Engagement to Heal
A Fractured Region

The Future of East Asia
Edited by Peter Hayes and Chung-in Moon
Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 318 pages, $179.00 (Hardcover)

Is an East Asian Community possible or probable? Decades of high economic interdependence and sociocultural interactions appear not to have ameliorated traditional security problems in the region. The East Asian peace that has lasted for at least four decades now appears volatile at best, with the threat of armed conflict, and even nuclear annihilation, lingering on the horizon. The region is trapped in a set of security dilemmas, revealing more of an “anti-community” than a community. This volume, published in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the East Asia Foundation, a nonprofit research-oriented institution based in Seoul — and the publisher of Global Asia — explores the factors and prospects both facilitating and inhibiting community-building in Northeast Asia, a prerequisite for a broader East Asian Community.

Nine prominent scholars with diverse national backgrounds endeavor to imagine a Northeast Asian Community by applying all three major international relations schools of thought — realism, liberalism and constructivism. Their intellectual probe revolves around three mutually intertwined dimensions. The first is the history–identity nexus. The deep animosity between China and Japan, and between Korea and Japan, stems from Japan’s imperial project in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during which agonizing colonial and semi-colonial memories became deeply ingrained as the fundamental elements in Korean and Chinese national identity.

The specter of the historical past, and subsequent cognitive dissonance among China, Japan and Korea, weigh heavily on the present, with “identity gaps” among these three countries continuing to widen, as Gilbert Rozman contends in his chapter. The second is the resurgence of geopolitical competition in the region. Power politics is certainly at work. Thus, Ruizhuang Zhang argues from a realist position that the future of the entire region, including the possibility of creating an East Asian Community, will be determined by the unfolding logic of power politics.

G. John Ikenberry, on the other hand, believes that the post-war liberal international order is weakening, but not disappearing in the region because the benefits of maintaining the order outweigh the costs of replacing it even for the “spoilers” like China and Russia. Mutiaah Alagappa goes a step further to denounce the “negative logic of anarchy” that has dominated the region since the end of the Second World War, decidedly giving rise to several security dilemmas. As a result, Alagappa contends, the critical problem is not the distribution of power or power transition, but the rigid realist “knowledge structure,” or strategic orientation, held by political and military leaders who control these forces uniformly in realist ways. The third is the trans-national chain reactions of competitive nationalism ramifying all the way from the domestic to the transnational realm. Japan often triggers Chinese and Korean reactions, which in turn strengthen right-wing nationalist sentiments and movements in Japan.

Chung-in Moon argues that the negative dynamic of competitive “reactive nationalism” completes its full vicious circle, amplifying animosities among the three countries. The authors concur that an East Asian Community appears an elusive dream now, but not impossible in the future. They offer some meaningful suggestions that could lead to a community: first of all, in order to loosen the historical and territorial straitjacket, it is crucial to create transnational communities and networks aimed at solving specific common problems. Transnational epistemic communities, in particular, would be of help in deconstructing the prevailing geopolitical discourses, and also in adopting less rigid models of the nation state that can accommodate greater diversity and autonomy.

The contributors to the volume together urge that now is the time to collectively engage in collaborative construction of shared regional identities, and of an imagined Asian Community. Ultimately, “the future is made, not forecast.”

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, Associate Professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and book reviews co-editor for Global Asia

Is there Life in the ‘Asian Peace’?

Identity, Trust, and Reconciliation in East Asia: Dealing with Painful History to Create a Peaceful Present
Edited by Kevin P. Clements
Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 302 pages, $118.51 (Hardcover)

Northeast Asia in recent years has seen a resurgence of retrospective nationalism and geopolitical contest. This calls into question the so-called “Asian Peace” hypothesis, founded on strong socio-cultural exchanges, economic interdependence and a lack of war for decades. Why are transnational relationships in deteriorating and becoming more volatile? Amid a sea of realism prevalent today in scholarly, media and policy discourses on international relations, Clements explores the identity and ideational dimensions of the relationships among the major Northeast Asian countries: China, Japan and Korea.

