

## Book review: Sebastian Strangio: In the Dragon's Shadow - Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century

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## Book Reviews

SEBASTIAN STRANGIO, *In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2020. 337 pages, £29.00. ISBN 978-0-3002-3403-9 (hb)

Two months after entering office, President Joe Biden of the United States remarked that his government's policy towards China was one of "extreme competition".<sup>1</sup> Antithetical to almost everything that his predecessor Donald Trump represented, Biden nonetheless kept to a policy that is an outlier in its continuity with that of the Trump administration. Within the Indo-Pacific region, the strategic landscape where this extreme competition between the US and China primarily takes place, the literal geographical centre is Southeast Asia. Hence, in the past few years there has been much renewed attention to the geopolitics of Southeast Asia, in particular in the context of the intensifying US-China rivalry. The book under review here, *In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century*, by seasoned and skilled journalist Sebastian Strangio, is a welcome addition to this burgeoning literature.

The title of the book, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, seems to suggest that Southeast Asian countries, for better or worse, are destined to endure and cope with the sheer physical presence of their massive neighbour China, an overwhelming, and at times dominating, presence (a similarly titled book, *Under Beijing's Shadow: Southeast Asia's China Challenge* by Murray Hiebert, gives a similar impression). Strangio also strives to provide a more complex picture and to show that leaders and people from Southeast Asia are not just passively "overshadowed" by an overbearing China but have also become agile actors, skilled in making strategic manoeuvres that could at times outwit the larger powers (China and Western powers both). As Strangio writes in the book's conclusion, "far from being passive subjects of Chinese and American attentions – countries to be 'won' and 'lost' by dueling superpowers – the region's governments will do what they can to maintain their freedom of maneuver in a tenser, more constrained world" (p. 283).

But one question remains: As China becomes more powerful economically, politically and militarily, and more active and emboldened in its diplomatic and cultural outreach, could Southeast Asian countries really withstand the orbital pull of this giant? Strangio does not provide a simple answer for all Southeast Asian countries, but the book seems to imply that those countries with stronger maritime connections stand a better chance. China is historically

1 Demetri Sevastopulo: Biden Warns China Will Face "Extreme Competition" from US. *Financial Times*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/c23a4e67-2052-4d2f-a844-e5c72a7de214> (accessed 17 July 2022).

a land power. Strangio contends that had it not been for the arrival of the European powers in the sixteenth century, the historically expansionist Chinese empire could have further expanded and incorporated more lands from mainland Southeast Asia (p. 15). And when China was weak (such as during dynastic changes), mainland Southeast Asia also bore the burden of receiving the fleeing refugees, which in turn potentially invited aggression from the new dynastic rulers of China. Hence, it is China's land-based neighbours that have had to face directly the consequences of whether China was weak, undergoing regime change or strong. As Strangio notes, "[w]hile all Southeast Asian nations face the challenge of living in China's shadow, it is in the mainland countries that the dilemma is most acute" (p. 63).

Hence, Strangio is to be commended for paying substantial attention to the unique and strategic role of Yunnan, a relatively poor province that tends to be overlooked by Western analysts. Yunnan shares borders with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. The historical incorporation of Yunnan into the Chinese empire brought the powerful giant right next to the different polities in mainland Southeast Asia in premodern times. During the Cold War, Yunnan was very much a "frontline" province to China as wars raged in Indochina for decades. Because of the intensity of the conflicts in Indochina, Yunnan was a latecomer to China's economic take-off. But now it plays a crucial role as it connects Myanmar (Strangio prefers to use the previous name "Burma" in this book) via the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and Laos via the China-Laos Railway. A substantial portion of China's economic investment in mainland Southeast Asia, whether legal, illicit or in-between, has some Yunnan connections. Many of Beijing's initiatives with mainland Southeast Asia go through Yunnan. The province hosts the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, which Strangio describes as Beijing's initiative to secure the Mekong region as China's "sphere of influence" (p. 61).

