The China Challenge

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China's Challenge and International Order Transition: Beyond "Thucydides's Trap." Edited by Huiyun Feng and Kai He. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. 330p. $80.00 cloth.

Taming Sino-American Rivalry. By Richard Ned Lebow and Feng Zhang. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 274p. $99.00 cloth, $29.95 paper.

Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia. By David M. Lampton, Selina Ho, and Cheng-Chwee Kuik. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020. 336p. $29.95 cloth.

China, the UN, and Human Protection: Beliefs, Power, Image. By Rosemary Foot. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 336p. $90.00 cloth, $35.00 paper.

China and the World. Edited by David Shambaugh. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 416p. $99.00 cloth, $27.95 paper.

In the good old days, China routinely offered reassurance to countries, saying that its development would be good for all parties, and the United States reciprocated by saying that a peaceful, stable, prosperous China was good for the world. More recently, however, China speaks routinely about core interests and never yielding a single inch of land passed down from its ancestors, whereas the United States speaks of China as its single most important long-term challenge. The language of reassurance has changed into the language of deterrence; the language of diplomacy has become the language of military confrontation. The turning point in the United States can be dated more or less precisely to an article that appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in March–April 2018 titled "The China Reckoning: How China Defied American Expectations." The article declared that engagement with China had failed to democratize it (though that was not its intended purpose) or to deter China from its desire to challenge US supremacy, at least in East Asia. The authors, Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, were both experienced Asia hands with much Washington experience. Campbell was US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 2009 to 2013. Today, Campbell is "Asia Co-Coordinator" under President Biden. Ely Ratner was deputy national security adviser to Vice President Biden, 2015–17, and is now principal adviser on China matters to General Lloyd Austin, the secretary of defense. The hardening of attitudes in China was matched by the toughening of attitudes in the United States.

Much of the discussion about China in the world today centers on the "rise of China" and the so-called Thucydides's trap, which refers to the increasing likelihood of conflict when one great power is faced with the rise of a rival power. In a widely read op-ed in the *Financial Times*, Graham Allison, the Douglas Dillon Professor of Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, evoked the Thucydides trap to characterize the conflict he saw emerging between China and the United States. Expanding on his thesis in 2017, Allison published a book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Avoid the Thucydides's Trap*? The Thucydides trap, which is really a catchy renaming of A. F. K. Organski's 1958 power transition theory, has stirred widespread discussion and perhaps fueled the notion that China presents a mortal threat to the United States.

Given this context, Huiyun Feng and Kai He's edited book, *China's Challenges and International Order Transition: Beyond the "Thucydides Trap*," is most welcome. One reason the Thucydides trap has become so popular is that it plays well into the China rising–US declining meme that reinforces the optimism of Chinese nationalists and the fears of Americans. It also seems to give a name to the assertive diplomacy of China and the US "pivot" to the Pacific. David Welch, in his contribution to this volume, expands on his 2015 article, "Can the United States and China Avoid a Thucydides Trap?" More than repeat his criticisms of the Thucydides trap, Welch challenges the whole China rising–US declining conceptual framework, noting that China faces enormous environmental

doi:10.1017/S1537592721001882
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

challenges, including water shortages and a rapidly aging population with serious gender imbalances. Although China's GDP has grown rapidly over the past four decades, there are indications that its growth is slowing. Nicholas Lardy has argued that China's failure to implement the market-oriented reforms the party called for in 2013 has curbed the growth of the private sector, the most productive part of the economy (*The State Strikes Back: The End of Economic Reform in China?* 2019), and a recent World Bank report says that China's total factor production has slowed from 2.8% in the 10 years before the global financial crisis to 0.7% in the 2009–18 period (Loren Brandt, John Litwack, Elitza Mileva, Luhang Wang, Yifan Zhang, and Luan Zhao, *China's Productivity Slowdown and Future Growth Potential,* 2020). These reports do not mean that there are not important issues in Sino-US relations but do suggest that one needs to be careful in delineating what those challenges are and how soon the United States may face them.

