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BOOK REVIEWS

The United States in Asia: Reflections on Deterrence, Alliances, and the 'Balance' of Power

Thomas J. Christensen, Worse than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. ISBN-13: 978-0393068283 (Hardcover $18.45).

Aaron L. Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia. New York: Norton, 2011. ISBN-13: 978-0691142616 (Paperback $23.46).

As the focus of U.S. military attention shifts away from the Middle East and Central Asia, Washington's geopolitical weathervane appears now to point firmly towards East Asia. Given the Obama administration's recent high-profile political 'pivot back' to the region, and against the context of the upcoming Presidential campaign, the two books under review here shed helpful light on American concerns and raise urgent questions about U.S. strategy in Asia. In the noisy cottage industry of strident publications about the rise of China and the future of U.S. power, these books stand out for their considered arguments and scholarly research. Both authors are professors at Princeton, and both served in the George

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W. Bush administration – Aaron Friedberg as deputy assistant for National Security Affairs in the Office of the Vice President Dick Cheney in 2003–5, and Thomas Christensen as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in 2006–8.

The common theme of these books is the rivalry between the United States and China in Asia since the Second World War, and both are fundamentally concerned with how to maintain peace and stability in the region. Both authors might also be characterized as 'neoclassical realists' in theoretical orientation, bringing a rationalist emphasis on power and interest to bear in explanations combining domestic and international levels of analyses. In *Worse than a Monolith*, Christensen explains the effectiveness of coercive diplomacy between the Communist and non-Communist camps in East Asia during the Cold War using a framework of alliance politics. Friedberg explains the evolution of what he sees as a long-standing struggle for mastery of Asia between the U.S. and China by emphasizing the mismatch between the Chinese goal of displacing the U.S. from the region and 'winning without fighting' and the U.S. aim of integrating China into the existing international system and encouraging its development as a liberal democracy. While both are concerned with the politics of coercion and competition between great powers, these books draw quite different conclusions and stimulate debate on three issues central to realists: deterrence, alliances, and balance of power.

1 Deterrence

At heart, these books are about deterrence. In contrast to many other treatments of the Cold War in East Asia, Christensen's focus is on effective coercive diplomacy that makes war unnecessary by successfully deterring opponents. Astutely juxtaposed against the common assumption that one's campaign is usually aided by discord in the enemy camp in a war scenario, Christensen's thesis appears more intuitive once we accept – as he points out – that diplomacy, even when coercive, falls in the realm of bargaining games. Starting with the bargaining core of deterrence theory – an actor's ability to send clear and credible signals to dissuade the adversary from undertaking undesirable actions – Christensen's thesis then operationalizes it for alliance systems by arguing: (i) that the lack of coordination and clarity in commitment, especially prevalent during

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formative or strategic adjustment phases of alliances, undermines the group's ability to send credible signals; and (ii) that specifically in revisionist alliances, intra-alliance mistrust and competition for leadership 'make the alliance as a whole aggressive and hard to contain through the use of coercive diplomacy' (p. 2).

Conceptually, Christensen's contribution is in demonstrating with convincing historical cases that more monolithic opponents are easier to deter, while divided and competitive adversary coalitions often prove to be 'worse than a monolith'. His strongest case is his explanation of why the Korean War escalated the way it did when Mao Zedong launched a massive counter-attack on U.S.-led forces advancing deeper into North in late November 1950, leading to the longest retreat of U.S. forces in an overseas battle. The distrust among the North Korean, Chinese, and Soviet leaderships has been the subject of other historical works, but Christensen draws out the impact of this discord on the lack of coordination and planning, which undermined potentially opportune signaling of credible Communist deterrence that might have ended the war in 1950. Instead, Chinese inaction in not sending troops into North Korea immediately after the successful allied operation in Inchon in September 1950 lulled American commanders into thinking that China would stand aside while they crossed the 38th parallel. Although the book is not essentially about contemporary East Asia, in the penultimate chapter Christensen also provides a relatively positive assessment of U.S. deterrence of China in the post-Cold War period. He lauds Washington's efforts at alliance coordination to achieve an effective mix of resolve in maintaining coercive diplomacy while credibly assuring China that strengthened alliances or force postures were not targeted at Taiwan or other Chinese interests.

