

Sometimes Zhao seems very certain about issues that would require a little more discussion, rather than a simple description. For example, it is far from clear how, for example, Japan's "informal mechanisms" of policymaking are so different from China's that they can really explain the course of Japan's foreign policy but not China's. One might reasonably argue the opposite, i.e. that understanding the informal mechanisms of policymaking may be more useful, though surely more difficult, in China's case.

Zhao also is very confident that "Confucianism will continue to serve as a leading source of ideas in China for its efforts to pursue modernization" (p. 103). Yet, the evidence that he musters to show the policy impact of those ideas consists of five paragraphs that include only one reference in a footnote to a statement made by the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi. While there is no doubt that Confucian ideas can be found easily in the work of some scholars or in the initiatives of the Chinese government, any scholar of international relations knows that that correlation is not causation, especially over a long period of time such as the one covered by Zhao's book.

Beyond the individual chapters, the same lack of clarity is evident in the above-mentioned lack of a real conclusion for the book. While the reader benefits a lot from the factual knowledge gained by reading the 200-plus pages of *Great Power Strategies*, it is not the same in terms of new interpretations of current events and ways of thinking about the foreseeable future.

To conclude, there is no doubt that Zhao's *Great Power Strategies* will be an extremely useful source for students and all those who have just approached the study of East Asian international relations. Scholars will also find a number of interesting anecdotes and case studies in there. Yet, many readers will also be somewhat dissatisfied by the vagueness that sometimes becomes evident in the text.

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## China's Belt and Road Initiative: The Impact on Sub-regional Southeast Asia

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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one of China's most ambitious efforts to expand its growing influence in international trade and development. Its geopolitical motivations tend to get more attention, in line with the alarming narratives about China's growing material capabilities, perceived dissatisfaction with the status quo arrangements in the regional and global order, and increasing anxiety in the West, especially in the United States, about the dangers of an imminent power transition amidst an intensifying US-China competition. It is in this context that this co-edited book, part of Routledge's *Frontiers of Political Economy* series, provides a refreshing and important analysis on the origins, purpose and impact of the BRI. The findings focus exclusively on China's relations with sub-regional Southeast Asia through the BRI framework. The book debunks many of the hyperbolic assessments about the BRI and shifts the attention and empirical analysis to domestic



politics and considerations. In so doing, it uncovers a wealth of information regarding sub-regional Southeast Asia's receptivity to and interest in the BRI. The analysis points to how the numerous BRI projects reflect the developmental needs, interests and priorities of countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework, as well as China's lesser-developed areas like Yunnan and Guangxi.

The book's contextualization of China's actual economic influence in sub-regional Southeast Asia further reveals how and why regional economic integration and cooperation processes are unfolding. In the case study chapters, the book offers rich and detailed insights into some of the key bilateral economic interactions, as well as the challenges of China's engagement in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. For instance, growing concerns over debt-trap diplomacy and the lack of stringent oversight of the BRI projects' environmental impact are often met with local push-backs to China's initiatives and can, at times, even lead to renegotiations. As the authors note, "the utility of BRI-related projects and investments should always be at the centre when agreeing on infrastructure investment, but at the same time, it may also remind the government in Beijing that domestic political developments within participating countries should be considered additional risk factors in their lending policy" (p. 9). In the book's empirical analyses in chapters three and four, growing concerns over energy investment and demand, for example, provide the basis for reorienting some of the BRI projects to support innovative, low-emission and energy-efficient ones and renewable sources. In addition, the book also delves into China's BRI projects with Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. In each of these three case studies, the contributing authors further the co-editors' overall framing of the book's argument, focusing on the domestic drivers for the BRI collaborations and the measurable impact such projects are having on local economies. In almost all cases, the economic impact – from connecting farms to markets or new economic corridors through improved infrastructure to the supply of reliable and consistent source of electrical power – is notable and provides a much-needed boost in these Southeast Asian countries' infrastructure development.

The book uniquely links regional economic cooperative frameworks like the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism (LMC) to the BRI. Critiquing them in tandem generates more coherence and helps external observers better understand the extent of China's regional economic influence. The next logical step for the co-editors would be to broaden the scope and provide a cross-comparison of China's BRI impact in sub-regional Southeast Asia with other parts of the world, like Central Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific islands, Central and South America and Europe. Additionally, the editors might also consider how China's economic largesse compares with other regional competitors like Japan, India, the European Union and the US. Providing such a comparison in the empirical analysis would enable those interested to better assess China's actual impact and influence at the local and regional levels. Similarly, comparing China's BRI figures with data from the Asian Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the World Bank, USAID and/or the International Monetary Fund would also be crucial to further contextualize the impact of foreign assistance from a variety of sources. These next steps would set up an important sequel to an ambitious project, but doing so would further strengthen this book's impact and argument and increase its overall explanatory power and value. If what the editors observe in sub-regional Southeast Asia can also be seen in other parts of the world, then the nuanced assessment derived from such patterns of behaviour would provide a critical counterargument to the prevailing critical voices and deepening scepticism of China's BRI and geopolitical ambitions more broadly.

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