

Naval War College Review

Volume 63
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 15

2010

The Vital Triangle: China, the United States and the Middle East

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Robert A.; Alterman, Jon B.; and Garver, John W. (2010) "The Vital Triangle: China, the United States and the Middle East," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 63 : No. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol63/iss2/15>

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work with the existing hegemonic power of the day? Also, to what extent can, and should, Beijing further its interests militarily? Horner sees this as part of a more fundamental question and cites a Chinese intellectual: “Do we Chinese have the possibility or necessity to form our own discourse of modernity, or do we open a ‘branch office’ of the Western discourse of modernity in China”?

I commend this book to general readers in search of intellectually stimulating but accessible material, to teachers of survey courses at the advanced undergraduate or graduate level, and to specialists seeking insights into their own studies of Chinese history.

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Alterman, Jon B., and John W. Garver. *The Vital Triangle: China, the United States and the Middle East*. Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2008. 144pp. \$16.95

In *The Vital Triangle* Jon Alterman and John Garver present a compact analysis of relations among China, the United States, and the countries of the Mideast. Alterman directs the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Garver is a professor of international affairs at Georgia Tech. They deliver a focused, 133-page narrative, peppered with charts illustrating statistical trends in the energy and arms trades. Based on interviews and conferences with scholars in China and the Mideast, a review of English- and Chinese-language secondary literature, and news reporting, this study is the first attempt at a

comprehensive, “three-dimensional” study of Sino-U.S. relations in regard to the vital Middle East.

Most important, the authors explain how Beijing’s keen awareness of its limited power and its recognition of the importance of Sino-U.S. trade significantly restrain Chinese opposition to U.S. Mideast strategy. Despite China’s growing economic stake in the region and declaratory opposition to U.S. “hegemony,” Beijing gives avoiding direct clashes with Washington higher priority than it does its relations with regional states. A key example is China’s decision in 1997 to scale back significantly cooperation with Iran on nuclear and missile technologies in response to pressure from the Clinton administration. The authors demonstrate how Beijing paradoxically combines a practical policy of risk avoidance with the rhetoric of antihegemonic solidarity, allowing China to reap economic and political profits from Western protection of the flow of Mideast energy and, simultaneously, from regional resentments of that same Western intervention. Beijing’s observations of rough Soviet and American experiences in Mideast geopolitics reinforce its belief in the cost-effectiveness of a low regional security profile.

The book concludes with some reasonable, if not exactly groundbreaking, recommendations for managing frictions in the China–United States–Mideast triangle. Of particular interest to the naval community are those focused on securing the maritime domain within the Persian Gulf. Alterman and Garver advocate collaboration among China and Western and Persian Gulf littoral states on ship identification protocols, cargo security initiatives, and multilateral

search-and-rescue operations. The authors argue that because these steps are limited, practical, and focus on the interests of all sides, China may be willing to engage here, and that further, because of Tehran's desire to stay on good terms with Beijing, Chinese participation might induce some restraint on Iran's part.

The Vital Triangle is well worth reading. It provides a useful contextual framework for placing in perspective overhyped news reports on Sino-U.S. disputes over Chinese arms deals with countries in the region, Beijing's growing concerns about ensuring the security of its oil imports, threats from Egypt and Saudi Arabia that they may seek Beijing's political-military support as an alternative to Washington, and attempts by Iran to appeal to China as a counterweight to Western pressures. Because the book cogently illustrates Beijing's reluctance to take risks or choose sides and thereby diminishes the credibility of China as a counterweight, Americans working diplomatically in the Mideast could even find it useful to provide copies to their host-country interlocutors the next time they try to play "the China card."

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(The views and opinions expressed in this review are the author's alone and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Department of Defense, or U.S. government.)



Jones, Seth G. *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*. New York: Norton, 2009. 414pp. \$27.95

In an August 2009 *Wall Street Journal* article, Seth Jones described meeting villagers in Afghanistan who had never heard of President Hamid Karzai and even thought the U.S. military forces he was traveling with were Soviets, "not realizing that the Soviet army withdrew in 1989." This lack of knowledge may seem implausible in an era of cell phone and Internet communication, but Jones offers a detailed narrative of the historical and modern-day challenges in Afghanistan that makes this ignorance believable. He describes a country populated by diverse ethnic tribes with strong aversions to central governance. As the title implies, he recalls the failure of foreign forces time and again to tame and govern this disparate Afghan populace. From Alexander the Great in 330 BC to the British Empire in the nineteenth century, to the Soviet invasion of the 1970s, Afghanistan has been seemingly unconquerable. Against this background Jones demonstrates the monumental challenge that the United States faces as it attempts to do what other "empires" could not—"create a new order" in Afghanistan. He clearly demonstrates that "the lessons from the past empires provide a stark lesson."

A well-respected political scientist at RAND, Seth Jones clearly has the credibility to take on the task of breaking down and explaining the complicated Afghan environment. Jones is an adjunct professor at Georgetown University, has taught at the Naval Postgraduate School, and has visited Afghanistan numerous times since 11 September 2001. *In the Graveyard of Empires* is painstakingly researched, with over a thousand notes citing interviews, documents, books, news articles, video clips, and written statements