



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Barelli, M. (2017). China's Use of Military Force in Foreign Affairs: the Dragon Strikes (Book Review). *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*, 22(3), pp. 557-559. doi: 10.1093/jcsl/krx007

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://city-ref-test.eprints-hosting.org/id/eprint/18732/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krx007>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

Markus B. Liegl, China's Use of Military Force in Foreign Affairs: the Dragon Strikes. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017, 254 pp. ISBN: 97811386933838, £90

Following the programme of market reforms initiated in the late 1970s by Deng Xiaoping, the economy of China has grown at an unprecedented pace and scale. As a result of this extraordinary process, China has become the second-largest economy in the world, and is now playing an increasingly influential role in the global economic order. This ambitious economic expansion has contextually boosted the country's military ambitions. Thus, after several years of double-digit defence spending increases, China is today the world's second-highest military spender. Perhaps not surprisingly, Beijing's economic and military transformation has become the epicenter of a passionate discussion among Western, and especially American, commentators, contributing to make the rise of China a prominent issue in international relations (IR) scholarship. Will China disrupt the status quo and challenge the extant ruling power, namely the USA? In doing so, will it adopt an increasingly belligerent attitude?

Many different, and often conflicting, answers have been given to these questions. Liegl's book seeks to contribute to this important debate by examining four past cases of China's use of force in foreign affairs, namely the intervention in Korea in the early 1950s (Chapter 3), the conflict with India in 1962 (Chapter 4), the border clashes with the Soviet Union in 1969 (Chapter 5) and the offensive launched against Vietnam in 1979 (Chapter 6). The book draws on insights from Lebow's cultural theory of IR, which, contrary to traditional IR theories, promotes a more comprehensive understanding of the role of non-material elements such as honour, standing and status in international politics (Chapter 2). Liegl's first set of findings fully comply with Lebow's model. Specifically, the author concludes that in none of the four empirical cases studied in the book did China go to war to protect national interests or make territorial gains; instead, the motives behind the decision to use force were primarily non-material. According to Liegl, China intervened in Korea to increase its international status; it used military force against India because of the latter's refusal to take its powerful neighbour seriously; it engaged in armed clashes with the Soviet Union in response to a perceived attempt at intimidation; and, finally, it launched an

offensive against Vietnam as a form of punishment for the latter's provocative and disrespectful attitudes.

The question as to what factor more than others influences a particular course of action is ultimately one of interpretation. In the instant cases, while the author develops his arguments in a sophisticated and methodologically sound manner, it is the present reviewer's view that China's fears of being encircled and threatened constitute important explanatory variables that, particularly in light of the historical circumstances of the time, contribute to blur the line between 'offensive' and 'defensive' actions. This is particularly evident in the case of the intervention in Korea, where more nuanced explanations of the relevant motives at play may be warranted in light of the serious threat posed by the advance of foreign forces to the Yalu River. While beyond the book's scope, it is also interesting to note that these four instances of use of force raise a number of important questions in terms of international law, a circumstance which could further add to the complexity of interpreting and assessing each situation. For example, while the Chinese intervention against India did exhibit punitive attitudes, a legal evaluation of the said conduct would also need to take into account the fact that, as the author suggests, New Delhi's 'forward policy' challenged the territorial integrity of China, notably a prohibited action which carries important legal consequences under international law.

What matters most, however, is how the book reflects, departing from the above findings, on contemporary problems. In addressing this central question, Liegl suggests that China's historical inclination to use force for non-material motives should today be taken into serious account by policymakers in Washington and East Asia because 'status-seeking' and 'status-preservation' are still defining elements of Chinese foreign policy. Hence, he warns, it might be again issues of honour, standing and status that will primarily determine China's reactions to situations of crisis and conflicts, with obvious consequences for both the actors involved and the international community. Considering the tensions that have recently erupted in the East China Sea and South China Sea, the book's overall purpose is very timely. While looking at present day China, however, the book does not directly engage with a potentially important question, namely the relevance of the broader context in determining a State

behaviour in IR. In light of the current connectivity and interdependence between China and the international system, should one not expect the former to behave in a less 'emotional' way than it did more than 50 years ago? After all, when it intervened in Korea or used force against India, the Soviet Union and Vietnam, China was economically weak and politically isolated. Today, by contrast, China is not only an economic giant but is also deeply integrated into international institutions. This extraordinary transformation has reshaped China's identity and arguably redefined not only its interests but also its emotions. Since China fully operates within the international system, and hugely benefits from it, any action that could threaten the latter's fundamental rules and principles would have different consequences than in the past. Against this background, Liegl is right in suggesting that 'status ambitions' will continue to affect China's international behaviour (a circumstance which should be taken into account when interacting with Beijing), but, crucially, new important factors and dynamics will be instrumental in determining it. This is something that, according to the present reviewer, should be borne in mind when drawing any parallel between the China of today and China more than 50 years ago.

In conclusion, Liegl's work has the combined merit of expanding scholarly debates on the role of 'emotions' in IR and providing a sophisticated explanation for the role of status and standing in Chinese foreign policy. The timely topic and the author's rigorous analyses further contribute to make the book particularly appealing to any scholar interested in exploring and understanding the various geopolitical implications of China's rise in the current world.

Mauro Barelli

Senior Lecturer, The City Law School (City, University of London)

Email: mauro.barelli.1@city.ac.uk