

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Great Power Competition and Overseas Bases: Chinese, Russian, and American Force Posture in the Twenty-First Century.

Edited by Andrew Yeo and Isaac Kardon.
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The volume “Great Power Competition and Overseas Bases” centers on comparisons between different strategies of “basing” by great powers. In a world of great power competition, bases matter, because they are a means to “project power and influence abroad, meet logistics requirements, secure economic access and trade flows, forge and maintain alliances and partnerships, and deter adversaries” (p. 2). The international security system is witnessing a growing Chinese and a renewed Russian interest in overseas bases and base access (p. vii), coupled with increasing appetite for friction and confrontation (p. 4). The editors argue that Russia, the repeat contestant and China, the newcomer, will not necessarily follow the Twentieth Century example of permanent, exclusive, and armed-to-the-teeth external locations. In the new era, bases instead could look like a location with professional personnel and a light military footprint, or an inconspicuous commercial port with a double-use function, or a private contractor run infrastructure in a friendly state (p. 8). In other words, even such a solid piece of military infrastructure as an overseas base has entered a hybridization phase—the bases of the late Twenty-First Century may well be disguised, unremarkable, stealthy, unattributable, and unclaimed. And nothing worries the conventional security champion—the U.S.—more than a hybrid, asymmetrical challenge.

Maintaining the competitive edge of the U.S. is at the center of enquiry of the book. The publication is a policy contribution to ensure continuing U.S. authority in this new phase of geopolitical competition, not a detached academic audit of the unfolding American, Russian, and Chinese base race. One of the questions the authors tackle in their chapters is how the U.S. should respond to Russian or Chinese military presence. O’Hanlon, Sisson, and Yeo explicitly offer lessons for U.S. strategic planners. The editors point out early on that the great power competition plays out unevenly in different parts of the world. Therefore, the articles examine the geopolitics of basing by regions, covering Pacific Islands, East Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, the Arctic, and Europe. Each chapter presents a deep dive into regional history, layout (a welcome and humbling reminder for continentally minded readers to brush up on

their ocean geographies), context, and stakeholder motivations.

The editors set the scene by admitting that the global military posture and the superiority of overseas military bases provide the U.S. with an unparalleled competitive edge. The reader’s initial reaction, then, is suspicion: if Russia and China are so far behind the U.S. in ambition and capacity, perhaps a comparative approach is somewhat limiting. In words of a colleague at a China global security strategy panel just last month, “What do you mean by China’s rising military power projection when it is still the U.S. with all the overseas bases?” I would imagine that the edited volume was probably inspired by a similar remark—after all, the editors Andrew Yeo and Isaac Kardon let us in on a detail that the book project was conceived during the sidelines at a conference in Washington.

The authors anticipate and pre-empt this criticism, arguing that the U.S. is the one with all the old-school overseas bases, yet, the competing powers—Russia and China—have other advantages. Moscow and Beijing may not have Washington’s capabilities further from home, but both are nevertheless increasingly pursuing distinct strategic objectives in different regions (p. 4). However, the comparative framework is both a significant contribution and a fundamental challenge of the book. It sets a clear structure and provides the reader with facts and proportion. It allows to escape the trap of interpreting all Chinese and Russian actions as triggered by geopolitical competition with the U.S. But most chapters run back into the apples and oranges issue as they progress: if there is no significant Chinese or Russian basing presence, what is there to compare? This should not deter potential readers as most comparisons in geopolitics are imperfect, after all.

Another challenge is the under-representation of Chinese and Russian sources in the chapters. Domestic materials, including strategies, official documents, but also analytic publications, are key for learning and understanding force posture of China and Russia vis-a-vis different regions. By avoiding these sources or relying on second-hand accounts written for Western audiences, one risks missing a causal link that would explain the motivation or the psychology behind a decision. Even if an occasional Liang Fang, Hu Bo, Putin, and Trenin, supplemented by a Chinese or Russian doctrine or two appears among the footnotes, the bulk of the references are Western sources and materials in English. The audience of the book is primarily the U.S. strategic community, but there is little doubt the volume will be carefully studied also by U.S. contenders. In a way, the volume provides more information on “us” than on “them.” If the goal of the book is to safeguard U.S. strategic presence, it is imperative to investigate how the other side is conceptualizing its basing strategies.

It is often helpful to evaluate research frameworks and results by applying them to a topic one empirically knows

well. For instance, as the example of the Baltic states illustrates, the practices and motivations described in the volume are well-suited to explain what happens on the ground. During the past thirty years, the Baltic states have witnessed the basing approaches of all three geostrategic players surveyed in the volume: First, the long-awaited withdrawal of Russian forces from their territories in 1994, in a symbolic Russian strategic retreat from the region; Then, a Chinese interest in a deep-water port in Klaipeda in 2019, in an illustration to China's creative dual-use tactic; Finally, an increase in U.S. persistent rotational

presence following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in a realization that the nations are risking to fall victim to the Russian renewed quest for dominance. As such, the book allows the readers in the Baltic—and elsewhere—to compare experiences, and to recognize the actions of Russia, China, and the United States in the wider global context of great powers force posture in the Twenty-First Century. Hence, the book offers an undeniable contribution and will be of great interest to comparative and area scholars and practitioners from different regions of the world.