Other contributions to Feng and He's volume, however, see the US-led order as "crumbling down" (p. 76) and China filling the void. The question T. V. Paul asks is whether or to what degree China will rewrite the rules. It is in this context that he discusses the Tianxia (or "all under heaven") model, which accepts the notion of hierarchy, at least in the Asian region, and thus is a challenge to the Westphalian model of equal, sovereign states The Tianxia model is essentially an updated and perhaps idealized version of China's tributary system. But China's following the Tianxia model seems unlikely, not only because it is hard to imagine it being extended throughout the globe but also because, as we see later, China in the United Nations remains a staunch defender of the Westphalian model.

In their contribution to this volume, Li Mingjiang and Xue Gong argue that Southeast Asia is more complex than the vision that the Tianxia model allows. Looking through the lens of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), they see some states, such as Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos, as being likely to bandwagon with China, enthusiastically embracing China's vision of Belt and Road and accepting China's leadership (along with its considerable investment in their countries). Other states, however, are much more cautious. Myanmar has strong nationalist sentiments, which were reflected in the cancellation of the Myitsone Dam project. The recent coup in Myanmar, for which China apparently bears no responsibility, has nevertheless unleashed another wave of anti-Chinese feeling. Not surprisingly, Vietnam worries about China's strategic goals and its desire to dominate the South China Sea. Such countries are unlikely to embrace a Tianxia model.

In their book, *Taming Sino-American Rivalry*, Richard Ned Lebow and Feng Zhang hope for a cooling of tensions in Sino-US relations, which certainly would be welcome, but many will disagree with some of their assumptions. Contrary to Graham Allison, they argue, "There is no historical evidence to support power transition theory" (p. 15). They also claim that "Western conceptions, notably hegemony and balance of power, are largely alien to China" (p. 23), but then go on to note that the largely stable relations between China, Japan, and Korea in the premodern era were due to the "unquestioned dominance of China" (p. 25)—a statement that sounds remarkably close to hegemony. They also argue that the clash between the United States and China "is more a clash of egos than of interests" (p. 3)—though it seems to me that there are plenty of interests involved, including freedom of navigation, protection of intellectual property rights, and an agreement on the basic rules by which stability in the international order is maintained.

There are two chapters that readers will find quite useful. The first is on "American mistakes," laying out what the authors believe to be errors in US policy: the striving for hegemony, the "pivot," and the snubbing of Chinese efforts to be respected. The second chapter is on Chinese errors. They argue that China's policy toward the United States during the Obama administration was "beset by a dysfunctional decision-making system dominated by parochial but powerful interest groups that focused on narrow, short-term gains rather than broad, long-term gains" (p. 60). There is obviously a lot in that sentence, but rather than unpacking it, the authors leave the readers to ponder what it might mean. In any event, they note China's failure to respond positively to US overtures at the beginning of the Obama administration. They offer two reasons for this lack of response. First, Chinese elites were "deeply suspicious" of America's "strategic intentions" and interpreted the overtures of the Obama administration as a "feint to draw China into excessive global commitments that would exhaust its resources and derail its rise" (p 63). Second, they claim that China succumbed to "triumphalist nationalism," particularly in the wake of the global financial crisis (p. 64). If these were the reasons, and China's sense of superiority in the wake of the financial crisis seems real, then it was tragic. The pivot was the American response, and mutual suspicion has deepened ever since.

Moving from the broad contours of power transitions and Sino-US relations to the nuts and bolts of policy implementation, there is the insightful and readable *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* by David M. Lampton, Selina Ho, and Cheng-Chwee Kuik. They point out that one important reason why China looks favorably on investment in Southeast Asia is to diversify its foreign trade and thus lessen its dependence on the United States. Although the BRI is often thought of in strategic terms, Lampton and his colleagues focus on the question of development. How often do books on China discuss the transcontinental railroad and the way it stirred development in the United States? The importance of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

infrastructure for development is apparent in China's own economic trajectory as roads, trains, airports, and seaports allowed producers to access urban and global markets. The extension of that model abroad seems natural.

