

BOOKS: 'In the Dragon's Shadow,' by Sebastian Strangio

RON GLUCKMAN, Contributing writer

BANGKOK -- China's miraculous rise, and its missteps, have fascinated writers for decades. When outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump launched his "America First" retreat from his predecessor's "pivot to Asia," experts predicted that China would fill the space, becoming the dominant regional power. They envisioned wide-ranging impacts for its various neighbors, rivals and trading partners. Many dubbed this the "Chinese Century."

Sebastian Strangio details the implications of this development for countries around the region in his comprehensive new book, "In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century." He covers the major countries chapter by chapter, illuminating the unique challenges facing those close to China, and exactly what is at stake for each country within this looming dragon's shadow.

"Southeast Asia's perspective of China is deeply fraught, and anguished," the author says by phone from Australia, where he grew up and has been living since the pandemic intensified in March. "On the one hand, there is the lure of opportunity, of hitching yourself to the freight train of the Chinese economy.

"That is an incredibly powerful lure, but there exists a great deal of fear and trepidation about what a powerful China will mean for Southeast Asia's future, and this state of tension between opportunity and apprehension, attraction and fear, is really the tension that characterizes the relationship. This is sort of the essence of the relationship. And of course this tension is rising every day as U.S.-China relations continue to deteriorate."

Strangio is hardly the first to highlight this complex balancing act, which plays out in the farthest corners of the globe, from Latin America to Africa. However, he focuses on a key area of intense anxiety, where China is making some of its biggest investments, parlaying high-profile projects in skirmishes for influence with Western powers, and where it has its most critical security concerns.

"Southeast Asia's relations with China are shaped overwhelmingly by the reality of geographic proximity," he says. "Proximity makes Southeast Asia a region of crucial importance. And one of the main reasons is China's security dilemma. I mean, gazing out from Beijing, Asia looks like a very claustrophobic place on every side.

"China is hemmed in by potential rivals, many of them nuclear states, also including U.S. treaty allies like Japan, South Korea, [and] the Philippines. And so, hemmed in on every side by powerful rivals, Southeast Asia is the one place where China doesn't face an entrenched great power," he says. "It is one place that it is able to break the chain of encirclement and expand its power.

While attention has been heightened in modern times, this struggle has been ongoing for centuries, as Strangio details in this meticulously researched book. Current events take center stage, but one of the delights for readers is how the author traces the ancient paths of migrations,

confrontations and tributes that historically defined each nation's relationship with the Middle Kingdom.

In the chapter "Marching Toward the Tropics," he describes a Mekong expedition from the 1860s. Two boats set off from Vietnam, steaming upriver into uncharted jungle, navigating a dizzying array of rapids in Cambodia and present day Laos, on the way to Yunnan, China. One of the expedition leaders perished, and they turned back at Wuhan, a century and a half before a pandemic put it on world maps. Still, the journey was hailed as a success, with the group traveling 9,000 km in two years.

Nowadays, says Strangio, the journey from Bangkok to Yunnan can be done by road in a day, and new high-speed rail lines will further cut the time as the region becomes interconnected. Yet, despite the increased linkage and the growth of regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, countries across the region remain a diverse lot, in size, population, religion and economic development. Even the notion of a "Southeast Asia" region, Strangio writes, is a rather recent aggregation with little historical relevance.

But the regional tag makes sense in the contemporary context, since all Southeast Asian countries face the same economic and political landscape, dominated by China, which has become the top trading partner across the region, and a major source of tourism, investment and labor. "China has become the primary foreign policy challenge in the region," the author notes.

Strangio has had a front-row seat for this power play. As a reporter based in Cambodia from 2008 to 2016, he watched as China's ascent became the catalyst for Phnom Penh's pivot from a long period of Western alignment. After the murderous Khmer Rouge regime of the 1970s, decades of civil war ended with the massive United Nations peacekeeping mission of the early 1990s. Factions were nominally disarmed, elections were held, and Western aid poured into Cambodia.

