Foreword

China’s post-1978 rise is a compelling anomaly. A dynamic economy and society coexist with a one-party communist state. Far from disappearing, the communist party state has been experiencing a resurgence during Xi Jinping’s post-2012 rule. China’s foreign policy during this era is no less compelling. Our story begins with China launching a war in 1979 against Vietnam, its Cold War era alliance partner, and ends with the escalating diplomatic fallout from Beijing’s prosecution of a self-styled ‘war’ against the coronavirus pandemic, which originated in the city of Wuhan in late 2019. As I pen this foreword, the world struggles to respond. Until the furious search for a vaccine reaches a successful conclusion, there is a deep sense that the world is at a standstill. But it is not. International politics does not stop, even for a global health crisis. The coronavirus pandemic has clarified an important point. That is, a hundred and eighty years after British gunboat diplomacy compelled the ‘Middle Kingdom’ to enter into a trading relationship, China has returned to a position of power.

While globalization is ‘made in the USA,’ without the ballast of China’s post-1978 industry, labour, and enterprise, the narrative is incomplete. But China’s rise is much more than an economic story. It has an international political dimension. Even before the coronavirus era dawned on us, China’s relationships with many of its top trading partners had soured. As Chinese power rose in the post-Cold War era, dormant territorial disputes with neighbouring states, stretching from the deep waters of the South China and East China Seas to the heights of the Himalayas, took on new life. China’s relationship with the United States grew increasingly fractious. And Beijing’s management of issues that it considers to be its internal affairs, notably its human rights record, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, reflected a particularly combative posture.

As the coronavirus epidemic spread through 2020, the rise in friction in China’s foreign relationships has become impossible to ignore. China’s disputes with contending claimants over the South China Sea have intensified. Indeed, the expansion of the geographical scope of this conflict has been clarified, with Chinese vessels entering Indonesia’s Exclusive Economic Zone, and boldly challenging Jakarta’s sovereignty. Further afield, for the first time since 1975, Chinese and Indian soldiers have been killed as a consequence of hand to hand combat on their contested Himalayan border. Meanwhile, Beijing makes no apologies for persistently challenging both Japanese control over
islands in the East China Sea and Taiwan’s aerial and maritime sovereignty. Further afield, Chinese and European diplomats have sparred over aspects of the coronavirus pandemic. And, then there is China’s relationship with the United States. The cracks in the US-China relationship are multiple and deep, stretching from trade and human rights to outright great power rivalry. It is now commonplace to hear American commentators talk of the failure of the United States’ post-1972 engagement policy with China. Even the most optimistic Chinese commentators recognize that their international environment has deteriorated.

The chapters that follow chart China’s rise to its current position, with particular emphasis on the East Asian region and the US-China relationship. The first chapter interrogates the contending conceptual and theoretical understandings of China as an international actor. Chapters Two through Four investigate China’s role in the termination of the Cold War in East Asia, and the trajectory of its two most important bilateral relationships, with Japan and the United States respectively. Chapters One, Two, and Three draw on material that has previously been published by Oxford University Press and Columbia University Press. These chapters have either been expanded or heavily revised for inclusion in this book. I would like to thank the publishers for granting permission to reuse this material.

I dedicate this book to my wife Karen, and daughter Ellena.

Nicholas Khoo
Dunedin, New Zealand
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