

## Great Power Strategies: The United States, China and Japan

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Written by Zhao Quansheng, professor of international relations at the American University in Washington, DC, *Great Power Strategies: The United States, China and Japan* is an ambitious piece of research that aims at blending together insights from history and a variety of theoretical notions to analyse the strategies adopted by the “Pacific Three” (US, PRC and Japan). From a temporal point of view, Zhao focuses on the post-Cold War era, though some parts of the book reach back in time to the 19th century.

*Great Power Strategies* can be best characterized as a panoramic, highly informative, multi-level survey of the evolution of the foreign policy of, and relations among, the three countries. Mostly descriptive, the book does not have an argument per se. This is clearly reflected in its structure. For example, it does not have a “conclusion”. Rather, the book ends with a brief discussion of the events that took place in 2021 and 2022, just before its publication.

In order to analyse the many domestic and international factors that influence the international behaviour of the “Pacific Three,” Zhao applies what he calls the “micro-macro linkage” approach that he has already deployed in his previous studies of Chinese foreign policy (e.g. *Interpreting Chinese Foreign Policy: The Micro-Macro Linkage Approach*, Oxford University Press, 1996). In essence, this approach consists of considering the influence of both international and domestic factors on decision-making processes. It does not include any particular insight about how that happens. Rather, as Zhao does in the rest of the book, it is up to the analyst to figure that out on a case-by-case basis, depending on their knowledge of the country they are studying.

The empirical core of the book can be divided into two parts. The first consists of three chapters, each focused on the foreign policy of one of the three countries. Consistent with the loose “micro-macro linkage” approach, the content of each chapter differs in terms of temporal scope, factors or actors taken into account, from advisers and high-level bureaucrats in the US, to Confucianism’s influence on contemporary Chinese international behaviour, and Japan’s “informal mechanisms” of policymaking.

Chapters five and six, then, compose the second part of the book. There, Zhao analyses the evolution on Sino-American-Japanese relations through the lens of a variety of concepts from IR theory, mixed with some other ideas that Zhao developed in past studies, such as that of “two ups and two downs” to describe the rising status of China and the US and the decline of Japan’s and Russia’s (e.g. “The shift in power distribution and the change of major power relations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 24(1), 2001: 49–78).

In general, the strengths and weaknesses of this book are evident. As to the former, Zhao’s research clearly benefits from his experience of long-time observer of East Asian international relations, and the domestic politics and foreign policy of the main powers in that region. This allows him to provide a highly accurate description of specific cases, as well as draw interesting connections and parallels between past events and today’s situation in the region.

As to the weaknesses, in the view of this reviewer, the main one is the vagueness of the framework that Zhao has adopted to study the foreign policies of the three countries and their approaches toward each other. Often it is not clear why Zhao focuses on certain facts, policymakers or events.



Sometimes Zhao seems very certain about issues that would require a little more discussion, rather than a simple description. For example, it is far from clear how, for example, Japan's "informal mechanisms" of policymaking are so different from China's that they can really explain the course of Japan's foreign policy but not China's. One might reasonably argue the opposite, i.e. that understanding the informal mechanisms of policymaking may be more useful, though surely more difficult, in China's case.

Zhao also is very confident that "Confucianism will continue to serve as a leading source of ideas in China for its efforts to pursue modernization" (p. 103). Yet, the evidence that he musters to show the policy impact of those ideas consists of five paragraphs that include only one reference in a footnote to a statement made by the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi. While there is no doubt that Confucian ideas can be found easily in the work of some scholars or in the initiatives of the Chinese government, any scholar of international relations knows that that correlation is not causation, especially over a long period of time such as the one covered by Zhao's book.

Beyond the individual chapters, the same lack of clarity is evident in the above-mentioned lack of a real conclusion for the book. While the reader benefits a lot from the factual knowledge gained by reading the 200-plus pages of *Great Power Strategies*, it is not the same in terms of new interpretations of current events and ways of thinking about the foreseeable future.

To conclude, there is no doubt that Zhao's *Great Power Strategies* will be an extremely useful source for students and all those who have just approached the study of East Asian international relations. Scholars will also find a number of interesting anecdotes and case studies in there. Yet, many readers will also be somewhat dissatisfied by the vagueness that sometimes becomes evident in the text.

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## China's Belt and Road Initiative: The Impact on Sub-regional Southeast Asia

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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one of China's most ambitious efforts to expand its growing influence in international trade and development. Its geopolitical motivations tend to get more attention, in line with the alarming narratives about China's growing material capabilities, perceived dissatisfaction with the status quo arrangements in the regional and global order, and increasing anxiety in the West, especially in the United States, about the dangers of an imminent power transition amidst an intensifying US-China competition. It is in this context that this co-edited book, part of Routledge's *Frontiers of Political Economy* series, provides a refreshing and important analysis on the origins, purpose and impact of the BRI. The findings focus exclusively on China's relations with sub-regional Southeast Asia through the BRI framework. The book debunks many of the hyperbolic assessments about the BRI and shifts the attention and empirical analysis to domestic