In an observation that should catch the attention of policy makers in Washington, Lampton and coauthors argue that the United States has changed its approach to development. In the past, the United States, like contemporary China, viewed infrastructure as the key to development. The United States built the transcontinental railroad and the Eisenhower interstate highway system (and much else) in the belief that infrastructure was fundamental to economic development. In recent years, the United States has approached development through the lens of political institutions, human resources, and norm building (p. 210). Perhaps under President Biden, the United States is returning, at least to some extent, to a view that takes infrastructure as a variable in its own right. In any event, China, it seems, is adopting the old US approach of "build it and they will come." This approach does fit well with China's experience of the last four decades.

The plan is to develop a network of high-speed railroads from Kunming in Yunnan Province to Laos and on to Bangkok. From there, it would go south through peninsular Malaysia to Singapore. An east branch would go through Vietnam, and a western branch would include Cambodia and Myanmar. A series of port projects would then link China and Southeast Asia to the world. An ambitious project, it could spur growth throughout the region. For landlocked Laos, the debt load seems high, but as a senior official explained to Lampton and his coauthors, the development of the rail system seems to be the country's only chance to escape poverty.

Lampton, Ho, and Kuik argue that, although the rail system China is building and planning to build in Southeast Asia is likely to benefit China and the countries it will run through, the negotiations that are ongoing will be complex and difficult. The loans to Malaysia have already had to be renegotiated because of the bribery associated with the original agreements. All the nations of Southeast Asia, as Li Mingjiang and Xue Gong point out in their chapter cited earlier, have different interests, and most hope that the United States will be involved in various ways. BRI does not have to exclude the United States.

Whether China's approach to Southeast Asia succeeds in binding those countries more closely to it depends on its willingness to sustain the costs of investment over an extended period of time (about which significant debates are ongoing in China), its flexibility and skill in negotiating with the governments and interest groups of the region, and the complex domestic politics of the various countries in the region. There is significant room for the United States to be involved, offsetting to some extent China's influence in the area.

At the center of Rosemary Foot's brilliant study of China in the United Nations is a puzzle that is as difficult to understand as it is worth wrestling with. At its core, the United Nations is a liberal institution; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of the essential pillars on which the institution is built (the other being its Westphalian emphasis on state sovereignty). Over the years, the UN has become more liberal. This trend has been a result of tragedy in the world. The genocide in Rwanda, in particular, played a major role in moving the UN to see the responsibility to protect individual citizens from their own governments as an important part of its work. In particular, Secretary-General Kofi Annan "committed himself to the argument that humanitarian disasters represented a threat to international peace and security, that 'another Rwanda' had to be prevented, and that sovereignty had to mean more than the recognition of the sovereign rights of each and every state." The world, he argued, could not stand idly by watching gross violations of human rights; the UN charter meant that we are "more than ever conscious that its aim is to protect individual human beings, not to protect those who abuse them" (p. 136). This concern led, in 2005, to the adoption of the World Summit Outcome Document: paras. 138 and 139 declare that states have a "responsibility to protect their citizens from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" and that the international community should be prepared "to take collective action, on a case by case basis …, as appropriate, should peaceful means be inadequate" (quoted on p. 134). In other words, the UN could, in certain cases, intervene to protect individuals without the permission of the offending country. Over the years this mandate to intervene, known as the "right to protect," or R2P in UN speak, has become stronger, at least at the rhetorical level.

China's approach to global governance is more clearly based on the UN's other pillar, the Westphalian notion of state sovereignty. This approach to international relations emphasizes the equality of states and their sovereignty, which includes their right to oppose outside interference in their internal affairs.

These different approaches lead to different and contending approaches to questions of development and conflict. The UN model emphasizes the linkages between development, security, and human rights, whereas the Chinese approach links development, strong states, and social stability. Human rights all but disappear in the Chinese approach. Although China has wavered in its approach, particularly with regard to Darfur and, to its later regret, in Libya, overall China's strategy has tended to increasingly emphasize state sovereignty and development.

It would seem that the trend lines of China and the UN have been diverging, yet Foot argues, "In many respects, Chinese scholarship and UN thinking have moved closer together" (p. 245). How can this be?