But in discussing the key issue of the resurfacing security dilemma between a rising China and a Japan with a more pronounced security role in the U.S. alliance, Christensen tends to focus on the knotty Taiwan issue to the exclusion of the bilateral roots of tensions between China and Japan, as well as the wider regional implications of the U.S.–Japan alliance that fuel Chinese threat perceptions. As China's more assertive stance in the East and South China Seas since 2009 suggests, deterring China within the contemporary regional context is perhaps fraught with complications beyond alliance politics. In *A Contest for Supremacy*, Friedberg is significantly more critical of Washington's

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record of managing rising China since the end of the Cold War. He disagrees with Christensen in warning that the U.S. may not have gotten the balance right between credible deterrence and assurance of China. Based on a close reading of Chinese sources, Friedberg highlights the time-biding, ambivalent aspects of Chinese strategic thinking regarding the United States. He also emphasizes the opportunistic and non-cooperative elements of Chinese behavior in a range of international security issues, arguing strongly against optimistic expectations of interdependence and socialization having an impact on shaping China's future strategies and intentions.

Friedberg is not so unsubtle as to propound an all-out strategy to contain China; he accepts the combination of engagement and containment that has prevailed thus far. But he warns against shifting towards 'enhanced engagement' (p. 255) of the sort that he feels the mainstream 'China hands' in the U.S. establishment fancy, and that, in his reading, would be dangerous because 'unilateral restraint' on the American part would only increase the speed with which the military capabilities gap narrows with China, and increase the risk of misperception and accidental conflict if Beijing and U.S. allies perceive a waning of U.S. power and commitment to the region. As such, the book's main message is the need to strengthen U.S. deterrence capabilities against China, for '[a]s China improves its ability to attack targets off its eastern coast, the United States and its allies are going to have to find new ways of threatening to conduct conventional counterstrikes against the mainland' (p. 277). Friedberg focuses on the need for new, more flexible mixed systems of projecting U.S. power in the region. In contrast to Christensen's approach though, his analysis pays less attention to the flip side of how deterrable an increasingly prosperous and ambitious China with more friends in the region is going to be.

2 Alliances

The main strength of *Worse than a Monolith* lies in the skill with which Christensen uses his alliance politics framework to lend welcome analytical traction especially to explaining the Communist side of the conflict at a time when there is arguably little genuinely new to add to the historiography of the 'hot Asian wars' of the Cold War since declassified documents have been mined extensively. By highlighting the costs of poorly

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organized and mistrustful, competitive alliances, he sheds new light on the key highs and lows of conflict in the region during this period. In addition to the Korean intervention, the Indochina conflict became more violent and extended than a nationalist civil war might otherwise have been because of competitive Sino-Soviet economic and military aid provision to the North Vietnamese. Conversely, 'increased Sino-Soviet-North Korean coordination after China entered the war made escalation easier to control and an armistice agreement more likely, even though it took many months of bloody warfare and ultimately the death of Stalin to bring about an acceptable compromise on the POW issue' (p. 119). Similarly, the Geneva Accord was made possible in 1954, Christensen argues, because the relative lack of rivalry between Moscow and Beijing and their coordinated lack of interest in supporting North Vietnam's agenda of taking over the South or destabilizing Laos and Cambodia prevented Hanoi from playing one ally off against the other (p. 135). Indeed, Christensen demonstrates reasonably well that 'the period in which the communists in East Asia were easiest to contain was from 1954 to 1957, when Mao Zedong had already proven ... that he was very much a member of the international communist movement – at a time when Soviet leadership within that movement was widely accepted, and Sino-Soviet relations were still quite warm.' (p. 17)

Yet, the book as a whole would have been strengthened significantly by a more explicit recognition of the normative implications of Christensen's finding that the stable, hierarchical U.S.-led alliance system is good for exercising effective coercive diplomacy in East Asia. This type of alliance cohesion and coordination comes at the expense of highly unequal partnerships with allies, who struggle continually with the dilemma of entrapment versus abandonment in having to adopt or privilege U.S. security priorities above their own. Such dynamics have intensified in the post-Cold War era – the periodic divergences of Japanese, South Korean and American policy aims in dealing with North Korea have at times helped to stymie the Six Party talks, for instance, while these allies' policy dilemmas vis-à-vis China are even more complex. *A Contest for Supremacy* suffers from a similar gap: as Friedberg sees it, Washington's hub-and-spokes alliance system in East Asia 'remains indispensable' (p. 280) and ought to be strengthened. To this end, he recommends that Washington try to cultivate inter-alliance mini-lateral cooperation such as revitalizing the 'quad' (U.S., Japan, India and

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Australia) as a means of stimulating a 'community of democracies' in the region (p. 282). Because of his acceptance that democracy promotion in China must be a central tenet of U.S. strategy, however, he downplays the complexity of U.S. allies' strategic calculations. Given China's growing economic and political importance, East Asian states are increasingly circumspect about the issues they deem worth risking openly antagonizing China for.

