

China–US Competition: Impact on Small and Middle Powers’ Strategic Choices, ed. Simona A. Grano and David Wei Feng Huang. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 351 pp.

The continuous intensification of the US–China competition has created a challenging international environment for many small and middle countries around the world, forcing them to readjust their foreign policy to maximize national interests. Hence, the responses of small and middle countries under the US–China competition has become an increasingly significant, yet under-studied, issue.

That is where the edited volume *China–US Competition Impact on Small and Middle Powers’ Strategic Choices* comes in. The volume includes 12 chapters focusing on examining foreign policy adjustments of the Asian and European countries that are arguably most affected by the hegemony contest under recent developments of the US–China competition and international environment.

The theoretical framework used to analyze countries’ response to the rise of China as well as US–China competition is the balancing–bandwagoning continuum adapted from Alan Bloomfield. The continuum classifies hedging response into two types: one is risk contingency (including soft-balancing and dominance denial), representing an effort to minimize security and political risks through cultivating a balance of power; the other is return-maximizing, which includes economic pragmatism, binding engagement, and limited bandwagoning, and is closer to the traditional category of bandwagoning. This framework, along with the case study method, is helpful in providing an insightful understanding on the similarities and differences of countries’ policy recalibration toward the US and China. Researchers in the volume also pinpoint significant impact of domestic factors on the final strategic choice.

Since the beginning of the US–China competition, small and middle countries have been pressured to produce an effective response policy. Remaining neutral is increasingly difficult as China is becoming more aggressive on both domestic and foreign affairs, while the US under the Biden administration is reinforcing relations with allies and partners. Cases analyzed in the book reveal that most small and middle countries still opt for a hedging policy (remaining neutral) rather than publicly aligning with one side to maximize advantages. Nevertheless, differences exist between countries’ hedging policies, as being affected by geographical distance, historical context, domestic politics, and relations with the two powers. And as the US–China competition is continuously developing and Russia–Ukraine conflict broke out, there is an emerging trend of moving closer to the US while taking tougher stance on China.

For European countries, considering its geographical distance from China and a unique position in the US–China relations, all five mentioned countries (Switzerland, Sweden, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom) initially adopted an economic pragmatism policy with China. This involves maintaining good economic relations and pursuing interests in the Chinese market while adhering to political and military neutral policies. European countries also wanted to engage China into the liberal rule-based order, and to adopt Western values.

However, under recent geopolitical changes, European countries have gradually taken a tougher stance toward China, aiming to limit China's power and influence in the region through dominance denial policies. Notably, the most dramatic shift happened in Sweden, as the country joined NATO, marking a significant rethinking on its long-standing neutrality policy. For the rest of the European countries in the volume, there is a commonly, rapidly growing interest in forging the Transatlantic relations and encouraging US engagement with European security architecture. This signals that more European countries may move closer to a soft-balancing policy in dealing with China in the future.

For Asian countries, Japan and Korea have always welcomed the US's presence in Asia and its commitment to the regional security order, while managing good relations with China for economic, and even security, benefits. Nevertheless, both countries have shifted to strengthen alignment with the US when reassessing the economic benefits after the COVID-19 pandemic, and security implications of the conflict in Ukraine. Meanwhile, in many years, Taiwan's people have showed support for an alliance with the United States against China, based on their perception of threats coming from China's aggressive military actions in the Taiwan Strait and the US's strong commitment for Taiwan.

Regarding small countries in Asia, with Singapore as the representative, the final chapter explained the challenges for small countries to balance their relations with the two powers in the context of the ongoing decoupling. Balancing bilateral relations with the US and China involves manipulating the overlapping interests of the two powers. Therefore, when the differences in the US–China relations are growing, there will be less room for small countries to implement this kind of policy. Researchers believe that small countries should consider more proactive policies, such as trade-off policies or diversifying from both powers.

Although providing a diverse analysis of small and middle countries' response to the current global contest, the edited volume mostly focuses on the response to the rise of China, while being short of explaining policy to deal with the US. Additionally, a more comprehensive understanding of this topic could be achieved by incorporating research on countries with diverse political regimes and other regions of Asia.

China–US Competition: Impact on Small and Middle Powers’ Strategic Choices is a significant contribution to an under-studied issue in international relations. Researchers with focus on European and Asian countries, small and middle countries, or strategic autonomy, and policy makers will find this volume and its approach helpful and can use it as a theoretical and empirical foundation for further works. 📖

Hoang Hien Thuong

Ms. Thuong is an official of Multilateral Affairs Department, Viet Nam Union of Friendship Organizations.