

Book Review

Karl Roberts and Saira Bano (Eds.), *The Ascendancy of Regional Powers in Contemporary US-China Relations: Rethinking the Great Power Rivalry*, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2023, 294pp. + xv.

Kari Roberts and Saira Bano (editors), together with their book contributors, tackle a timely and pressing area of concern in *The Ascendancy of Regional Powers in Contemporary United States (US)-China Relations*. The work delves into the shifting dynamics of international politics, particularly the growing influence of regional powers within the framework of the US-China rivalry. Through a comprehensive analysis and compendium of works from esteemed experts in their respective fields, the book contemplates and explores how middle and emerging powers, such as India, Japan, Australia, and other key regional states and players are increasingly contesting the contours of global geopolitics. The book, thereby, challenges and calls for a revisit of the classically accepted 'great power' framework of international relations.

Themes and Analysis

Roberts and Bano's main assertion is that the unipolar reign of the US is over, and that China's hegemonic ambitions find increased competition from smaller regional spheres. This emerging dynamic challenges the great power rivalry, and mounts a more constructivist approach of great power relations. The erosion of unipolar state dominance in favor of a more multipolar world order allows for, and is caused by regional powers asserting their agency amidst the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing. The authors argue that these regional actors are not merely pawns predisposed by the great power contest but are instead players leveraging their economic, political, and military assets to influence global governance and regional stability.

A significant strength of the book lies in its exploration and focus towards the agency of regional powers. Roberts and Bano carefully unpack how these nations are employing nuanced strategies—ranging from economic partnerships and military alliances to diplomatic initiatives, which allow them to navigate the tensions between the US and China. For example, the authors highlight India's balancing act in the Indo-Pacific, Japan's proactive military and diplomatic policies, and Australia's attempts to reconcile its security ties with the US while maintaining economic reliance on China.

The work also provides an insightful examination of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, positioning them as quintessential instruments of soft and hard power competition. It demonstrates how regional powers respond differently to these initiatives based on their unique geostrategic interests, historical ties, and stances towards contemporary issues. The book further demonstrates that regional states are not passive actors and have the ability to exert influence on contemporary US-China relations. This approach affords the regional actors to also use the great power rivalry to their own benefit. The book chapters explore comprehensively the extent by which regional states have both agency, capacity, and influence toward the US-China competition, moreso with the advent of Russia's war in Ukraine and its global effects. The work puts into perspective that regions experience the impact of the conflict differently.

The work builds on the aggressive changes in the landscape of international order in recent years. Australia's alliance with the US through the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security pact has the potential to accelerate the great power competition should China opt to counter this new alliance. In South Asia, Northeast Asia, and Latin America, the states of India, South Korea, Brazil, and Mexico, respectively, usher strategic balancing by avoiding taking clear sides and silently advancing political and economic gains from both China and the US. In Southeast Asia and the Arctic, states are stabilizing competition through multilateralism, responding to China's increasing assertiveness with robust regional organizations.

In Africa and Eastern Europe, regional states are attempting to equibalance economic benefits from both states. The European Union (EU) is striving to play a proactive role in the rivalry to improve economic relations with China while sustaining its reaffirmed and shared political values with the US.

Consequently, this has been affected by China's tacit support for Russia in the war against Ukraine, as well as strong European alignment with the US against Russian aggression. In the Middle East, China is emerging as an alternative option, but some regional powers want to retain US engagement in the region. South Asia further sets the stage for intensifying US-China great power competition, through India's growing strategic partnership with the US to counterbalance the rise of China, and Beijing's deepening strategic relations with Pakistan to offset New Delhi. These regional circumstances, in one way or the other, exacerbate or even attenuate the great power dynamic.

One of the book's key contributions is its nuanced view of regional agency, which often gets overshadowed in established scholarly literature and discussions in international relations, dominated by great-power politics. However, at times, the depth of analysis on regional powers varies. While countries like India and Japan receive substantial attention, smaller Southeast Asian states, are addressed less religiously. This may leave readers seeking a more equalized regional overview of representation.

Moreover, the book could delve further into the implications of regional power strategies on global institutions and norms. While the authors acknowledge this dimension, it remains somewhat peripheral to their primary focus on bilateral and regional interactions.

Writing Style and Accessibility

The authors adopt an academic yet accessible writing style, making the book suitable for both scholars and readers with a keen interest in international relations. While it is rich in theoretical perspectives and empirical data, the prose remains clear and engaging, avoiding unnecessary jargon. The authors strike a fine balance between detailed case studies and broader conceptual analysis, ensuring that the book appeals to both policy analysts and general readers.

Each chapter contributes to the wider view of redefining and rethinking the great power competition between the US and China, while also contextualizing each regional powers' history with the two, and connecting them with contemporary issues by which these actors converge upon. This allows for a 'learning spiral' by which each succeeding chapter builds upon

existing ideas taken from the book while allowing the central thesis of the work to be further elucidated.

Overall Assessment

The Ascendancy of Regional Powers in Contemporary US-China Relations is a compelling and thought-provoking book that highlights the increasingly important yet often overlooked role of regional powers in global politics. Roberts and Bano challenge the traditional great-power narrative and reinforce the dynamic capacity of regional actors in shaping and influencing the future of global order, trade, and security.

This book is particularly recommended for faculty and students of political science, especially those with a keen interest in geopolitics, conflict studies, and US-China relations. It serves as a valuable resource for understanding the changing dynamics of contemporary international relations and the interplay of global and regional forces. The work offers a fresh and nuanced perspective and is a worthy addition to the wider literature of geopolitics and international relations. Roberts and Bano's book is a welcome inclusion to my personal roster of course materials I would be sharing with students in the coming semesters of my contemporary studies classes.

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