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Book Reviews

Mertha, Andrew (2014), *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, ISBN: 9780801452659, 175 pages

In its capacity as chair of ASEAN in 2012, Cambodia stunned the world by siding with China rather than its fellow ASEAN countries that have maritime territorial disputes with China, therefore preventing the issuance of a joint statement, a first in the history of this regional organisation. Many pundits have since pointed to China as an increasingly negative force in ASEAN unity, as it uses its leverage over countries that are highly dependent on it (Cambodia, Laos and others) to fracture ASEAN and prevent the organisation from playing a more important role in solving disputes. According to this narrative, China is gradually but steadily building a network of “client” states over whose external policies China can exert great influence to its own advantage. However, it is not that simple, according to Andrew Mertha, based on the argument he makes in this meticulously researched book.

Mertha’s thesis is based on the theory that policy outcome tends to be affected more by the implementation of said policy by the bureaucratic organisations on the ground than by the outcome intended or preferred by the policy formulators (an insight that Graham Allison pointed out a long time ago and one that is widely shared by public administration scholars today but has not been given much attention by international relations scholars) – the actual policy interface between China and Cambodia being no exception. By examining three instances of Chinese aid delivery to the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979 (in the forms of the construction of a military airfield, the repairing of an oil refinery and assistance in the development of foreign trade of Cambodia), this book shows that the internal bureaucratic structures (especially the level of bureaucratic fragmentation) of both countries were vastly important in shaping the outcome. Importantly, China, as the much more powerful actor (and the aid giver) in this bilateral relationship, was not able to truly dominate its junior partner, Cambodia (Democratic Kampuchea – DK). Simply put, power asymmetries in bilateral relations do not necessarily lead to a superior–subordinate model. The case studies illustrate this point. China’s military aid was vital to the survival of DK. However, the military organisation of the Khmer Rouge regime boasted relatively strong institutional integrity, and therefore it was able to resist China’s

influence and push back against its interests (for example, China's choice of the site of a military airfield in DK was overruled by the Khmer Rouge, as the location was deemed strategically advantageous to China's interests, but not to the interests of DK). The second case was China's provision of technical assistance in the repairing of an oil-refinery plant. Here, the complete absence of any form of rational organisational structure of the Khmer Rouge regime in this policy area, coupled with the complex and fragmented energy-policy sector of the Chinese bureaucracy (which involved multiple ministerial-level organisations), made the project a complete failure. The third case, regarding the development of commercial trade, showed China exerting more influence, because the Chinese bureaucratic institutions were more compact and better coordinated, while their counterparts in DK were not as strong and suffered from fragmentation (mostly because of the internal purges under Pol Pot). As a result, China was able to "colonize the [DK trade-related] institution structurally and especially procedurally in ways unimaginable in the case of military assistance" (p. 120).

Mertha's book draws from, and reinforces, his past research interests and expertise – namely, the study of the bureaucratic–institutional nexus where policy formulation and implementation are embedded in China. Hence, the book is also very much outstanding in its description of the byzantine bureaucratic worlds of both Leninist systems. His transition from focusing on domestic politics to foreign policy without abandoning his basic theoretical paradigm is a remarkable example of how comparative politics and international relations can be bridged. Also, in terms of sources and materials the book excels as well; it uses many primary documents (archives, private diaries, interviews) that only a very dedicated researcher could uncover.

Finally, how can the lessons learned from the era of 1975 to 1979 remain relevant today? While China has moved toward market-based reforms since 1979 and has undergone a transition that was unimaginable in the years prior to that, Cambodia has also witnessed two regime changes (Vietnamese occupation and Hun Sen's current authoritarian regime). Mertha is confident that the lessons are very much relevant. Despite the monumental changes experienced in both countries, the bureaucratic fragmentation characteristic to both countries before 1979 is still very relevant, perhaps even more so today. Toward the end of the final chapter, he points out the numerous incidents of inconsistency in China's foreign policy in recent years as evidence of the convoluted bureaucracy that China evinces today, a predicament not much different from the one it suffered from in the 1970s. Cambodia has not had much

institutional integrity in its civil service under the Hun Sen regime either, due to the strongman and patronage politics he practises.

Is Mertha ultimately convincing? While the research is certainly excellent and the logic of the argument intuitive, the jump to the policy implications – that China is unable to actually influence its “client” states’ policies all that much – may be unacceptable to some readers, who will take the view that China is simply becoming too powerful and influential, and that no matter how poorly coordinated its bureaucracy is, its “client” states will practise self-discipline and censorship to avoid offending China.

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