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*China's Gambit* adds to the literature examining China's rise and coercion calculations in an era of great power competition. Using a rich data set from firsthand interviews and Chinese documents, Ketian Zhang argues that her cost-balancing theory explains China's coercive behavior toward other states, not realism, an individual leader, or nationalism. The underlying assumption of the cost-balancing theory is that "in an era of global economic interdependence ... coercion decisions are a result of balancing security and economic factors" (p. 19). As the world faces an inflection point and moves closer to a multipolar world, great power competition and state behavior take center stage. The US National Security Strategy highlights this competition. It states that the "People's Republic of China harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit." China's capacity to reshape the international order, particularly the coercion strategies employed, deserves examination. Zhang's work examines the coercion calculus and argues, "China is a cost-conscious coercer, paying the least price to gain the greatest interest" (p. 68). Gaining the greatest interest through coercion helped a global competitor rise to power and grow state capacity.

For the author, explanatory variables dealing with a state's core interests, economic concerns, and the perceived need to signal a reputation for resolve explain when, why, and how China seeks to compel its neighbors. China's interest hierarchy includes issues divided between core interests and high stakes. Core interests, Taiwan and Tibet, represent China's highest interests and trigger the most decisive response. High-stake issues include territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea and tend to trigger nonmilitarized gray-zone tactics (pp. 33-35). Zhang examines China's behavior through the lens of her theory and describes the balance employed as the
Goldilocks approach. China’s risk-averse approach showed sensitivity to "both the costs of fighting and the costs of backing down" (p. 29). Risk tolerance helps explain Beijing’s behavior, and the cost-balancing theory enables the examination of Chinese coercion strategies concerning disputed territory, Taiwan, and foreign visits to the Dali Lama (p. 2). Zhang’s examination of the cost-balancing theory offers insights to historians, political scientists, or those looking to better understand Chinese motives during its rise to power from the 1990s to 2020.

Zhang’s book includes four chapters emphasizing fundamental Chinese interests and the associated coercion method used during tensions in those areas. Those chapters are as follows: "Coercion in the South China Sea," "Sino-Japanese Disputes in the East China Sea," "Coercion in Cross-Strait Relations," and "Tibet and the Dalai Lama Visits." Zhang discusses the complexities and the history of the South China Sea as a principal topic that generates global attention. She begins with a baseline to explain how unilateral exploration of the oil and gas reserves in the region from the 1990s to the 2000s drew attention to a region rich in resources. As a result, each neighboring state sought to profit from oil production, foreign investment, and infrastructure projects. In turn, that exploration and economic interest created Chinese assertions regarding historic rights, led to the broader publication of the Nine-Dash Line, and highlighted an increased resolve to protect disputed territory in the South China Sea. Zhang states that when public and global challenges arose against those interests, the need to protect China’s reputation triggered two different responses. When Philippine press coverage of a dispute between the two countries prevented Beijing from resolving the issue diplomatically without losing face, China balanced potential economic losses with the Philippines with its reputation and chose a coercion method that signaled resolve. In contrast, Zhang studies examples where China chose a diplomatic approach to resolve issues discreetly due to the lack of press coverage. In those quiet instances, China did not have to risk its global reputation.

Zhang also provides an engaging insight into China’s core interest in Taiwan. During the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, "China escalated to militarized coercion, the magnitude of which was the greatest among all cases of Chinese coercion concerning territorial disputes, Taiwan, and Tibet in the post-Cold War era" (p. 159). Zhang states that supporting the status quo and lesser-capable weapons sales to Taiwan did not trigger a coercive response. However, state decisions perceived as recognizing Taiwan’s independence or selling weapons with an asymmetric advantage resulted in coercion and a calculated show of resolve toward its core interest. The articulated reason for this coercion falls in line with the cost-balancing theory. Taiwan is a core interest, and in the future “if Taiwan decides to pursue judiciary independence, then it is highly likely that China will resort to military coercion or even the use of force” (p. 161).

China’s Gambit addresses a broader spectrum of coercion than traditional military measures. It pays particular attention to gray-zone activities in the South China Sea, where Coast Guard patrols, not the military, are used for coercion as a less escalatory tactic. The author briefly mentions China’s rising military power and internal efforts to decouple from the global supply chain as topics for future research. Zhang suggests that both changes will give China more freedom in coercive behaviors with fewer economic costs and potentially less geopolitical backlash. The book’s dataset ends in 2020 and due to significant changes afterward, Zhang does not thoroughly examine China’s growing stockpile of nuclear weapons and military capabilities that have the potential to provide additional tools for coercion and political maneuvering space.

Zhang’s book highlights China’s coercive posture from the end of the Cold War to today as a
rising power and postulates that it provides insights into Beijing's future behavior. China's rise and calculated coercion should not inevitably trigger a conflict. She argues that "despite the growth of Chinese power, major conflicts or a war of power transition are not inevitable as long as China still depends on the global supply chains and the United States maintains a physical but low-profile presence in the Asia-Pacific region" (p. 196). In short, maintaining the system of economic costs and understanding China's core interests will help to avoid miscalculations in the era of great power competition.

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