

BOOK REVIEW

Upstart: How China Became a Great Power

Oriana Skylar Mastro. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 336 pp. £22.99 (hbk). ISBN 9780197695067

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China's ascent to great power status has been widely studied and analysed. And for good reason – it remains one of the most intriguing and awe-inspiring success stories of modern post-industrial development. How did a communist nation evolve from its poor, agrarian roots after the Second World War to become an economic and military juggernaut in just a few decades?

In her recent book, *Upstart: How China Became a Great Power*, Oriana Mastro, a senior fellow at Stanford University, unpacks the strategic approach of China's rise. Mastro offers a compelling thesis for understanding how Beijing was able to achieve such economic and military success without provoking sustained pushback from the United States. Drawing on business competition models, Mastro argues that China *emulated* some US practices, *exploited* certain American vulnerabilities, and, at times, pursued *entrepreneurship* to gain a competitive edge. It is this mix of emulation, exploitation and entrepreneurship that explains how China was able to amass significant power within a Western-led, rules-based order that Beijing initially did not build or shape.

Given the oversaturation of political science books examining China's rise, Mastro's work stands apart for its novel methodological approach and mining of Chinese-language documents, white papers, and statistics on trade and military capabilities. Mastro's contribution uniquely and persuasively straddles political science, business and marketing strategy, and public policy subjects.

In particular, Mastro uses 22 cases across economic, diplomatic and military activities to make her case. In each case, she identifies when China emulated, exploited or built new approaches to accumulate wealth and power. As Mastro finds, "China tends to emulate the United States when it assesses the US approach to be effective, when emulative behavior would reassure Western powers, and when it enjoys competitive advantages in that domain to ensure strategic efficacy" (p. 6).

It is the last component – entrepreneurship – where Mastro makes a significant contribution to the literature. Take, for example, alliances. China has assiduously cultivated partnerships, or what China calls "strategic partnerships," to achieve global power and influence, while foreswearing "military alliances" pursued by the US. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) supports these strategic partnerships by securing access to ports and logistics hubs around the globe without entering into formal military partnerships. The key point here is that China has been able to emphasize the economic benefits of such partnerships, while downplaying the strategic or military components of its relationships.

Another example is China's utilization of civilian law enforcement agencies to train and equip foreign partners, providing non-military training to meet partner needs below the threshold of military cooperation. China is also the largest contributor to United Nations peacekeeping troops, giving China's security and law enforcement forces access to foreign conflict zones under a veneer of providing "public goods."

China's exploitation approaches are manifested in the military domain by pursuing an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy in Asia. Doing so, according to Mastro, allows China to pursue a defensive-oriented posture to neutralize the United States' offensive capabilities in the region, without directly challenging US interests. China's pursuit of anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), which allows China's military the ability to target US aircraft carriers operating close to China's shores, is an example of this strategy.

Exploitation cuts both ways, too. While Mastro points out the positive aspects of China's strategy, she doesn't overlook the negative implications. China is one of the largest cyber actors in the world, stealing vast amounts of US intellectual property through cyber intrusions and hacking operations. This has allowed China to exploit weaknesses in US information security systems to gain a competitive edge in the economic and military domains. Mastro admits that China's cyber activities have produced pushback and penalties from the US, but not enough to stop such activities from continuing.

Mastro offers tangible recommendations for the US and partners in the region. First, her book suggests US strategists have often miscalculated or mischaracterized China's strategy by mirror-imaging how the US would behave in China's shoes. Thus far, China has keenly shown an ability to pursue comprehensive power without copying or imitating US policies that might appear hegemonic. But she also calls on the US to be vigilant. Just because China has not "copied" the US doesn't mean it won't change its strategy in the future.

And change may be afoot. The most recent US Department of Defense report on China found that China is actively seeking to "expand its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the PLA to project and sustain military power at greater distances." Beyond China's only overseas base in Djibouti, the report finds that China is looking to establish bases in over 20 countries and may already have access to parts of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, for example. So, while Mastro offers a useful lens to analyse how China has historically approached power and influence, China may, after all, succumb to using the same hard power strategies adopted by the US that it has so far so artfully avoided.