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Part of the answer lies in the relative absence of the United States from the UN. During the Trump administration, US funding became less certain, and it no longer participated in the Human Rights Council (p. 229). But much of the answer lies in China's own actions. Particularly under Xi Jinping, China has become a more active and more confident participant in the UN. It actively takes part in peacekeeping activities, contributing more troops than any other nation (some 27,000 according to Philip Saunders in his chapter in the Shambaugh book, *China and the World*, p. 201, reviewed next), and thus has gained credibility in discussions on when and how such activities are conducted. Moreover, China's financial contributions to the UN have increased rapidly, and China is now the second-largest contributor. As its contributions have increased, so has the presence of its diplomats in UN organizations.

China has also gained greater confidence in its arguments. Even when participating in peacekeeping activities, Beijing reinforces notions that the government in power should be supported. The UN, according to Ambassador Ma Zhaoxu, "should provide constructive assistance…but must respect the sovereignty of the country concerned" (p. 262).

As Foot shows, such arguments appeal to many countries, particularly in Africa, which hosts most of the UN's peacekeeping operations. The notion that strong states and economic development should take precedence often finds a ready reception, particularly in an age in which neoliberal ideology is under siege. At the same time, regional organizations, particularly the African Union, believe that they should take a leading role in resolving conflict. Finally, many countries that contribute troops, including India, support the idea of curtailing UN ambitions (p. 265). It is such factors that have brought the UN and China closer together, despite the UN's apparent embrace of a more liberal stance. This rapprochement will likely be tested as China's violation of the rights of Uighurs in Xinjiang becomes ever more apparent.

Last but not least, David Shambaugh's edited *China and the World* is the most comprehensive of the books under review here. Divided into five sections—historical sources, domestic sources, global interactions, bilateral and regional relationships, and patterns and prospects—this book will be adopted in many courses on China's foreign policy. It begins with two essays, one by Odd Arne Westad and one by Chas W. Freeman, that look at the historical sources of China's foreign policy. The "century of humiliation" is unavoidable in a discussion of Chinese foreign policy, but Westad's brief treatment is refreshing. He argues, correctly in my opinion, that the version of history repeated ad nauseum by the Chinese government—that foreigners humiliated China and the Chinese people for a century before the Communist takeover in 1949—is "not only untrue but also unhelpful for China in finding its place in the world" (p. 32). What Westad objects to is that the century of humiliation narrative suggests that the Chinese were passive victims of foreign aggression, whereas in reality, they used the opportunity of the breakdown of the Qing to do all sorts of things that the imperial state had prevented them from doing: migrating, adopting religion, cooperating with foreigners, and experimenting with new forms of political representation, culture, and gender relations. In other words, the so-called century of humiliation was, at least in part, a century of discovery as Chinese citizens explored all sorts of new activities and relationships before being forced back into the constraints of an authoritarian system.

Except for the century of humiliation, Westad argues that China's imperial past left a legacy and concept of cultural cohesion that reverberate today in a sense of exceptionalism and rationale for dominating a region. He also notes that the PRC has inherited much of its current practices from the Qing, once derided by Chinese nationalists as foreign and decrepit. Overall, this is a short but rich essay that should be a part of every curriculum.

Freeman, like Westad, looks at lessons of the past but spends more time examining Chinese foreign policy under the PRC, particularly under Deng Xiaoping. Stability on China's periphery has been central to China's concerns, but Sino-US confrontation has emerged as the leitmotif of our time. As Freeman puts it, "China's rise has provoked an obsessively hostile American response that is unlikely to be reversed anytime soon" (p. 51). Freeman's essay is pessimistic about the future, and confrontation will be costly: "China now has the capacity to inflict serious pain on the United States and its interests" (p. 56).

In exploring the domestic sources of China's foreign policy, Shambaugh includes a very useful chapter by Suisheng Zhao on the players and institutions that decide China's foreign policy. Much of this chapter is spent on the foreign policy of Xi Jinping. Zhao is certainly correct that Xi has taken a greater interest in foreign affairs than either of his two immediate predecessors (Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao), but one wishes for greater attention to why Xi has done so. Xi's more activist foreign policy has certainly challenged the interests of many countries, including the United States, but it is clearly risky from China's point of view. The arrogance that many countries perceive in China's new activism has brought about an unprecedented pushback that will certainly challenge Xi's notion of the China dream. "Wolf-warrior diplomacy" has brought China's place in global public opinion to a new low, suggesting that the people and institutions in China's foreign policy establishment have been unable to constrain Xi Jinping.