China's growing impact on the Mekong River is also extensively covered in the book. The still murky case of the gruesome killings of a dozen Chinese crewmembers on a Mekong freighter in 2011 prompted Beijing to press for the initiation a four-country joint patrol (China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand) against illicit border crossings, drugs and other trans-border crimes. The joint patrol has provided legitimate cover for China to be involved in the security of the middle Mekong. More significant are China's activities on the upstream Mekong (called the Lancang River in China), including damming for hydro-energy and widening the waterway for increased capacity for trade. Such activities alter the Mekong ecology and have negatively impacted the downstream countries. Most alarming, Strangio points out, is the fact that China now seems to have "valve-like control of the upper Mekong" (p. 60), which apparently puts the downstream countries at its mercy. Such a disturbing picture, however, remains more theoretical than real, at least for now. Not all scientists have agreed that China's activities on the upstream Mekong have been the principal causes of

the water conditions downstream. The Mekong River Commission, for example, has issued a report that disputes some of the findings of the research cited by Strangio. Regardless, China certainly has the upper hand in mainland Southeast Asia. Stronger and wealthier mainland Southeast Asian countries that have better connections with the rest of the world (such as Thailand and Vietnam) will be able to resist China's embrace more strongly than their weaker neighbours, but China's pre-eminence in mainland Southeast Asia appears almost as a foregone, and acknowledged, reality.

But the rise of China today is not confined to the mainland region alone. Its oceanic turn since the reform and opening era has arguably been the most crucial factor in cementing its phenomenal role in the global economy. After all, it is the sea-borne trade of China's coastal provinces that powers its remarkable industrialisation and integration with the global economy. In the process, maritime Southeast Asian countries, which have also been very much reliant on international trade and the global supply chain, also benefit tremendously from China's oceanic turn. Yet, Strangio also notes that "China's oceanic push has created considerable friction with the five nations of maritime Southeast Asia" (p. 181). China's greater sea-borne trade with the world makes it increasingly insecure about the vulnerabilities of its shipping lanes. A stronger naval force is needed to protect its shipping lanes and its expanding interests globally. But as the rising China turns nationalistic, its naval power also increasingly worries the maritime Southeast Asian countries, particularly those with lingering maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Maritime Southeast Asian countries have traditionally enjoyed a healthy distance from the direct power of China, but this is changing with China's consolidated presence in the South China Sea. Its naval strength (inclusive of its coast guard and other quasi-civilian agencies) is now more powerful than ever, to be checked and balanced only by the Western, principally US, naval presence. It is no wonder that maritime Southeast Asia as a whole features more importantly in the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States as the US searches for reliable friends and partners. Nonetheless, maritime Southeast Asian countries continue to walk a careful and fine balance. While they collectively welcome the US as a balancing and stabilising presence, they are equally wary of being forced into an irreversible conflict with China as US-China rivalry intensifies. As Strangio documents, even in the most pro-US and China-vigilant countries such as Singapore and the Philippines, there has never been a strong appetite to be fully aligned with the US side against China. "Not-taking-sides" has become the received wisdom and daily mantra of all Southeast Asian countries.

A notable feature of Strangio's book is the attention that is paid to the "Chinese question": the waves of Chinese migrations to Southeast Asia over centuries. In each of the country chapters Strangio discusses the historical, political, economic and cultural roles of the local ethnic Chinese communities vis-à-vis

the potentially combustible ethnic political relations in their adopted societies, and also the phenomenon of the so-called New Chinese Migrants (*Xin Yimin*) – the PRC citizens who have ventured out since the 1980s. At one level, this attention to the flow of people is admirable, as many of the works on China – Southeast Asia relations are focused on grandiose geo-strategic and economic dimensions. But on the other hand, Strangio’s account of the *Xin Yimin* phenomenon is somewhat problematic and inconsistent. While in certain sections he displays the understanding of the complexity and pluralistic nature of the *Xin Yimin*, in others he makes sweeping statements about the *Xin Yimin* and tends to portray them as somewhat monolithic and backed by the state. The common usage of *putonghua* (Mandarin Chinese) by the *Xin Yimin*, for example, supposedly makes them manifestations of the “PRC imperium” (p. 49). Strangio also writes that “it remains hard to disentangle the outward flow of the Chinese people from the long-term goals of the Chinese state” (p. 49). These sweeping statements are not helpful in understanding the *Xin Yimin* and at worst they reinforce certain deeply-rooted racist views towards the Chinese in some Southeast Asian countries.