A surge of growth in the mid-2000s transformed Cambodia, one of the world's poorest nations, into Asia's second-fastest growing economy, after China. That short burst of prosperity ended in the 2008 global economic crash. Strangio watched as Cambodia rebounded afterward thanks to closer ties to China, and a stream of crucial investment.

"This book really does have its roots in the eight years I spent in Cambodia," he says. "During that time, China became Cambodia's No. 1 trade partner, its No. 1 source of investment, its No. 1 source of tourism. The visible investment presence increased out of sight during that period. Chinese bridges were extended across the Mekong River, and Chinese real estate projects reshaped the skyline of Phnom Penh."

And Prime Minister Hun Sen, the subject of Strangio's first book, "Hun Sen's Cambodia," retreated from Western-supported democratic reforms and human rights. Instead, he ramped up his authoritarian rule, Strangio says, "in large part because of Chinese backing."

The situation was perhaps most pronounced in Cambodia, but Strangio noticed similarities in power struggles playing out in other countries, where Chinese influence and investments were also rising. Moving around the region, he tracks each country's relationship with China, detailing their histories and the projects -- roads, bridges, dams, casinos and train lines -- that link them now, and will do so long into the future.

Strangio is not the only scribe noting the dragon's perilous proximity. In "Under Beijing's Shadow: Southeast Asia's China Challenge," Murray Hiebert says that Chinese investment and

expectations in Southeast Asia have escalated since Xi Jinping took control in Beijing and ramped up Chinese power, and prestige, in Asia.

A Chinese-run casino in Sihanoukville, on Cambodia's southern coast. Since 2015, a wave of Chinese money has transformed this small port city, once popular with Western backpackers, into a tourism and gambling hub. It has been likened to a down-market version of Macao on the Gulf of Thailand. (Courtesy of Sebastian Strangio)

"Beijing launched the Belt and Road Initiative to build rail links and roads that link Southeast Asia more closely to China," says Hiebert, who reported from the region for decades and is now a senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Relations in the U.S.

"Beijing stepped up its soft power initiatives, like inviting more students from the region to study in China, and stepped up military exchanges with most of the countries in the region," he adds. These are the aspirations of an Asian superpower. Yet results have been uneven, particularly with the infrastructure-focused Belt and Road Initiative.

Rather than bind countries in Southeast Asia, promoting gratitude to Beijing, Hiebert says the initiative has often raised concerns. Poor countries like Laos worry about loan interest rates and the amount of land that must be provided. Other countries have balked at Beijing's insistence on the use of Chinese engineers and equipment.

"There is definitely a growing nervousness about China's role in the region," says Dexter Roberts, author of "The Myth of Chinese Capitalism: The Worker, the Factory, and the Future of the World." The longtime China bureau chief for Business Week also traces China's more aggressive approach in Southeast Asia to the emergence of Xi. "He really abandoned the doctrine of (former paramount leader) Deng Xiaoping, who had talked of keeping your head low, and biding your time," he says.

Roberts adds that China has significantly stepped up its trade, and flexed its muscles as a fledging superpower, not just in Southeast Asia but around the globe. Yet he sees a reckoning on the horizon, as the slowing Chinese economy begins to be challenged by the need to support so many major projects abroad.

"I don't predict a collapse, but China is on track for a slowdown. The years of double-digit growth (economic) rates are in the past," he says. Still, even a somewhat restrained China should remain the dominant power in Southeast Asia. "No one else will step into the vacuum and become the engine of growth," he says. "China will still be a huge neighbor that has to be reckoned with."

Strangio says the choice of "Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century" as his book's subtitle was intended in part to be provocative. "But I do think China is the primary foreign policy challenge of the region," he says. "And I think that this challenge is going to be a permanent one for the region."

Ron Gluckman is a Bangkok-based journalist.