

Review: In the Dragon's Shadow

Uwe Hoering, Dezember 2020

Heading into the Chinese or, may be more appropriate, into the Asian century, the rivalry between China and the United States is most often in the spotlight. In Europe people are also concerned about how the old continent should and could position itself or whether it will fall by the wayside. Other major players such as Japan, Taiwan and India are more the domain of specialists. Hardly anyone outside Asia and academic circles is really looking at Southeast Asia – except just now, when the world's largest free trade zone was agreed with [RCEP](#). But this is a passing interest that is also mainly focused on the question: What does this mean for China, what games is Beijing playing? And in Europe it raises the anxious expectations: What does this mean for our economy, our companies, our exports?

Centrally located

Sebastian Strangio's book „[In the Dragon's Shadow](#)“, published in August, focuses on ten Southeast Asian countries, from Myanmar to the Philippines, from Vietnam to Indonesia. This is a challenge, given that the region has a population of 660 million, is economically, culturally and politically extremely heterogeneous, and has some stubborn and self-confident governments. At least, since the founding of the regional organization ASEAN in 1967, political conflicts and differences of opinion have largely been mediated in a kind of truce agreement. Since it has also been striving for far-reaching economic integration, it likes to compare itself with the European Union. „Southeast Asians now think regionally,“ the journalist is convinced, even if they still have very different, conflicting and sometimes divergent interests.

Geographically, Southeast Asia is in the center of the greater Indo-Pacific region, which has been dominated by the United States for decades but currently feels rather neglected by President Trump: India in the west, China in the north, Japan and South Korea in the east, Australia and New Zealand in the south. Above all, however, it lies in the core shadow of China, which, according to Sebastian Strangio, views it „as essential to its national interest.“ And thus the region has also emerged as a geopolitical center of heated strategic competition, economic, political, military, and cultural. In particular, the dispute over the South China Sea, to which China has territorial claims, threatens to become an explosive device with international repercussions.

Balancing act

In many areas, there are large interfaces of common interests and perceptions with the powerful neighbour to the north. Economically, China emerged years ago as the most important and thus also politically influential partner, even though Japan is still the largest investor. Ideologically, the People's Republic sells itself as a committed defender of national sovereignty and self-determination, „two ideas with deep resonance in post-colonial Southeast Asia“. The rejection of Western liberal-democratic norms and of universal human rights is also an increasingly shared view.

On the other hand, there is a growing concern about China's dominance, which in many cases has historical roots. Especially with Xi Jinping, „fears of Chinese coercion and subversion have revived,“ the author observes. Thus, it is a constant balancing act for every country, a challenge „how to benefit from China's booming economy

while safeguarding its sovereignty from the perils of overdependence.“ In this delicate situation, however, which requires diplomatic skill, consideration, and a balance of interests that is perceived as fair, Sebastian Strangio diagnoses an increasing „great-state autism“ in China, the „difficulty that large powers face in breaking free of entrenched ways of thinking, acting, and behaving.“

Eight country chapters describe the different ways in which the balancing act is performed, responding to China’s long shadow based on each country’s own history and economic and political situation. Some have harnessed Chinese power as a shield against Western pressures to enact democratic reforms like Cambodia, or as a means of developing their infrastructure. Others have sought to offset China’s clout by building up economic and security ties to the US, Japan or India. „All have been promiscuous in tilting, balancing, and hedging their bets.“

New thinking required

With the background of more than a decade of reporting in the region, Sebastian Strangio describes knowledgeably, with an eye for detail as well as for the major historical lines, state level actions as well as concerns of the people, for example along the Mekong, the lifeline of mainland Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, he could only touch on the impact of Corona in the afterword. A particularly exciting recurrent theme is his remarks on the Chinese diaspora, which has long lived in many countries and controls large parts of the economy, on Chinese tourism and labour migration: widespread resentment, which has repeatedly turned into hostility and persecution, and speculations about „dual loyalties“ pose an interesting challenge to Beijing’s reputation in the region.

Thus, the book helps to understand China’s strengths and the reasons for its successes in a condensed, vivid form, using Southeast Asia as an example. But it also highlights the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Beijing’s current strategy – of a policy described as „more improvised, contradictory, and chaotic that at first it might appear.“ As such, it also raises implications for possible policy changes, for new directions in relations, for new thinking, acting, and behaving.

Therefore, Chinese state policy advisors should also read it in order to understand that Beijing must free itself from the diagnosed „great-state autism“. Because otherwise, the rejection of Chinese dominance could increase: „Fortified by a potent new sense of national pride and identity, the nation states of Southeast Asia were (and remain) fiercely defensive of their sovereignty.“

Translated by DeepL.com (free version)

Sebastian Strangio, [In the Dragon’s Shadow](#). Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century. Yale University Press. August 2020