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1989, a Watershed in Chinese History?

David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds*

Berkeley, UC Press, 2008, 362 pp.

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- 1 David Lampton argues that for the next 20 years, China and the United States will be engaged in a “double gamble“ in which the United States is required to bet that Chinese leaders are more interested in the needs of developing their economy than external aggression and will therefore become “a responsible, decent role model for others,” (p. 2) while China’s leaders are required to bet that the United States will not work to constrain China’s return to power and prosperity. The argument is based on analysis of three forms of power: might, money, and minds. Following chapters on each of these, Lampton includes a chapter analysing China’s relations with its neighbours, a chapter on China’s domestic vulnerabilities, and a conclusion considering “what Chinese power means for America and the world.“ (p.252)
- 2 Lampton’s scholarship sets a high standard. He draws considerable insight from international relations and comparative political theory to make sophisticated and nuanced arguments. For example, he distinguishes between “power,“ defined as the capacity to achieve purposes, and “impact,“ defined as effect on others without reference to goals, to argue that China has a great deal of impact that is often perceived as power. His research supplies reams of relevant and useful information, drawing on many insightful interviews with officials and scholars in China and other Asian countries.
- 3 The main thrust is to reassure readers that China’s leaders aim to keep their side of this bargain. Prof. Lampton is favourably impressed with the growth of China’s military might. While he documents China’s increasing ability to project power, he also argues that Chinese leaders have reassured neighbours that no harm is intended, and in contrast to George W. Bush, they understand that excessive reliance on force is counterproductive. Moreover, the United States will retain superior force for some

time to come. As regards China's increasing economic strength, Lampton argues that China's impact as a seller is often exaggerated, while China's power as a buyer is underappreciated. While noting the considerable power China musters by effectively coordinating aid and economic transactions with foreign policy goals, he also notes China's economic muscle may cause resentment, as when Africans, Brazilians, and others are left as suppliers of raw materials with little value added. A good portion of the chapter on minds celebrates the high quality of China's leaders and international representatives, who, Lampton argues, have done an outstanding job of representing China to the world. While Lampton's evaluation of the "Beijing Consensus" is equivocal and he argues that democracy has stronger appeal, he astutely notes that China is an attractive model for becoming prosperous quickly, and that China's authoritarian politics may especially appeal to elites in poorer countries.

- 4 In his chapter on "China and Its Neighbors," Lampton's discussion is framed by the observations that "China's objective in the region is not to dictate outcomes so much as to prevent others in the region from undertaking activities that threaten core Chinese interests," and that "China's neighbors...seek 'water far away' (the United States) to help manage the 'fire nearby' (China)." (p.169) This framework makes sense of what Lampton rightly argues is a difficult and complicated neighbourhood, but the distinction between not dictating outcomes and preventing threats to core interests breaks down over issues such as preventing Japan from becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council or preventing Taiwan from gaining *de jure* independence. The tenor of the argument on China's regional role can be drawn from an earlier comment that "almost all instances of China's external use of force (...) have had something to do with borders and sovereignty" (p.16), which Lampton seems to take as evidence that Beijing is a defensive power. But what are reasonable borders to defend? China's extravagant territorial claims in the South China Sea and territorial disputes with Japan and India receive only brief mention. Lampton delicately avoids giving Taiwan more than passing reference while discussing China's neighbours, and comes close to stating that the U.S. ought to accept China's claim that their interest in Taiwan is defensive when he concludes that "I find little reason to think that peaceful change in the cross-strait political relationship in the direction of closer association (...) would be adverse to core American interests" (p.270). In short, the argument is that the Chinese government's desire to be the dominant regional power, as well as its territorial claims and attitude toward Taiwan, are fundamentally reasonable and therefore not a threat to the United States or the world, as long as the United States, in particular, does not adopt an alarmist or threatening attitude. The chapter on China's domestic politics argues that domestic problems tie the hands of China's leaders and press China toward democracy. As this book was published in 2008, Lampton cannot be expected to give vulnerability to international economic downturn as much attention as if he were writing today. Otherwise the list of vulnerabilities is credible and backed with the plentiful data that is found throughout this book. The argument on democratisation is framed with the comparative political theory that modernisation requires democratisation, as found in Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell's classic *Comparative Politics* text and Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*. Thus Chinese leaders who work to overcome these obstacles to modernisation are, in Lampton's eyes, leading the way to democracy. Confidence in the likelihood of democracy perhaps accounts for his scepticism of the need to emphasise human rights in foreign policy, a predilection that he dismisses as an impractical

American ideology. It may also account for the very limited discussion of China's support for some of the world's worst dictators in Burma and the many other actions the Chinese government has taken to weaken international respect for human rights. Those who are sceptical of the teleological argument that modernisation requires democratisation might instead see China's leaders as sustaining an authoritarian hierarchy by any means they judge effective, and may therefore doubt that the Chinese state will be a benign force in world politics.

- 5 In short, this is a finely crafted and meticulously researched book that ably articulates what is arguably the dominant perspective on China in the Western world, e.g., that China poses some challenges, but that the United States and the rest of the world can accommodate these without giving up core interests, and that China faces domestic challenges that will most likely result in modernisation along familiar patterns. This book is not above reproach, but surely deserves a place on many reading lists.

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