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In recent years, historians almost have deconstructed completely the conventional wisdom that the Cold War was primarily an East–West conflict under the domination of the two superpowers. Instead, scholars now reframe the Cold War as a global contest whereby multiple players promoted different models of economic development and ways of life in competition to win hearts and minds. Accordingly, the Third World has emerged as the central, rather than the peripheral, battleground of the Cold War. Brazinsky’s new book, Winning the Third World, is an important contribution to this historiographic shift.

Focusing on the Cold War Sino-American rivalry in the Third World, Brazinsky demonstrates that this competition was an important priority for both Washington and Beijing, and that it played a pivotal role in shaping the Cold War’s evolution. The most important driving force behind this struggle was not strategic gains but status. As Brazinsky puts it, “Sino-American rivalry in the Third World was, in essence, a competition over status” (p. 4). While recognizing status as a slippery concept that perhaps one can best understand as a state’s relative standing within a hierarchy, Brazinsky argues that Beijing’s overall Cold War objective in the Third World was to gain prestige, legitimacy, and honor, implementing a strategy of positioning itself as the first among equals in the Third World, promoting China as a successful example of postcolonial nation-building, and building a leadership position among the Afro-Asian nations. Washington, on the other hand, believed that if China succeeded in improving its status, it would threaten the U.S.-led international order. This fear drove the United States to devote its resources to frustrating China’s pursuit of status in the Third World.

The book’s opening chapter traces the Sino-American rivalry in the Third World from 1919 to 1950. Even before the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Brazinsky argues, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) already
believed that the Chinese revolution was bound to restoring China’s international status and becoming a model for worldwide struggles against colonialism. Americans slowly but eventually came to understand the CCP as a threat to the U.S.-led liberal international order. During the 1950s, the U.S.-China competition for status continued under the new Cold War framework. Brazinsky devotes four chapters to examining various aspects of that rivalry. The focus on status allows him to examine a broad range of Cold War issues from a new perspective. China’s pursuit of status obliged Beijing to intervene in the Korean War, support Communist movements in Indochina, and criticize U.S. policy in the Third World whenever possible. Washington, on the other hand, was obliged to frustrate China’s effort to export revolution, support Taiwan, and maintain a trade embargo against China to deny the legitimacy and prestige Beijing so aspired to attain. Meanwhile, the PRC launched a peace offensive in the Third World to create a new image of itself as a peaceful, anti-colonial power. This strategy involved promoting the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, wooing important Third World countries such as India, Indonesia, and Egypt, and offering limited economic aid. The United States, accordingly, mobilized its resources and allies to block China’s effort to achieve a leadership position among the Afro-Asian nations. The two countries’ rivalry over status also spilled into the area of cultural competition, as each used a variety of propaganda tools to promote its own status, while undermining the status of the enemy.

During the 1960s, the radicalization of Chinese politics further intensified the competition for status. In the other four chapters, Brazinsky demonstrates how the Sino-Soviet split, the Sino-Indian border conflict, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution radicalized Beijing’s foreign policy in the Third World. No longer a champion of peaceful coexistence, China in the 1960s promoted a more radical, militant version of Afro-Asian unity, which emphasized anti-American and Anti-Soviet policies. Beijing launched a diplomatic offensive to create the largest possible united front of Afro-Asian nations as a militant, anti-imperialist alternative to the two Cold War camps. It actively supported wars of national liberation in Indochina and Africa. Not surprisingly, Washington feared Beijing’s radical vision, coupled with its racial rhetoric of unifying all subaltern people, would become a fatal threat for a liberal world order. In fact, the United States gradually came to regard the PRC as a bigger threat than the Soviet Union in terms of its ideology. The desire to deny China the status it sought in the Third World thus became an important driving force behind American involvement in the Vietnam War and other Cold War adventures. As Brazinsky shows, the competition for status was no less intensive in the area of economic aid, as both sponsored nation-building projects in the Third World.