While thoughtfully and carefully written from a US national interest perspective, one wonders how viable such an overall policy is. For the authors, a crucial element of their recommendations is that the PRC must continue to believe that time is on its side, that one way or another, Taiwan will become part of the PRC. Obviously, to the extent that the PRC leadership comes to believe that time is not on its side (and assuming that incorporation of Taiwan into the PRC is a central goal of the leadership), this is likely to push the PRC in the direction of using extreme military force to try to obtain control over Taiwan. The key question becomes how long the PRC will continue to believe it can play the long game. While its military capabilities vis-à-vis Taiwan will continue to increase, US support for Taiwan is also increasing. How does the US reinforce a PRC view that time is on its side as the US increases its contacts with and rhetorical (at the very least) support for a democratic Taiwan? The management of this balancing act of trying to reinforce the PRC’s perception that it can take a long-term approach while at the same time enabling Taiwan to be confident that it will not be coerced into a future its people don’t want seems extraordinarily difficult. That management becomes all the more difficult when political elites in the US are polarized and, in many cases, largely uninformed about the nuances of the China–Taiwan–US triangle and US policy. As US elite and public opinion is increasingly critical of the PRC, the kind of resolute, steady and self-assured policies the authors advocate seem all but impossible to sustain.

doi:10.1017/S0305741023001200

China’s Strategic Opportunity: Change and Revisionism in Chinese Foreign Policy


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In the book China’s Strategic Opportunity, Yong Deng presents a refreshing analysis of China’s foreign policy under Xi Jinping’s leadership. Rather than focusing on conventional international relations theories like realism and power transition theory, the book emphasizes the Chinese concept of “strategic opportunity” as a key analytical framework. The concept directs attention to “how the Chinese elites evaluate the international environment and choose what they believe to be the best course of action to achieve their national agenda” (p. 3).

The book delves into China’s evaluation and shaping of its international environment, empirically examining policy patterns across various domains. Chapter one explains why the concept of strategic opportunity is a useful framework for analysing China’s foreign policy. Focusing on US–China relations, chapter two investigates how China’s foreign policy has changed from a previous low-profile approach to a more assertive major-power diplomacy. Chapter three examines the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with a specific focus on how China builds international belief in its commitment and credibility regarding the project. Chapter four unpacks China’s economic statecraft, while chapter five addresses China’s active institutional tactics. Chapter six takes a closer look at China–Europe relations from the perspective of multipolar diplomacy. The concluding
chapter summarizes the findings and policy implications. Utilizing a diverse range of sources, including official documents, leaders’ speeches, media reports and academic publications, the book offers an up-to-date study of China’s active global diplomacy in the new era. Additionally, it engages with pertinent theories and debates within the fields of international relations and China studies.

China’s Strategic Opportunity makes significant contributions to the study of Chinese foreign policy and international relations. Firstly, it challenges the mainstream structural analysis that focuses merely on rising powers’ insecurity and discontent in the international order. Deng argues that China is not merely responding to external pressures. Instead, China actively pursues an agenda aimed at reshaping the international order in line with its own resources and interests. The book restores agency to the process of international change and highlights how China’s beliefs and actions shape its strategic opportunity and influence the international order. Secondly, Deng provides a nuanced framework for understanding China’s approach to the international order. He questions the conventional dichotomy of status quo versus revisionism as a means to comprehend the tendencies of Chinese foreign policy. Thirdly, the author provides a timely and insightful account of China’s foreign policy during the Xi Jinping era, which has been marked by increasing assertiveness and ambition. Tracing the evolution of China’s foreign policy under Xi Jinping’s leadership since 2012, Deng identifies the main drivers and features of China’s foreign policy in this period, such as Xi Jinping’s personal authority and vision; the consolidation of party-state control over foreign affairs; the promotion of major initiatives; the pursuit of great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics; the adoption of a more proactive posture in regional and global affairs. The book assesses the achievements and problems of China’s foreign policy, as well as its implications for regional order and global governance.

While acknowledging the contributions of the book, I would raise some questions that could be further explored in future research. First, the question of whether China has a grand strategy remains inconclusive in Deng’s analysis. On one hand, Deng argues that “China’s threat environment is too diffuse and multidimensional to allow for a grand strategy” (p. 10). However, by focusing on China’s strategic opportunity, Deng implies that Chinese leaders have a rational framework to pursue national goals. Although China may not release an equivalent document to the United States National Security Strategy, Deng’s analytical framework indeed suggests that China possesses a distinct strategic framework to actively pursue its national goals. Second, it is important to investigate how China’s domestic politics, including its insecurities, influence its strategic opportunity and foreign policy. Deng emphasizes China’s pursuit of great power status and treats China as a conventional rising power. While this holds some truth, it is widely acknowledged that China’s party-state nature fundamentally shapes the Chinese elites’ perception of threats and opportunities. The Chinese elites place high importance on regime security, which significantly shapes China’s foreign and security policies. Future research could explore how Beijing navigates its differentiated sense of security with regime security as its top priority.

Finally, it is crucial to consider the duration of China’s strategic opportunity and identify potential triggers or indicators for its potential end. Deng briefly discusses how the Chinese elites reconsider the theme of “peace and development” as China faces more significant international challenges. However, it remains unclear when and if the Chinese leaders might reassess the entire framework of strategic opportunity and when this period of opportunity for China might come to an end.

In sum, Yong Deng’s China’s Strategic Opportunity is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding China’s foreign policy and its implications for the global order. The book is thoroughly researched and effectively argued, providing a sophisticated viewpoint on Chinese foreign policy.

doi:10.1017/S0305741023000905