

Book Review

JAE HO CHUNG (ed.), *Assessing China's Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 299 + xiv, US\$109.00, ISBN: 9781137534613.

The outcome of a 2014 conference organised by the Asan Institute, Seoul, this book succinctly addresses a critical question that is of importance to foreign ministries and statesmen the world over at a time of major global power transition. This is a dense work, with authoritative and insightful chapters, demanding close reading.

The introduction emphasises that power is an elusive concept, and can be seen in three perspectives: actual and perceived, 'it is not always or automatically translated into corresponding extent of influence', to be assessed in multiple dimensions (p. 2). Becoming a great power demands the will to achieve such status, recognition by others of that status, and multiple capabilities that go with it. The last of these three attributes is the focus of the book, through its 13 essays, viewed in terms of economics, governance, military and external relations, and soft capabilities.

Military power demands economic muscle, hinging not on absolute GDP but 'mobilizable wealth', plus political governance capacity (p. 4). The Soviet Union challenged the USA for four decades, while low on the GDP scale. Equally vital is internal governance capacity. On both counts, against a horizon of 2025 (presented as a realistic time period for forecasts), China does well, conclude the authors of two chapters. In the economic arena, the USA remains the goalkeeper of the international system, but 'loses the ability to shape, even indirectly, Chinese outcomes' (p. 34).

Another chapter notes that 'China's core problems arise from deficiencies in governance. The system is riddled with corruption...' They challenge the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) but 'do not necessarily pose insuperable problems' (pp. 42–5). Based on the chapter author's surveys in 2003, citizens are rather satisfied with the performance of the central government, but are far less content with their local governments. The conclusion: systemic collapse is 'least likely'; while muddling through is one option, over time 'soft authoritarianism' is one prospect, while the other is Putin style xenophobic nationalism combined with inefficient authoritarianism, where a 'party dominated

state would be in continual friction with society' (pp. 57–8). This is rather similar to what Shambaugh sets out in *China's Future* (2016).

Three chapters examine China's military (especially air and naval), and its nuclear power. China's equipment development has been formidable, including technological leap-frogging in select areas. Its nuclear arsenal is much smaller than those of the USA and Russia; the latter two are unlikely to undertake further arms reductions unless China is brought into future arms control discussions (p. 106). It retains its 'non-first use' doctrine, but the book does not ask if that might change. China's development of space-based laser weapons brings new uncertainties. Its space and cyberspace capabilities are 'offensive-dominant and becoming more robust in recent years' (p. 7), but actions to secure Arctic access have been modest.

Unusually, this book places China's quest to build its soft power in the context of its efforts to mitigate its great power image. Other observers have noted China's pride at its affirmative role in combating climate change; climate envoy Xie Zhenhua recently spoke of his country's 'leadership role in combating global climate change' (*The Economist*, 22 April 2017: 25). Yet, 2008 was the year of transition, when China shifted from a relatively compliant international posture to a more assertive one; examples, supply of arms to Sri Lanka in its fight against Tamil separatists, and the creation of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank (p. 147). 'Before 2008 China was still essentially still a Club of One... (it) has begun to change the rules and norms of the international system' (pp. 152–3).

Chapter 8 is devoted to China's soft power, a fashionable topic, asserting that normative power shares some commonality with cultural and soft power. A weakness is that much of the analysis relies upon Western surveys of perceptions of China, contrasting it with other countries; non-Western surveys of this kind are rare, providing balance against one-sided views. That said, the suggestions advanced of 'Confucian practices' and China's focus on economic development are indirect excuses for its abuse of human rights (p. 179). My conclusion: for all its investment in soft power, the outcomes remain hollow when authoritarian rule remains the Chinese norm.

The final two clusters of chapters cover China's regional and global power. Now the world's second largest power, its regional power transition is complete. Consider China-South Korea relations: South Koreans now view China more favorably than they view Japan; in 2008, 800,000 South Koreans visited the USA as tourists, while 4.1 million went to China; and in 2012, China surpassed Japan as that country's largest source of incoming visitors. Japan should worry about such challenges in its own backyard. Another conclusion: East Asian states place more focus on economic, diplomatic and business strategies than on their military strategies. China's investment in Southeast Asia is the focus of another chapter, which concludes: 'ASEAN style and norms are inadequate... Regional peace and order will ultimately depend on these great powers themselves (the US and China) ... it is not clear that the Southeast Asian states can play a substantial role' (p. 223). We should worry that India does not figure much in

this analysis, despite some ASEAN talk about using India as a balance vis-à-vis China; one reason: India's regional economic presence is but a fraction of China's.

Will China establish rules of the road, first in Asia and then across the globe? Its 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) is a template and master plan, though this book does not dwell much on this. The book concludes that China pushes for change within the world order, without attempting anything radical. One might add that despite this caution, actions to begin to alter the status quo cannot be ruled out—the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is an example.

Another conclusion advanced is that while shifting from a developing country to a great power narrative, China is a 'fragile great power due to serious external and internal challenges' (p. 261); 'it has focused on pursuing its immediate interests and will hesitate to use its rising power status to bolster the global common welfare' (p. 266) '...are we prepared for the coming back of China as one of the few real central powers, and this time at the global level, with profound systemic ramifications?' (p. 287).

The reader is presented with an elegant story on the nature of power, and China's evolution in different dimensions. For over two centuries, power has resided with the West, with the partial exception of Japan, which for over seven decades has been co-opted into the West. China's rise alters the game, and challenges assumptions long treated as self-evident truths—such as the notion of 'global common welfare' cited above. Much of Africa and Latin America rejoices in this. Even Asia, bracing to deal with an assertive China, seeks benefit in the power shift to this continent. In this fluid, complex situation, India needs its own version of Deng's *taoquang yanghui*, that is, keep its head down and focus on nation building. That is my real takeaway.

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