People’s Republic of China in the Baltic states
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BOOK REVIEW


This collection of analytic essays describing political/security, economic, and people-to-people interactions between Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) provides a welcome and useful elucidation of similarities and differences among the Baltic states. It also identifies (albeit without specifically doing so) the kinds of challenges facing all small and mid-sized countries in their dealings with much larger powers. Asymmetries of scale in the size of populations, firms, government bureaucracies, and other capacities make it difficult to identify and exploit opportunities, maintain multifaceted relationships, and manage the deluge and sometimes manipulative intent of initiatives from the larger partner. Small state governments must play a larger brokering and facilitating role than is true in bigger economies because sub-national actors have limited knowledge and capacity. This is certainly the case with respect to Baltic state interactions with China. Moreover, as these essays make clear, disparities in size and national objectives create vulnerabilities and dependencies that can be manipulated by the larger partner. A recurring leitmotif of the book is that China attempts to exploit dependencies for political reasons.

The motivations and goals of all three Baltic states vis-à-vis China have been similar but appear to have been pursued independently (or at least the essays in the book do not identify or emphasize coordination). In the early 1990s, when these countries regained independence, their priority was to obtain Chinese support for their admission to the United Nations. This proved easy to do but required acquiescence to a ‘One China’ policy. Having achieved the first objective, all three began to focus on the potential economic benefits of access to the vast if somewhat mythical China market. In a market as large as China’s, surely there would be opportunities for Baltic firms. But negotiating bureaucratic obstacles, coping with the complex and often opaque Chinese system, and identifying appropriate partners was beyond the capabilities of virtually all sub-national actors. National governments stepped in to facilitate trade and investment. In doing so they concluded agreements and fostered arrangements that increased PRC leverage.

As inherent limitations on the potential for economic benefit from the relationships with China became apparent and PRC actions underscored the hazards of asymmetric dependence and Beijing’s willingness to exploit it, security considerations, broadly defined, attained higher priority in all three countries. The increased attention to security considerations entailed both a desire to reduce vulnerability to PRC pressure and increased attentiveness to the concerns and preferences of their EU and American partners. Simply stated, the Baltic states recognized that their economic stake in the relationship with China was small, the political risks of dependency were growing, and
their security, economic, and political interests in the United States and their EU partners was far larger, and thus, China’s appeal and influence decreased.

Overarching objectives evolved over time and at slightly different rates in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, but policies in each were shaped by specific (and changing) domestic and external developments. For example, domestic politics appear to have been relatively more important in Lithuania than in the other two states, but that is an impression left after reading the chapters rather than an explicit judgment. Conversely, external developments, specifically PRC actions, appear to have been more important shapers of Lithuanian policy. The essays in the book devote limited attention to which groups or constituencies championed and/or opposed particular policy options and why they did so. The overall impression of the collection is that public and political actors held changing but relatively uniform views on questions related to China policy. If correct, that would be an interesting but surprising finding worthy of deeper exploration.

Individually and collectively, the chapters suggest or assert that the most important shaper of Baltic policies toward China is PRC behavior, both in general and vis-à-vis individual Baltic states. Relations with all three countries have deteriorated and become more problematic over time. All authors and the editors state or strongly imply that Chinese actions were more important for this deterioration than were changes in Baltic goals, domestic politics, or overt pressure from Washington or EU partners. Data provided in the book indicate that China’s importance to all three states, as measured by the value of exports to the PRC or other such indicators is minimal. In comparison, the importance and perceived imperatives of pursuing policies at least broadly consistent with those of their major political, security, and economic partners are overwhelming.

The structure of the book emphasizes description and explanation of individual country interactions with China but largely eschews explicit comparisons and exploration of differences. Nevertheless, reading the country-specific chapters in tandem indicates that the China policies of all three evolved along more-or-less the same trajectory, but that they did so at a different pace and in response to slightly different PRC actions. In virtually all cases, policy adjustments (and shifts in public attitudes toward China), were triggered by Chinese behavior. Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were responders, not initiators of changes that produced cumulative and steady deterioration of the relationship. The notable and important exception to this generalization is Lithuania’s decision to deepen its relationship with Taiwan and to accept/allow use of ‘Taiwan’ (rather than Taipei or some other adjective) in the name of the representative office in Vilnius. Doing so triggered a harsh but predictable reaction in Beijing and accelerated the downward spiral of relations with all three Baltic countries.

The book’s focus on Baltic policies and actions eschews exploration of why Beijing has acted as it has. The likely answer to this question is that PRC relations with the Baltic states were even less important to China than they were to Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, and that the importance of the ‘One China’ principle to regime legitimacy made it impossible for Beijing to temporize on what it defined as a ‘Core Interest.’ If Lithuania or the Baltic states were more important to China’s security and sustained economic growth than they are, there would have been incentives for Beijing to react less strongly, but that is not the case.

It would have been interesting and informative if the editors had devoted more space to explicit comparisons and discussion of patterns, trends, and
triggers, but it seems churlish to criticize them for not writing a different book. As written, this collection of papers provides informative descriptions of individual country policies toward and interactions with the PRC, illustrates the existence and consequences of asymmetries and Beijing’s readiness to exploit them, and provides a basis for anticipating and evaluating future changes in Baltic relations with China.

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