
As Beijing grows more comfortable with its great power status, one of the more pressing questions about its developing ‘clout’ in the international system is whether the country will continue to abide by the world order established by the West during the last century, or whether it will begin to challenge the norms established by the United States and its allies. Despite the foreign policy idea of a ‘peaceful rise’ that dominated much of China’s international relations under Hu Jintao, there is the strong possibility that China may seek to redefine the current international system to reflect better its interests, a pattern established by great powers in the past. However, *China and Coexistence* suggests a different view of Chinese power and foreign policy, one that is more conservative and cautious, even in light of the remarkable progress that China has made in advancing its global status and widening its security interests beyond the Asia–Pacific region. As a result, this work is a welcome and sober second thought to counter more alarmist analyses of Beijing’s developing military strategies. While Beijing has not been subordinate to the international system, neither has it sought to overturn it. Instead, China’s foreign policy, it is argued, has consisted of a successful application of ‘peaceful coexistence’ policies with both its neighbours and with the United States, providing Beijing with the ability to rise internationally without sparking conflict and overt competition. These policies have been very well suited to China as a non-traditional great power, and as Odgaard notes, ‘coexistence is a strategy for rising, would be great powers that do not command the military and economic capabilities of a full-blown great power, but that have already obtained political influence at a great power level’ (p. 8).

Chinese coexistence policies are described as measured engagement with neighbours and other states, while maintaining a long-held position on the sanctity of sovereignty and non-interference. The study also argues that measuring Chinese power and capabilities solely *vis-à-vis* the United States, despite the obvious importance of that relationship, is too limiting given Beijing’s growing interests with other states and regions. *China and Coexistence* seeks to describe Chinese foreign policies more broadly, both in their historical context, comparing Beijing’s policies today with successful and failed policies of rising powers in earlier periods, as well as examining more current issues such as border disputes with Russia and India, Chinese policies in the United
Nations regarding Iran, Sudan and Myanmar, and the timely matters of contested sovereignty in the East and South China Seas. The historical cases examine attempts by previous great powers to manage their rise (or fall) through coexistence policies with varying degrees of success. The former USSR, for example, is viewed as attempting to pursue a coexistence policy, while at the same time trying constantly to enhance its status in the Cold War international arena. In another example, Britain’s policy of peaceful coexistence in the period between the world wars foundered because of its misreading of the changing power dynamics in continental Europe.

The sections on Chinese maritime security policies provide a very useful background to the recent diplomatic clashes over the South China Sea (with the Philippines and Vietnam) and the status of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (with Japan). As the book explains about the former issue, ‘China’s goal in the South China Sea appears to be to maintain a physical presence that enables it to gradually expand its control over critical sea lanes without jeopardising policy coordination with the other littoral states’ (p. 92), meaning South-East Asia. Japan, by contrast, is portrayed as a challenge to — practically a thorn in the side of — China’s coexistence policies, largely because of Tokyo’s perceived ongoing challenges to China’s regional interests: ‘Beijing exhibits few qualms in using coercive diplomatic instruments to compel Tokyo to meet its demands and to publically disgrace Japan as a responsible great power’ (p. 172). Beijing’s policies towards its frontier territory of Xinjiang and the island of Taiwan are also described as a sometimes discordant mix of attempted coexistence and insular nationalism.

Further afield, Beijing’s relationship with the United Nations and especially the UN Security Council is examined in the work through a coexistence lens. While China is rarely able to put forward its own agendas in the Security Council, it has frequently pushed for non-interference in states’ domestic affairs, for the consent of governments when international operations are undertaken, and an adherence to international law. This has meant that China often collides, sometimes along with Russia, with more flexible interpretations of the rules of intervention proposed by Western members of the Security Council. This is illustrated by the Iran case and others described in this book (and readers looking for background explanations for China’s recent ‘contrarian’ policies towards the Syrian civil war will find good comparison cases here). This book is highly recommended not only for students of China’s politics and international affairs, but also for others who are seeking a deeper understanding of what motivates Beijing’s current security concerns. While it can be debated whether China’s adherence to peaceful coexistence is as fixed as this