

BOOK REVIEWS

***China's Foreign Policy since 1978: Return to Power.* By Nicholas Khoo. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2020. Hardcover: 184pp.**

China's rise is one of the defining political events of the twenty-first century. How to understand the evolution of China's foreign policy since its reform and opening-up under Deng Xiaoping is a critical task for scholars and policymakers. Nicholas Khoo's concise book, *China's Foreign Policy since 1978: Return to Power*, offers theoretical insights into China's foreign policy, especially towards Japan and the United States, in the post-1978 era, from Deng's introduction of economic reforms to Xi Jinping's ambitions of national rejuvenation.

The book has five chapters. The first chapter engages with theoretical discussions on how to conceptualize China. Chapter Two examines China's foreign policy under Deng before the end of the Cold War. Khoo suggests that China adopted a wedging strategy between Vietnam and the Soviet Union to uphold the status quo in Asia. Chapter Three focuses on China's foreign policy towards the United States in the post-Cold War era. It suggests that China carried out a "mix of status quo and revisionist" behaviours (p. 2). Chapter Four touches on China's assertive and revisionist foreign policy towards Japan from 2010, especially over the territorial disputes in the East China Sea. In conclusion, Khoo argues that China's foreign policy has returned to a posture of traditional power competition and revisionism. Conflicts with the United States will be inevitable in the future.

Drawing on China's post-Cold War foreign policy towards the United States and Japan as case studies, the book illustrates China's

shift from being a status quo power to a revisionist one. However, readers may want to know more about China's foreign policy towards other countries, especially those in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in the developing world. If China has indeed become a revisionist power, it should behave assertively or even aggressively towards weaker states in the international system. Despite the maritime disputes between China and some Southeast Asian countries in the South China Sea, China has maintained relatively cooperative ties with ASEAN member states as well as other developing countries. Therefore, some comparative research between China's foreign policy towards America and Japan and its policy towards developing countries might better test the author's power-oriented account of China's foreign policy.

One analytical strength of the book is worth highlighting. It is always a theoretical challenge for scholars to conduct research on China's foreign policy because the many existing theoretical perspectives on the topic make it quite difficult to decide where to start. For example, Khoo suggests that, based on mainstream International Relations (IR) theories, China can be variously conceptualized as a trading state, an identity state, a social state, an *innenpolitik* state or a neorealist state. Depending on their choice of conceptualization, scholars can then explore the role of different variables, such as trade (economic interdependence), identity, institutions, bureaucratic and domestic politics or power, in shaping China's foreign policy behaviour. Unlike some scholars, who try to include as many variables as possible in their research, Khoo takes the bold approach of adopting a revised neorealist theory to examine China's foreign policy. Khoo critically analyses the weaknesses of other IR theories—especially liberalism, constructivism and the domestic politics approach—in understanding China's foreign policy, although his critiques could have been developed further and in greater depth.

By emphasizing the role of relative power and state interests in shaping China's foreign policy, Khoo portrays how China has changed from a status quo power to a revisionist state in the post-1978 era. Although this power-oriented analysis will be opposed and criticized by others, Khoo's argument is clear and concise. It is an exemplary work in applying a parsimonious theoretical framework to shed light on a complicated political phenomenon such as China's foreign policy.

Khoo's theory-driven argument will inspire other scholars to ask tough questions. For example, Khoo argues that he is using a revised version of neorealism to explain China's foreign policy. However, it would have been beneficial for him to have further elaborated on this revised neorealist model. While the book highlights relative power and state interests, these variables are not unique to neorealism and are common across all realist frameworks. The book implicitly examines the impact of power polarity in the international system on China's foreign policy, but questions remain. In particular, how did relative power change China's national interests? How did China's redefined interests shape its foreign policy behaviour? Addressing these questions—which are also key issues for scholars of China's foreign policy—would have helped to clarify Khoo's revised neorealist model.

A more fundamental issue relates to Kenneth Waltz's famous claim that neorealism is not a theory of foreign policy since a systemic theory (such as neorealism) will not be able to explain "why state X made a certain move last Tuesday" (Waltz 1979, p. 121). It would have thus been beneficial for readers if Khoo addressed this apparent disjuncture between neorealism and foreign policy.

It is always a challenge to balance the parsimony of a research model and the richness of analysis in the study of foreign policy. Although the author's parsimonious model is commendable, more in-depth and nuanced discussions of China's foreign policy are also desirable. For example, the notion that China's foreign policy has moved in an assertive direction is a prevailing, but somehow misleading, narrative (e.g., Johnston 2013). Moreover, China's foreign policy is not only decided by China's political leaders, but also influenced by the interaction between China and outside powers. An exploration into the "interactive process" between China and other powers, especially ASEAN, and how that process shapes China's foreign policy behaviour can be an interesting future research direction.

Despite the above questions, the book offers a theoretically driven and empirically rich analysis of China's foreign policy. It will be of interest to scholars and policy analysts who want to understand China's foreign policy from a realist perspective.

REFERENCES

- Johnston, Alastair Iain. 2013. "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?", *International Security* 37, no. 4: 7–48.
- Waltz, Kenneth. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. New York City, New York: McGraw-Hill.

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