A Geopolitical Chess Match

Asia's Quest for Balance: China's Rise and Balancing in the Indo-Pacific

Edited by Jeff M. Smith
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UNDER A BLAZING Indian sun, US President Donald J. Trump, a veteran of political rallies, beamed at the mother of all rallies before him. Some 130,000 screaming Indians overflowing the world’s largest cricket stadium in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s hometown of Ahmedabad greeted the American guest. If China, itself used to mega-rallies in Tiananmen Square, wanted a visual display of India’s balancing act vis-à-vis Beijing, this certainly was one. An ebullient Trump promised India eternal love: “America will always be a faithful and loyal friend to the Indian people.”

In the torrent of warm words exchanged during the February extravaganza, the word China — the main reason for the newfound love between the US and India — was missing. This timely volume of essays edited by Jeff M. Smith looks at the various shades of balancing, from engagement to bandwagoning, or virtually aligning with China’s power — from bandwagoning, or virtually aligning with China, to publicly embrace it. Although China’s actual military threat might still be limited, it is unforeseen to countries that show signs of disloyalty. This means there are not many takers for the “free and open” Indo-Pacific pact. Against this general lack of enthusiasm, the raucous rally for a safer course than either surrendering or openly aligning with the US.

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Taking extensive external balancing. From dramatic improvement in US-Vietnam bilateral relations (in March, a second US aircraft carrier visited Vietnam), Vietnam has strengthened relations with Japan, India, Australia and other major Asian countries. But worry about China’s response led Vietnam to refrain from supporting America’s freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). Tran Trong Thuy and Ha Anh Tuan also note that despite improvement in relations, including a White House visit by Vietnam’s party secretary, Trump’s transactional approach makes Vietnamese leadership worry about the “possibility that the United States will reach an accommodation with China that will compromise Vietnam’s national interests.”

As China’s assertiveness has grown from 2008 onward, so has Australia’s strategic anxiety about the country. Australia’s decades-old practice of aerial patrolling and surveillance in the South China Sea. Although most of the countries in the region may not so much on the big powers themselves but on the Asian neighbors who are “not merely spectators in a superpower title fight; they are active participants in a geopolitical chess match.”

In the introductory chapters, Smith traces the steps of China’s so-called “peaceful rise” and its transformation into unabashed hegemon. He sets the year 2008 as the turning point when “the luster of China’s ‘peaceful rise’ began to fade, revealing a more assertive, authoritarian, and ambitious country fueled by an undercurrent of restlessness.” Since the 2008 financial crisis — seen by China as marking the end of the American Century — a series of measures has underlined China’s ambitious goal. With Xi Jinping at the helm in 2012, a slew of actions including the building of artificial islands in the South China Sea and the launching of aggressive patrols, China’s profile changed dramatically. China, Xi told the Communist Party elite, must “dare to be frontal against the core interests of the country.”

China’s aggressive new posture put the country’s neighbors in a dilemma about how to respond. The challenge was even more acute when countries were loath to utter the word “balancing” for fear of antagonizing China. Singapore gingerly called on India to play a regional role as a means to produce a “balanced regional order.” More outspoken, Australia’s Malcolm Turnbull asked for “careful diplomacy, balancing” to deal with the rise of China.

In the nine chapters that follow the introductory four, country specialists offer well-documented and nuanced pictures of the countries — from Australia, Myanmar and India to Vietnam — as they grapple with the challenge from China. The book carefully breaks down the various shades of reaction countries have had to China’s power — from bandwagoning, or virtually aligning with China in the hope that it would be treated well, to shades of hedging, from engagement to hostile alliance and containment. Engagement, or deep co-operation aimed at encouraging political and economic liberalization in China, is proposed as a safer course than either surrendering or openly aligning with the US.

Evan A. Laksmana notes that Indonesia’s policy establishment is divided over how to deal with Chinese activities in the Natuna Sea, which overlaps Chinese claims. “Those who stand to benefit from economic co-operation with Beijing are prepared to publicly endorse a growing Chinese sphere of influence at the expense of the United States while downplaying Beijing’s revisionist designs and policies in the South China Sea. Although most of the defense and security establishment are concerned by China’s behavior, he says policy-makers remain ambivalent about taking a position overtly in favor of either China or the US.

Apart from internal balancing where Vietnam is building up its defense forces, especially the navy, to face China, the country has also undertaken a range of external balancing — military acquisition and preparedness — and diplomatic overtures to key neighbors from Vietnam to Australia. While refusing to sign up to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, India offered vocal support to US freedom of navigation operations. Military exercises with the US were ramped up and orders placed for new US military hardware. During the mass rally in Ahmedabad, Trump announced the US$3.4 billion sale of military helicopters to India.

In recent years, Washington has pushed the concept of the Indo-Pacific in place of the Asia-Pacific to balance China. In October 2017, the Trump administration deployed new terminology — a “free and open Indo-Pacific” — as the ideological heart of a new grouping — the rule of law, freedom from coercion, respect for sovereignty and private enterprise and open markets.

While most of the countries in the region may in theory accept the concept, there is reluctance...