast Asia was a sideshow. Specific agendas of interest groups and the US proclivity to use blunt instruments and hortatory messages overwhelmed sober policymaking.

In the end, Ciciori says, “Beijing’s interest in the South China Sea is firm and long-term, in contrast to the doubts of Americans about confronting China over ‘a bunch of rocks’ on the other side of the world.”

The chapter by the doyen of Myanmar scholars, David I. Steinberg, on the country’s relations with the giant neighbor to the north is a master class: judicious, steeped in history, reflective of the wisdom gained over multiple decades. His astute observations about China’s relations with Myanmar is to a large degree applicable to most of mainland Southeast Asia. “China’s imposing presence did not make the Burmese feel subservient; it made them apprehensive,” he notes. “At the same time, on the Chinese side, it was associated with yet another illusion — Chinese overconfidence.” Contributing to that attitude were Burma’s history as a tributary state; China’s pride in its own pre-modern prominence, in its current rise, and in the ostensible superiority of Chinese culture; along with a corresponding disdain for seemingly inferior Southeast Asian cultures.

Asymmetry of power and diplomatic skill between China and its neighbors detailed in this region means that many of them appear like deer in the headlights, frozen in fear, not like the cunning and agile mouse deer of Southeast Asian fables, ready to fell the dragon in a trap.

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