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BOOK REVIEW: SUNG CHULL KIM, CHINA AND ITS SMALL NEIGHBOURS: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ASYMMETRY, VULNERABILITY, AND HEDGING (2023), 306 PAGES

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"China and Its Small Neighbours" provides a clear and incisive evaluation of the complex political dynamics that represents the relationships between China and its smaller neighbouring states. Through a substantial exploration of different nations, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and North Korea, the author brilliantly elucidates the concept of asymmetry in international relations, arguing that smaller countries, despite their vulnerabilities, apply strategies of hedging to mitigate the barriers presented by their powerful neighbour.

The book is structured into eight chapters, each presenting different case studies of China's interactions with its six smaller neighbours, beginning with an exploration of key concepts that underpin these relationships, such as "asymmetrical economic relationships" and the notion of "hedging." The introduction establishes the groundwork for the main thesis: that China's rise as a great power opens both opportunities and challenges for its smaller neighbours, who adopt hedging strategies that include engaging with China while at the same time searching for alliances with other powers to mitigate dependency risks. Throughout the book, the author consistently amplifies that the political economy of China's relations with its neighbours is critical for understanding the wider implications of China's ascendance in international politics. "Asymmetry leads to increasing economic reliance on the great power, which in turn makes the small states more vulnerable to the great power's intrusion into their politics," (Chapter 1, p. 2) the author states, encapsulating the paradox faced by these small states in their dealings with China.

The core argument of the book is that the asymmetrical relationships between China and its neighbours, characterized by dependency dynamics, breed a critical need for these smaller nations to adopt multifaceted hedging strategies. This thesis is backed up not just by theoretical analysis, but by empirical research across different cultural and political contexts. The author illustrates that, "the linkage between asymmetry and vulnerability to coercion takes shape when asymmetrical relations are embedded and embodied in the domestic politics of the small states," (Chapter 1, p. 3).

The author undertakes a rigorous comparative analysis methodology, drawing on historical data, personal interviews, and contemporary reports on national security, economics, and foreign relations. This diverse approach lends credibility to the argument, as it engages with concrete events and historical context. Interviews with local scholars and access to archival material further valourises the depth of insight offered about each country. For instance, the examination of Vietnam in Chapter 3 (pp. 59-80), titled "Vietnam: Perception of Duality and Mixed Hedging," stresses a nuanced understanding of Vietnam's geopolitical strategies and reactions to Chinese incursions in the South China Sea. Here, the author adeptly notes that "Hanoi's concern for security and its economic policy of diversification" (p. 70) underscore the joined hedging approach adopted by the Vietnamese authorities.

Major themes throughout the book centres around the concepts of dependency, the asymmetry of power, and varying perceptions of national sovereignty. Notably, the author delves into themes of resilience among smaller Asian states while describing their efforts to explore dependency through strategic partnerships with foreign actors. The originality of the work rests in its blend of rigorous theoretical frameworks with elaborated case studies, presenting a landscape where smaller nations are not merely pawns in a geopolitical game but active participants negotiating their sovereignty within complex power dynamics.

One of the book's remarkable strengths is its unveiling perspective on the agency of small states. The chapters on Uzbekistan, and Mongolia, especially, reflect on how these countries harness their strategic geographical positions and historical legacies to facilitate multifaceted relations with regional and extra-regional players. For example, chapter 6 on "Uzbekistan: Hedging with Balanced, Multivector Diplomacy" asserts that "Uzbekistan, despite pressure from larger neighbours, has made efforts to avoid over-dependence on any single country, effectively engaging with multiple powers to preserve its sovereignty," (p. 131). This analysis adds value to the discourse around international relations by integrating historical context with contemporary political manoeuvres.

While "China and Its Small Neighbours" prevails in its empirical richness and theoretical sophistication, one weakness is that it sometimes glosses over the complications and nuances inherent in the relationships. The portrayal of certain countries may lack depth, usually portraying them as monolithic entities driven by singular motivations, rather than as composite nations with a good number of interests. Additionally, some readers may find the writing style at times dense, which could impede readability. Simplifying complex ideas could improve access for a broader audience without trading academic integrity.

This publication significantly adds to the growing literature on international relations, particularly in its evaluation of non-Western perspectives on power dynamics in contemporary politics. By reframing traditional views around the resilience of small states, the author motivates further debate and scholarly inquiry into how these nations can mitigate the apex tensions linked with competition by great power.

This book will be most beneficial for scholars, students, and policymakers interested in Asian geopolitics, international relations, and regional security dynamics. Academics focusing on China's rise and its impact on neighbouring states will find the detailed case studies and theoretical frameworks valuable for deepening their understanding of small state agency and strategic adaptation. Students studying international relations, Asian

studies, or security studies will also benefit from the book's comprehensive analysis and real-world examples, which can enrich their academic pursuits and research projects. Policymakers and diplomats engaged in regional diplomacy or strategic planning will find the insights into hedging strategies and dependency dynamics particularly relevant for informing policy decisions and diplomatic negotiations in the Asia-Pacific region. Overall, the book serves as a crucial resource for anyone seeking a nuanced understanding of how smaller states navigate power asymmetries in a rising China era.

"China and Its Small Neighbours" targets academics, students, policymakers, and those interested in international relations, Asian studies, and geopolitical strategies. As this book addresses fundamental questions about sovereignty, power dynamics, and resilience, it would be useful for anyone checking the implications of China's rise for the broader global order. In conclusion, this book presents a well-researched and thought-provoking inquiry that not only highlights the struggles of China's smaller neighbours but also celebrates their capacity for agency and adaptation. It serves as a vital asset for understanding the evolving dynamics of international relations in the context of the Asia-Pacific region.