Together, these works highlight that for Washington, the management of its alliances in East Asia – both in the bilateral and regional contexts – may prove to be the greatest challenge of the on-going strategic transition. China's rise is divisive for these alliances as long as Washington is not able to accommodate the very different constraints that its East Asian partners operate under as close geographical, historical and commercial neighbors of China. Even though these alliances seem to have survived the denting of U.S. global legitimacy as a result of the controversial war in Iraq, legitimate American leadership in East Asia will suffer greater questioning if allies feel that Washington is forcing them to choose outright between the U.S. and China. At the very least, therefore, we can expect the maintenance costs of these alliances to rise in the future.

3 'Balance' of power

In the final analysis, these two books are most divergent in terms of their systemic contextualization. While both are works of foreign policy analysis, Christensen's book is about the forging of bipolar stability in the classic sense of mutual containment and power-balancing between two opposing camps. In the contemporary context he briefly assesses alliance and U.S.-China relations management, but without engaging with the broader systemic questions about the post-Cold War distribution of power and authority, even though he is optimistic about U.S. ability to manage China's ascendance peacefully. Friedberg is quite different and this is where his book will spark greatest debate. His starting point is that if the U.S. were to 'permit China as presently constituted to dominate Asia, our prosperity, security, and hopes of promoting the further spread of freedom will be seriously impaired.' (p. 7) Friedberg asks, 'Can American keep its balance?', but what he is really interested in is 'preserving a favourable balance of power' (p. 274), which, to be accurate, turns on maintaining American *preponderance* of power, for his

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nightmare is that 'an illiberal China [will] displace us as the preponderant player in Asia.' (p. 8)

In line with Christensen's timely reminder of the parallels between these periods of transition, Friedberg's polemics echo the Truman administration's turn towards global containment of Communism and maintenance of American preponderance of power in the early Cold War years. As Friedberg observes, 'Preponderance is not a fixed end point but a sliding scale of possibilities.' He sees the Chinese pursuit of preponderance in the following:

> In general ... China's leaders appear intent on making their country the strongest and most influential in its neighbourhood, capable of deterring attacks, threats, or other actions it deems contrary to its interests, resolving disputes over territory and resources according to its preferences, and coercing or persuading others to accede to its wishes on issues ranging from trade and investment, to alliance and third-party basing arrangements, to the treatment of ethnic Chinese populations, and, at least in some cases, the character and composition of their governments. (p. 157)

As Friedberg rightly observes, 'such ambitions would hardly make China unique.' Indeed, it would occur to some readers that the above paragraph – with the exception of ethnic policy – might just as well describe the U.S. position in Asia.

Aside from the polemical tone, two of Friedberg's assumptions will give readers pause. First, that there must be a preponderant power in Asia, which is destined to be subjected to a power transition cycle of rising and declining hegemons, and that power-sharing or more equilateral power-balancing in some form is out of the question. Friedberg adopts this assumption for theoretical as well as ideological reasons that his readers may not all share. The second assumption is that Asia has been and will continue to be dominated; that the nations and political entities of Asia are a somewhat passive canvas or pawns in the epic struggle for mastery between the U.S. and China. Both assumptions are challenged by Christensen's analysis.

Ultimately, these two books provide timely reminders that the modern geopolitical contest in East Asia has been a hard-fought one, and that the strategic transition in Asia may be just about to enter its most unpredictable phase yet. Against this background, as Friedberg (p. 264)

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reminds us, 'China's rise presents an intellectual challenge to the American people and their leader' – and this is not just because, as he notes, China cannot be pigeon-holed easily as a friend or foe. Rather, China is re-emerging as a great power in a manner that conforms neither to the expectations of narrow international relations theories nor to the aspirations of ideological revolutionaries. At the same time, many in the United States feel that its hard-won global primacy is now being threatened in a comprehensive way by a more credible challenger. In this climate, it is incumbent upon scholars and policy-makers to work harder at developing new ways of understanding and living with China and the United States.

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Deconstructing Japan's Image of South Korea Identity in Foreign Policy

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Will the Real Japan Please Stand Up?

How to understand Japan's identity is one of the most enduring themes in research on the country's international relations. In the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of theoretically innovative analyses, which go beyond, and problematize, the alleged 'peace' identity stipulated by Peter J. Katzenstein (1996) and Thomas U. Berger (1998) in the 1990s. Xavier Guillaume (2011) published a monograph last year, while Alexander Bukh (2010) and Taku Tamaki made one valuable

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