Strangio sometimes makes assertions without evidence or that prove to be incorrect. The alleged issuing of the *huayi ka* (p. 29), a special green card for foreign citizens of Chinese origin, was never implemented. In fact, it was never seriously considered by the Chinese government. Strangio writes that Professor Jin Yanan, a hawkish academic at China’s National Defense University, is an “influential security advisor” (p. 193). Jin may be popular, but there is no evidence that he is influential. In discussing the construction of Malacca Gateway and an industrial park in Malaysia, Strangio seemingly suggests these projects involved debts to China (p. 203). In fact, these projects were not financed by loans from China, hence there was no debt. Xiamen University Malaysia is said to be “funded and built by the Chinese government” (p. 213), yet no evidence for this is provided here. The Chinese government actually played only a minimal role in the construction of this university.

One gets the impression from this book that China is a lonely superpower in a region that is perhaps much more consequential to its rise than any other region of the world. Strangio’s assessment of China’s efforts to win the “hearts and minds” of Southeast Asia is that it has been a failure:

for all its attempts at “soft power” [...] China’s communist leadership faced an uphill battle in convincing the region of its peaceful intentions and selling its vision of co-prosperity. From fears of Chinese debt and maritime bullying to the negative externalities of largescale Chinese infrastructure projects, China’s actions continued to undermine its promises. Conjoined to these worries was a simmering disquiet about new flows of Chinese immigration and the CCP’s relationship with the region’s Overseas Chinese, issues that pressed on an exposed nerve of sovereignty. (p. 274)

Over the past decades China has managed to develop a tremendous number of interactions and dealings with the leaders, businesses and peoples in Southeast Asia, but these interactions are more often than not of a transactional nature.

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PAK SUM LOW (ED.), *Sustainable Development: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 449 pages, £120.00. ISBN 978-0-5218-9717-4 (hb)

This is a whale of a book in two senses: it is big, and it has had a long gestation. First, the gestation: the seeds were sown in March 2005 during the Eminent Scientists Symposium on “Global Change and Sustainable Development” held in Seoul. It was agreed at the Symposium that the papers presented would be published, but it has taken 17 years to get to that point. I am all in favour of slow scholarship, but that is tardy even by academic standards, a fact that the editor acknowledges in a profuse apology. Of the original papers, 17 have been updated and are present in this volume; there are also 15 new chapters. These contributions fall into two equal sections, the first on theories and practices of sustainable development (16 chapters), and the second on the challenges and opportunities of/for sustainable development (another 16 chapters). Now to the size: there are 70 authors, 32 chapters and a text that runs to almost 450 pages.

The book is dedicated to a doyen of sustainable development and environmental diplomacy: Dr Mostafa Kamal Tolba. Dr Tolba, in fact, chaired the 2005 Symposium and passed away in March 2016. There is a foreword from Dr Tolba which he wrote for an earlier manuscript that never saw the light of day, but which the editor feels “remains valid”. Tolba writes that “the book is a solid piece of work that should constitute a basic reference source in the library of any person concerned with the issues of sustainable development” (page xxxiv). That about sums it up – people will turn to the volume when they are scouting out a starting point for a myriad of sustainable development debates and issues: poverty, land degradation, food security, green development, Confucianism and the environment, biomass energy, DRR, climate change and international law, biodiversity, land use change, the “haze”.... The entries for each are shortish (around 12 pages) and written in an approachable manner, reflecting the fact that the book’s readership will be broad. In fact, that is exactly how I used the book recently in writing a chapter on “present and future environments of South-east Asia” for another edited volume: as a basic source.