Peter Gries discusses how nationalism and other social influences have shaped Chinese foreign policy. He notes how tightly the Chinese regime has tied its domestic legitimacy to its foreign policy successes (p. 65), a

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seemingly risky strategy. China's touted BRI project, for instance, could go proverbially south if the Chinese public perceives the government as throwing good money after bad, as borrowing countries fail to repay loans or demand to renegotiate the terms of loans after a year of COVID, or as Chinese assertiveness leads countries to build new arms and otherwise undertake security enhancements.

Reading this section, one wonders what sectors of the Chinese polity have demanded such activism and why the government seems to have adopted these demands. One can understand the military demanding larger budgets, but has Xi Jinping and the foreign policy establishment thought whether expanding the military is a good idea? Have others joined them in this push?

Also missing from this section is a chapter on China's new techno-nationalism. We have seen China go from "indigenous innovation" in 2006 to "Made in China 2025." Does China now have the technological base that can enable it to innovate with less interaction with the world's scientific and technical bodies? Has the development of technology reached a point where globalization slows or reverses because of security issues? Who thought that the phone would become an issue in our security concerns? One hopes that such questions will increasingly be integrated into books on China's foreign policy like this one.

Another section looks at China's interactions with the world, starting with Barry Naughton's lucid examination of China's international currency issues. Naughton explores China's wavering between a long-standing desire to open its capital account— first stated in 1996—and its fear of uncontrolled outflows of its substantial capital reserves. This oscillation results in China investing in BRI, which is intended both to bind other countries more closely to China and to provide an outlet for China's cash and formidable infrastructure-building capacity.

In another chapter, Shaun Breslin discusses China's cultural interactions, particularly its efforts to build soft power by "selling China." Such efforts are badly undercut by China's bullying in the South China Sea, destruction of Hong Kong's electoral system, and gross violations of human rights in Xinjiang (mostly dating from after the writing of the chapter), which underscore how difficult it is to develop soft power. In a chapter that largely parallels Rosemary Foot's book discussed earlier, Katherine Morton looks at China's Global Governance, particularly at the ways in which it has tried to "reaffirm traditional notions of sovereignty while maintaining political flexibility" (p. 156). This chapter underscores the impact China is having while stressing the opportunistic ways in which it has proceeded, stressing its efforts to legitimate its statist and authoritarian norms.

Finally, Philip Saunders looks at China's military-security interactions over a period stretching from Hu Jintao's pronouncement of "New Historic Missions" for the PLA in 2004, when China became more aware of the need to protect its interests overseas, to the present, when China has taken more direct military action to protect what it perceives to be its interests in the South China Sea, along the Sino-Indian border, in the Taiwan Straits, and elsewhere.

All in all, this section on China's global interactions leaves one with a sense of a China that is starting from a point that is in many ways defensive—trying to protect interests it sees as legitimate—and reshaping global norms and balances without a clear sense of how it hopes the world should be. Proceeding with much greater confidence in its own values and interests, China has not so much tried to impose its values on others as it has pushed aside other interests as its tries to secure its own future.

A fifth section discusses China's bilateral relations with the United States, Russia, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and "regional multilateralism." Space does not permit discussion of each of these essays, all of which are solid and will be useful in the classroom. It should be noted, however, that most texts of this sort do not include a discussion of China's relations with Russia. Alexei D. Voskressenski's essay gives a very good overview of the improving relations between Russia and China, including the very real uncertainties going forward. China presents quite good opportunities for Russia, but China's belief that it has "historic lands" in Russia presents a latent threat that cannot be ignored.

All in all, these five books further our understanding of China's foreign policy, though important questions are barely touched. As mentioned earlier, the field could benefit from greater discussion of China's techno-nationalism. How innovative is China today? How dependent is it on outside technology? Can China's dream of becoming dominant in important technologies be realized, and what would be the impact of its success or failure in this regard? Finally, one hopes for a deeper exploration of why China seeks such dominance, even at the cost of heightened tensions with other countries and a decline in public opinion abroad.

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