

Review – US Strategy in the Asian Century: Empowering Allies and Partners

Written by Eerishika Pankaj

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By Abraham M. Denmark

Colombia University Press 2020

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as one of the most strategically and geopolitically important regions of the world; simultaneously, the competition between the two leading powers of the United States (US) and China – on fronts ranging from technology to security to ideology – has only intensified. China grows more and more powerful; even amidst an unprecedented pandemic that arose from within its borders and has threatened the established trade, connectivity and power-balance of the world, Chinese revisionist tendencies have showed no signs of diminishing. Meanwhile, the presence of the US in the Indo-Pacific – and Asia at large – has waned over the years; Washington needs to recalibrate its approach in order to regain power, promote regional stability and sustain an active presence in a region increasingly under China's complete sphere of influence.

Abraham Denmark's book *US Strategy in the Asian Century: Empowering Allies and Partners* offers a timely addition to the present literature on how the US must reorient its outlook amidst an increasingly aggressive and powerful rising China (such as Graham Allison's pivotal 2018 publication *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Jonathan Ward's 2019 book *China's Vision of Victory* and Robert Spalding's 2019 book *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept*). Importantly, despite being a 2020, Trump-era publication, the book offers insights that will have long-standing value for new US President Joseph Biden and his administration, speaking to the longevity of Denmark's deductions. The US' own power has become increasingly unreliable – further dented by an 'America First' ideology implemented by Donald Trump that severely impacted trust between the US and its allies as well as partners. President Biden has promised an administration that will aim to renew US alliances in order to build a future world order where America will 'lead again'. The book begins with the deduction that US "allies and partners have played a highly consequential role in America's foreign and national security policy since before its founding" (p.1). Denmark presents arguments that advance this very goal in a pragmatic manner to allow mutual growth for the US and its allies and partners, while allowing Washington to harness the true potential of its partnerships. Biden's move to begin plurilateral engagements by hosting the first leaders' summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue powers (Australia, India, Japan and the US) is a move towards re-synergizing these very alliances and partnerships that Denmark argues for.

Building on his expertise in both practical and theoretical politics and policy-making, Denmark presents a holistic dimension of the US' Asia strategy while also outlining the Chinese perspective. He attests that despite President Xi Jinping's emphasis on foreign affairs, a major attribute of China as a "great power" is that its policies are still "primarily motivated by domestic consideration" (p.40). Such an insight offers a lens to gauge China's outlook towards not just the world but its own standing in the international order. China's 2021 'Two Sessions' have seen the official endorsement of the 14th Five Year Plan, which focuses on a dual-circulation strategy, preparation for achieving Beijing's centennial goals and a simultaneous thrust on increasing the defence budget in line with national growth, highlighting present examples of this very domestic-centered vision. Furthermore, "ideology also plays a role in shaping Chinese foreign policy" with China having objected to the US' global framework of alliances as

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reminiscent of a “Cold War mentality” (p.41). Denmark hence argues that the US must, while re-adapting its Indo-Pacific policy, give equal weight to convincing China that the preservation of the existing global order is in its favor. According to Denmark, China will show support for the system if it believes the mechanism is in its interests – such as nonproliferation. Such a recommendation is something the Biden administration would do well to take seriously, keeping in mind the diplomatic *faux pas* that the US-China diplomatic summit at Alaska proved to be. China will not back away from its international and domestic policies simply because the US expects – or wishes – it to.

Denmark argues that the Asia of today is “unstable, unpredictable and increasingly well-armed” (p.87). The region is supporting an increasingly multipolar order, with powers like India, Japan and Australia seeing remarkable growth as well. There is, hence, a new “regional heterarchy” in place wherein major powers are competing for complete advantages across all “aspects of national power” while middle powers practice “hedging strategies” (p.87). Denmark argues that as military challenges from China and North Korea evolve, the “United States must evolve as well” (p.117). This must be achieved by significantly investing in military technology and readjusting US military posture to account for new threats. For its part, China since 2016 has continued with its consistent single-digit growth to the annual defence budget, which increased by 6.8 per cent to 1.35 trillion yuan (USD 209 billion) in 2021. But another major area that requires focus vis-a-vis US foreign policy exists outside the scope of the Pentagon, increasing the number of US diplomats (p.118). In 2019 China became the country with the highest number of diplomats. Denmark’s recommendation especially supports Biden’s “America is back, diplomacy is back” gambit. Furthermore, it can provide major pushback to China’s ‘charm offensive’ (coined by Joshua Kurlantzick in his 2007 book, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, which refers to Beijing’s use of soft-power to enhance its global status) and ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy (using of confrontational offensives by Chinese diplomats to defend China’s national interests).

China’s non-negotiable insistence on its ‘One China’ policy being followed by international counterparts has become a matter of much renewed debate amidst Beijing’s increasingly assertive actions. For instance, in India, a lack of reciprocity by China in endorsing a ‘One India’ policy (as seen with China’s claims on Arunachal Pradesh and along the India-China border) has highlighted hypocrisy by the Chinese government in Indian strategic circles, especially after clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020. In a dedicated section of the book titled “Country Studies” (p.159), Denmark provides individual focus on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, Europe (focusing on France, Germany and the United Kingdom as well as the NATO headquarters in Brussels), India, Japan, Philippines, South Korea, New Zealand, Taiwan and Vietnam. Such analysis allows deeper insights into the nuanced concerns each of these vital geo-political players has with respect to China. A read of them all allows us to draw out commonalities in China’s behavior. As seen with the approach to ‘One India’, reciprocity is a major failing of the Chinese with their expectation of unilateral actions by Beijing left unquestioned leading to strife in its bilateral ties across the globe.

Such a diversified focus connects with Denmark’s pivotal and conclusive argument: US Strategy towards Asia cannot be a choice between China-centric or alliance centric. Instead, it is important to accept that the “duality in American strategy towards the Indo-Pacific is shifting” (p.228). Concurrently, it is important to note that while Denmark’s work is a critical addition, it remains a pre-COVID and pre-Biden publication. Moreover, its focus is on ascertaining what the future of Washington’s strategy towards Asia should look like; however, the author’s hypothesis stems from the perspective of the US in a position of strength as the reigning status-quo power. Yet, countries of the Indo-Pacific – middle power states like India and Japan – have begun to model their Indo-Pacific outlooks based on regional power parity. Similarly, while the US is focused on limiting China’s expanse, China is no longer focused solely on dethroning the US; rather, Beijing’s focus is its own growth, with everything else being a casualty of its quest to secure its great power and national identity. Hence, Denmark’s deductions must be bound together with a regional-order in Asia that has grown accustomed to – and is increasingly progressing with or without – a waning US presence.

Importantly, Denmark’s book concludes that the US approach to China “cannot be successful” without focusing on alliances and partnerships; simultaneously, US ties with allies and partners “cannot be successful” without a realistic and pragmatic understanding of China (p.228). For the new Biden administration, understanding this pivotal policy reality is necessary to fulfil goals of having the US “lead again”. US policy towards Asia has been largely China

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centric, limiting itself to containing Beijing's expanse rather than focusing independently on its Indo-Pacific partners beyond the Chinese threat. This outlook must see immediate positive change; as Denmark concludes, the time for "dichotomies" is gone.

About the author:

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