

Facing China: The Prospect for War and Peace

Jean-Pierre Cabestan (translated by N. Jayaram). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2023. ix + 233 pp. \$34.00; £25.00 (pbk). ISBN 9781538169896

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Facing China: The Prospect for War and Peace by Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a senior French researcher on contemporary Chinese politics and emeritus professor of political science at Hong Kong Baptist University, was originally published in French in 2021 before being translated into English (with further up-dating) and published in 2023. Although this is a translation, the overall delivery is exceptionally clear and highly readable. As Chinese politics and international relations are increasingly becoming one of the most popular academic focuses in the world, my hope is that scholars working on these topics introduce more such professionally translated works to the mainstream English-speaking scholarly community.

Other than the introduction and the conclusion, there are seven chapters covering the theoretical approaches of the book – the great power politics of Sino-US relations on Taiwan issues, China–India contention as well as regional affairs such as the South China Seas disputes and the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands conflict with Japan. The book is especially topical and highly current, serving a comprehensive overview of the regional and foreign policy with the main focus of China in mind.

The central line of thought, running through almost every single chapter, is that a hot war between China and the US or other regional powers may not happen. But the “gray zones” (p. 6) and, of course, the trade and tech wars are constantly bombarding both China and the US. For example, according to the author, the most likely military operation abroad undertaken by China will still be along those grey zones, such as outward foreign direct investment, the “go out” strategy, global migration and even some forms of future armed engagement through the People’s Liberation Army’s intervention (p. 187). To conclude, the author returns to the conventional international approach by saying “... realism and firmness with China are the best strategy for defending our [Western] interests and values...” (p. 216). Such a straightforward assessment of Chinese foreign policy is simple, empirical and pragmatic.

The analysis is consistent throughout the book and strongly supported by exceptionally abundant written materials (in English, French and Chinese), including books, articles, US reports to Congress, Chinese media and newspapers from the Greater China and East Asia regions as well as online materials. Other than informative, the author is adamant in providing some logical and balanced viewpoint on cross-Strait relations from his observations. He unambiguously concludes that the most likely military operation from China toward Taiwan could be a blockade (p. 88), with some convincing evaluation of the pros and cons underpinning China’s foreign policy analysis. Sooner rather than later, perhaps, we can authenticate if and how such an assessment will be realised following the recent presidential election in Taiwan in January 2024, when the Taiwanese people elected Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as their new President after eight years’ ruling of DPP’s Tsai Ing-wen, the outgoing president.

There is no problem at all in looking at some of the grey zones from the foreign policy angle, I suspect. Yet, some of them, such as outward foreign direct investment and international migration, can be understood better as ingredients of the international political economy, rather than purely military or non-traditional security. There is a line of argument about “what China wants” that

Cabestan could have developed further even though he points out that domestic Chinese viewpoints between constructivist (more favourable to reform and to cooperation with the West) and the realists (protecting the one-party system from outside interference) (p. 54) is not the focus of this book. In addition, the author rightly notes that China wants to use its influence to change the whole international order in those areas where it is able to exercise its power with both capacity and willingness, such as the UN. However, the argument about China's intention not only to reform but also to improve the international order could have been pushed further by linking it to more recent speeches and addresses from Beijing – for example, Xi Jinping's address at the UN clearly mentioned that “Bolstering Confidence and Jointly Overcoming Difficulties to Build a Better World” (76th Session of UN General Assembly, 21 September 2021). As far as development goes, China appears to be more confident to demonstrate to the world its different points of view on global development, to say the least.

This book is written with policy makers in mind and as such it will prove essential reading. The no-nonsense style and jargon-free writing can attract other potential readers such as researchers on Chinese foreign policy, academics working on East Asian international relations and graduate students of Chinese politics and international relations. This book is well in line with academic disciplines such as contemporary Chinese politics, international relations studies and foreign policy analysis.

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Birth of the Geopolitical Age: Global Frontiers and the Making of Modern China

Shellen Xiao Wu. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023. 309 pp. US\$32.00 (pbk). ISBN 9781503636842

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With China asserting itself as an economic and military power, the theme of empires is making a strong comeback. Shellen Xiao Wu's book is a stimulating contribution that invites us to rethink the political structure of modern China and how its sovereignty is legitimized. The period covered runs from the Treaty of Kanagawa (1854) and the forced opening up of Japan to the start of the Cold War. Drawing on a rich corpus of sources, ranging from the private collections of geopolitologists who founded the discipline (Bowman, Haushofer, Mackinder, Lattimore) to the archives of the Kuomintang and the Rockefeller Foundation, Wu traces the historical roots of geopolitical narrative in China and shows that countries as different as the US and Germany have continued to reproduce the patterns of empires. In doing so, Wu sets out to find the thread that inserts China into the global history of the 19th and 20th centuries – the role of agriculture, but also the way in which energy supply and transport infrastructure networks determine spatial hierarchies.

Wu's comparative and multidisciplinary approach is commendable, skilfully combining the contributions of geographers, agronomists and lawyers with the concerns of Chinese intellectuals during this period and revealing areas of controversy that have remained in the shadows. The argument is structured around a strong idea: the concept of geo-modernity, a neologism that the author defines as the clear demarcation of borders and the use of science and technology to develop