

Review – Navigating Uncertainty

Written by Anthony Toh Han Yang

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Navigating Uncertainty: Our Region in an Age of Flux

By Joseph Chinyong Liow

World Scientific Press, Singapore, 2024

The era of untrammelled globalization and the enduring spirit of multilateralism of the post-Cold war milieu have faded. The Southeast Asian region is once again confronted by perennial uncertainties stemming from beyond its borders. This is the central theme of *Navigating uncertainty* as the book delves into the most pressing geopolitical, economic, and socio-political challenges that threaten to undermine the cherished peace and prosperity of Southeast Asia. It provides a fine-grained analysis of the broader dynamics of how geopolitical uncertainties are framed and managed from the Southeast Asian experience. From the policy-making perspective, it offers insights on practical self-help strategies for small states navigating a rapidly changing world. This book is an edited collection of Professor Joseph Liow's lecture series as the 13th S. R. Nathan fellow endowed by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to advance knowledge and ideas of critical interest to Singapore as a thriving city-state.

The book begins by addressing the complexities of the ongoing US-China rivalry which is widely regarded as one of the most pervasive challenges for Southeast Asia. Professor Liow cautions against a facile illustration of the origin and contour of US-China competition. Stressing the constructivist notion that 'power is what states make of it' (p.10), Professor Liow argues that the trajectory of US-China relations have to be evaluated through how US and China perceive and react to the power transition vis-a-vis other material and ideational paradigms, namely, the intensity of the security dilemma, prevalence of nationalistic sentiments, presence of domestic political constraints as well as the personal idiosyncrasies of leaders in Washington and Beijing. He concludes with nuance, that an all-out war between the US and China is not inevitable although present systemic and domestic conditions would lock both states in a fierce competition that is bound to sharpen by the day (p.23).

As far as one can tell, the book's eclectic framework on examining the US-China rivalry is a comprehensive one that accounts for several important international, domestic, and individual-level variables that could contaminate Sino-American relations. However, this approach still raises some problems. Of primary concern here is that the framework gives insufficient attention towards how other smaller states or perhaps institutional actors could influence the trajectory of US-China relations both in the short and longer term. The relationship between Washington and Beijing cannot be perceived through an oversimplified two-player game for the obvious reason that the rivalry takes place in the broader global context with other consequential actors. Likewise, both great powers are not standalone entities wherein they have established extensive formal and informal partnerships with smaller states whose weaker but no less trivial presence may influence Washington and Beijing's strategic calculations towards each other. These spotlight the necessity of analyzing the nested dynamics of US-China relations through the prism of how external third-party actors may positively or negatively affect the course of US-China relations.

The book's proposed framework also implies that each of the aforementioned structural, national, and individual-level factors, be it nationalism or the security dilemma, affects US-China relations through piecemeal mechanisms. The book does not provide an in-depth examination of how each individual factor may amplify, obstruct or distort another factor to produce a significantly more potent force that steers US-China relations towards one direction or another. Incorporating these analytical dimensions would yield a more robust understanding of US-China relations.

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One noteworthy aspect of the book stems from its bold attempt to stretch the boundaries for which Singapore could maximize its autonomy amid intensifying US-China competition. Of all the five strategies Professor Liow has outlined in the first chapter, the one that probably stood out the most in terms of novelty and thought-provoking quality is the need for Singapore to increase its relevance to both US and Chinese interests in the economic, strategic, and commercial spheres such that neither great powers would find it increasingly hard to pressure Singapore to choose sides (p.18). From a theoretical standpoint, there are innovative merits to this strategy since the prevailing literature is primarily focuses on autonomy preservation through institutional-discursive means (Loh, 2023) and there is relatively little attention towards how small states can capitalize relevance vis-à-vis great powers in a way to preserve its autonomy on the international stage. However, from a policymaking perspective, there may be formidable hurdles for small states which are endowed with significantly lesser resources than great powers (Long, 2017) to effectively cultivate relevance to a point that great powers could no longer take it for granted. Nevertheless, the book provides a useful starting point to embolden future research efforts on this insightful strategy.

With its discussion on the trajectory of the US-China rivalry, it makes practical sense for the book to also unpack how geopolitical competition is reorganizing the structure of the contemporary global order. What makes Professor Liow's account of the shifting international order salient is his attempt to go beyond the conventional narrative of polarity transition to examine how the emerging multipolar system may shape the conduct of international politics and interactions (p.58). He argued that states in a contested multipolar environment would be increasingly challenged to enact foreign policy in ways that reflect a more diverse range of perspectives, given that more states are becoming vocal and assertive in exerting their regional interests (p.59). This observation is a trenchant reminder to policymakers since multipolarity is likely to be long term and it would be prudent for states to search for constructive avenues to stay ahead of the challenges posed in a volatile environment.

Professor Liow reflects on what the multipolar order means for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (p.62). He stresses that US disinterest in global trade as well as the creation of China-led multilaterals have seriously challenged ASEAN's position and that ASEAN must be strategically agile to reinvent itself in ways to retain its regional centrality (p.63). Speaking of ASEAN centrality, Professor Liow is right in explaining how external powers come to support ASEAN's centrality due to its low cost and enticing prospects for to make gains (p.64). However, such an observation opens the author to the criticism of being overly optimistic. Indeed, major powers and their respective led institutions have supported ASEAN centrality, but the more important question lies in both consistency and quality of support for ASEAN centrality (Pukhrem, 2024; Zhang, 2023). Here, it should be noted that this support is usually at the external power's convenience wherein there are numerous occasions of inconvenience where ritual lip service is paid towards ASEAN centrality (Acharya, 2017; Beeson, 2022; Li, 2022). On this aspect, it would be especially interesting if the book further explores how ASEAN centrality could be recalibrated such that it would be taken seriously by external powers in the region.

The concluding chapter of the book explores the nexus between identity and politics as well as how these may compromise the domestic stability of Southeast Asian states. It features two highly pertinent case studies which are the recent Israel-Hamas conflict (pp.78-96) and China's rejuvenation grand narrative (pp.96-103) within Indonesia and Malaysia. Professor Liow gives a structured account for how each of the two events which have offshore origins but nonetheless bear rippling consequences. He explains how the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict heightens religious tensions that in-turn polarized the domestic climate in both Indonesia and Malaysia such that the relationship between non-Muslims minorities and the Muslim majority in both countries are further strained (p.96). By the same token, China's re-Sinicisation efforts which are premised on the collective duty of all overseas Chinese in realizing its national rejuvenation goal has also cast greater suspicions on the loyalty of the minority ethnic Chinese population who are already facing equal rights issues in their respective home countries (p.102). Given the complexity of the deepening ethnocentrism taking root in Indonesia and Malaysia, Professor Liow steers clear of any pretensions that such issues could be resolved.

Despite the book's well-elaborated explication of how distant events with strong cultural imprints have destabilized domestic politics in Indonesia and Malaysia, it does not relate much to how the recent Israel-Hamas conflict and China's rise could have impacted Singapore as a city-state with a diverse ethnic population. Given that the book is commissioned under a S. R. Nathan fellowship to advance the study of Singapore, this leaves readers wandering if

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the Singapore case study is deliberately omitted on sensitive grounds for not wanting to stir unnecessary tensions.

Notwithstanding the above analytical lapses, *Navigating uncertainty. Our Region in an age of flux* is an excellent addition to the study of Southeast Asian politics and society. The book's rich vignettes of information on the complex challenges and opportunities that besets the Southeast Asian region makes it a highly recommended book for undergraduate and advanced readers to grasp a firm understanding on the past, present, and prospective general state of affairs in Southeast Asia.

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