
Studies on China’s foreign relations overwhelmingly concentrate on the relationships with powerful countries such as the United States or Russia. This book fills a niche in the literature. It focuses exclusively on China’s relations with the developing countries, divided geographically into several regions, with each region comprising a separate chapter. Together with the introductory and conclusion chapters and two theoretical chapters, this book addresses the continuities and changes in the relationship between China and developing countries.

Mel Gurtov reviews the changing perceptions and policies toward developing countries by successive generations of Chinese leaders. For the early Chinese leaders, the developing countries played three functions –as followers of China’s revolutionary path, deterrents of China’s enemies, and supporters of China in international arena. Moreover, China’s views of the developed world “should be understood within the context of China’s domestic political and economic priorities” (p. 14). Directing foreign policy to protect domestic development has consistently been applied by Chinese leaders, even during the radical Maoist years. David Zweig uses the concept of the “trading state” to illuminate China’s relationship with the developing world. As a trading state, China exhibits neo-mercantilist and other features of the East Asian developmental model. The developing world is important to China as resource suppliers and investment outlets. Hence, to the developing world, China represents both opportunities and threats. China competes with developing countries in drawing FDI, while importing large quantities of goods from developing countries.

In the chapter on China’s relations with Southeast Asia, Jørn Dosch hypothesizes that there is a growing trend among Southeast Asian countries to join the Chinese bandwagon. Even in contentious issue areas such as the disputes in the South China Sea, Dosch argues that most claimants from the region have competed with each other in getting better treatment from China. In another issue area that Dosch looks at –the management of the Mekong River –he finds that China is able to impose its will on the less powerful states. He also discusses the role of China as a foreign aid donor in the region. Dosch argues that “China has integrated ASEAN into a regional order” (p. 76) that reflects strategic thinking of Beijing rather than the other way around. Lawrence Saez and Crystal Chang focus on China’s “peripheral stability” policy toward South Asia. They disaggregate the policy into three categories: “reluctant competition with India; contingent co-operation with Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka; and secretive co-operation with Nepal, the Maldives, and Myanmar (Burma)” (p. 84). One notable contribution in this chapter is the discussion of the increased Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean, which of course has significant regional and global implications. Niklas Swanström looks at Central Asia, and he argues that China’s influence in the region grew only after the demise of the Soviet Union, exemplified most notably by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The initial imperative for forming SCO was security issues such as terrorism and separatism, given that the volatile Xinjiang is close to the region. For this reason, China always sees stability in the region as its principal objective.
George Yu argues that there are three dominant characteristics of China’s Africa policy: continuity, flexibility, and commitment. In terms of continuity, the economic and political ties between China and Africa date back to the 1950s and 1960s, underlined by the core principles of “equal treatment, mutual benefit, noninterference, and respect for sovereignty” (p. 133). In terms of flexibility, China’s removal of ideological consideration from foreign policy has allowed it to extend and build more relations in Africa and to use a variety of foreign policy tools. In terms of commitment, China’s aid to Africa has been steadily increasing, although more of this aid is directly related to China’s quest for energy and resources—the so-called “infrastructure for commodities” (p. 139) model. Yitzhak Shicor reviews China’s Middle East policy, which he finds to be full of contradictions. China opposes US’s presence in the region but recognizes the latter’s contribution to stability. China would like to play a greater role but is reluctant to get involved. China imports most oil from the region but seeks to diversify the oil supply. Shicor is skeptical that China’s oil supply diversification strategy will work, since there is essentially no better alternative. Finally, Nicola Phillips discusses China-Latin America relationship. Phillips puts forth two central arguments: (1) despite China’s efforts to avoid presenting itself as an ideological or geopolitical challenge to the United States, China-Latin American relationship inevitably is shaped by such geopolitical considerations; (2) China’s growing economic ties with Latin America may redirect the latter’s developmental thinking away from domestic manufacturing to commodities export, which ultimately will hurt Latin America’s economic competitiveness.

In both the introductory and concluding chapters, co-editor Lowell Dittmer discusses at length the contradictions of different self-portraits of China. At first it saw itself as the revolutionary leader of the developing world, and that had to be reconciled with Beijing’s united-front policy to serve its own strategic interests. At present, China’s self-reference as the leading developing country has to be reconciled with its own powerful economy. Dittmer contemplates on the dangers of a “relationship. . .that is peer in name but asymmetrically patron-client in fact, while perhaps a useful euphemism diplomatically, may prove sensitive to a charge of hypocrisy” (p. 226). This is a well-edited volume that should be seriously read by scholars, journalists, and policymakers.

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