

Review - China, the USA, and Global Order

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, JUL 30 2011

China, The United States, and Global Order by Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter takes as its premise the hypothesis that the US and China are the two most important nations in the world, with the US the current hegemon, and China the 'prospective challenger'. Hence the book is constructed in an integrated way, looking at a logically constructed series of issues from the perspectives of *both* China and the US, reflecting on the distinct aspects of both, whilst always drawing a comparison. In that sense the book is largely successful, and is a fascinating read. Whilst the aspects of the book that focus on America are well received, they draw on an already vast literature, so for the purposes of this review, the elements of the book that deal with the comparatively under-represented research into China are expanded upon.

Pacifism?

An interesting point of analysis in the book draws on a basic rejection over the perception that China is a pacifist state. The authors cite a dataset that finds China to be only second to the US in a study of nations who resort to force to settle conflicts, citing numerous territorial and border disputes in post 1945 Chinese history. Whilst much of these instances fell between two periods: 1954-58 and 1964-68 (in the Mao period), the authors do an excellent job of emphasizing the nature of the changes in internal politics which led China into an economic swing in the 1980s in which it focused keenly on integration rather than confrontation. Building the case further, the authors analyse the rising defence expenditure of China in the post Cold War era, which has risen 202% between 1998 and 2007, yet has showed signs of moderating in the last few years.

An interesting aspect that the authors explore is not only the statistics regarding China's military rise, but the nature by which China intends to use its newfound might. A very complete picture is painted, incorporating China's engagement in regional multilateral security mechanisms in the Asia/Pacific region – and its treaty signed with ASEAN members to rule out the use of force in regional disputes; which is often ignored by the familiar China alarmist faction of American academia. The authors are quite correct in pointing out that China has an understandable need for increased defences, and does in fact contribute to various UN peacekeeping operations, and conduct maritime security in the Gulf of Aden, for example. Hence, China appears as a reasonably engaged international actor.

Yet, despite the former, attention is drawn to China's permissiveness during conflicts in Somalia, Haiti and East Timor, before recalling the on-going crisis in Sudan and China's material interests there. An interesting counterpoint that the authors make here regarding Sudan is that China is actually exerting a degree of pressure within Sudan, which may come as a surprise to many readers considering the tide of western reporting on this issue.

Similarly, regarding R2P, China is noted as being a conservative force, yet not a spoiler. Although it was beyond the scope of the book, the Chinese actions in the Security Council over the Libyan intervention serve to prove the validity of the aforementioned.

Nuclear Ambiguity?

When dealing with China's nuclear proliferation, the analysis seems to fall short for the first time. In noting that China,

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as a signatory of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, has maintained close ties with North Korea, and Iran for that matter – and additionally aided Pakistan in its nuclear programme – the authors merely gloss over what is an extremely pressing series of contradictions without engaging in a suitable degree of critique. This is made all the more important as the authors suggest that China has become a substantial non proliferation voice, often suffering economically and strategically for that fact. Hence, with this issue to hand, certain pressing questions are left in the mind of reader.

Economics

A significant section of the book is reserved for discussion on Chinese economic policies. The ebb and flow of relations with the IMF are detailed, including discussion of the 1997 Asian economic crisis, along with a considerable analysis on the Chinese currency issue, which has gained significant news coverage in recent years due to widespread criticism that China had pursued a deliberate policy of undervaluing their currency. The authors sketch in some valuable context noting how China did in fact revalue the RMB through 2005 and 2008, and wed in some further background to give a fair hearing to the Chinese side of the argument, noting its focus on protecting its domestic growth model, rather than bowing to international pressure – which again is a refreshing aspect of the book.

Climate Change

It may come as a surprise to many that China has been involved in Climate initiatives since 1972, and has a world leading domestic green technology market and a comprehensive national plan to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Yet, the fact remains that China's emissions continue to rise whilst the rest of the developing world, principally the US, is 'flattening out'. Here the authors once again directly compare the actions of China and the US, but this time to make the very well received point that absent the other, each actor is consistently seen to be standing aside from taking a truly substantive role. Hence, the message is very much that, as in economics and security, China and the US must show global leadership in respect to climate change.

Final Words

By way of a general analytical overview of the book as a whole, the theme seems to be one of measured optimism. The future will be a challenge, and a tough series of policy choices and negotiations will have to be brokered by both nations, as one power declines and the other rises. Yet, as the authors state, the US *will* remain a global power, just not *the* global power; and China will *not* rule the world as many alarmists seem to consistently voice fears of in the American literature. So in that sense the book is a refreshing approach. The measured element to the optimism comes through the realisation that both powers will be faced with a responsibility to play a role in an emerging international order that is not based on a narrow strategic rivalries. Whether China or America can overcome a tendency towards a zero sum disposition and embrace change in a progressive way, especially with regard to America's perceptions of its security, remains to be seen.

About the author:

Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or LinkedIn.