This endeavor is relevant and legitimate in that collective historical memories, deeply ingrained in their national identities, cast a long shadow over interstate and international relationships in the region. Fifteen contributors probe how national identity is constructed in the three countries, in which collective historical memories are generating threat perceptions through the (re)constructing of an analical “Other;” these are then reflected in their foreign and security policies. Clashes of identity have been stopping the three from nourishing stable co-operative relationships. While power-oriented realists would argue that Northeast Asian relations are determined primarily by regional power politics and big power transitions, the essential proposition driving this book is that the relationships remain unresolved and intractable because they flow primarily from clashes of identity and divergent memories of suffering and pain, all of which are heavily anchored in the past and result in a generalized inability to trust one another.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

Our Time Has Come: How India Is Making Its Place in the World
By Alyssa Ayres
Oxford University Press, 2018, 360 pages, $22.15 (Hardcover)

India aspiring to Be a Global Power

Is India a global power? Two decades of growth has propelled it into the world’s top ten economies, and it is naturally searching for a larger international role commensurate with its size. Alyssa Ayres, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, here traces India’s bid for its “rightful place” in the world. Since Jawaharlal Nehru’s death, India has been gradually moving from non-alignment to a focus on “strategic autonomy” and now to a multi-alignment approach to the world. Not only does it seek a larger role in global bodies, such as a permanent UN Security Council seat, it is trying to build its “natural” role as the pre-eminent Indian Ocean power. New Delhi is forging strong partnerships with Western liberal democracies, the US included. But, Ayres argues, it is doing so cautiously, as the Gandhi-Nehru tradition of non-alignment and non-intervention lingers.

Is the world ready to accept India as a global power? Ayres sees the gap between where India sits and where it aspires to sit as never more apparent.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim
Modern China's Religious Surge

By Charles R. Kim
Honolulu: University Hawaii Press, 2017, 304 pages, $60 (Hardcover)

South Korea’s Activist Roots

South Korea’s democratic transition from the 1980s is a familiar story. Less well known is the experience of April 19, 1960, when students and university professors helped drive an anti-corruption movement that pushed President Syngman Rhee to resign, ushering in a brief democratic interregnum before Park Chung-Hee’s relatively bloodless coup in 1961. Charles Kim’s cultural history of 1953 to the mid-1960s charts the ideological dimensions of liberal nationalist nation-building in post-war Korea through a close study of intellectual discourse, state-sanctioned political initiatives and public media, including books, newspapers, periodicals and film. He highlights leaders’ efforts to develop two broad ideological “schematic” of “wholesome modernization” and the “student vanguard” — to promote a postcolonial narrative of economic development and gendered politics to bolster state-led rapid modernization. In the process, the fostering of student activism helped mobilize a core group in South Korea’s emerging civil society that could challenge Park’s increasingly authoritarian politics, paving the way to the more militant resistance of the later post-war period. Kim’s account is a compelling analysis of the limits of “social management” by the state.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright, Senior Lecturer, University of Cambridge, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia, Chatham House, and a regional editor for Global Asia

Youth for Nation: Culture and Protest in Cold War South Korea

By Ian Johnson

With political life in many countries seemingly ever more detached from Enlightenment rationalism, it is interesting to contemplate the role of emotion in a state seemingly committed to scientific thinking. Modern China, through its 1949 Communist revolution, nominally embraced the certainties of economic materialism inherent in Marxism-Leninism, a trend reinforced by the state-sanctioned pursuit of economic development under Deng Xiaoping and his successors. Equally important, the Cultural Revolution from 1966 sought to impose a secular mindset to rid the “backward” influences of religious superstition.

Ian Johnson, in his innovative study of modern China, shows such a view to be too simplistic. Not only did religion have deep historical roots in pre-modern China, operating at the local level via a bewildering proliferation of “city-gods” and professional deities, it was also widely diffused through an elaborate series of rituals that blurred sharp distinctions between the spiritual and secular in daily life.

Most important, as Johnson argues, religion is making a comeback, and with state support as it recognizes its critical role in meeting the affective needs of ordinary people for whom material progress alone fails to deliver happiness. Today’s China is spiritually eclectic and experiencing an extraordinary spiritual resurgence. Economic development under Deng Xiaoping and his successors. Equally important, the Cultural Revolution from 1966 sought to impose a secular mindset to rid the “backward” influences of religious superstition.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright, Senior Lecturer, University of Cambridge, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia, Chatham House, and a regional editor for Global Asia

Fresh Eye on the US Failure in Vietnam

By Max Boot
US: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018, 768 pages, $21 (Hardcover)

Fifty years on from the 1968 Tet Offensive that marked a decisive turning point in America’s Vietnam tragedy, there has been a renewed interest in understanding the roots of the US failure in Indochina. Max Boot’s magisterial and massive new biography of Edward Lansdale — a former advertising executive turned CIA field operative who played a critical role in US Cold War nation-building initiatives in the Philippines and South Vietnam — offers a fresh and compelling reassessment of what went wrong as well as new insights into an arguably much misjudged and maligned historical figure. Not only was Lansdale not the model for Graham Greene’s manipulative and disingenuous Quiet American in the novel of that name, he was also a far more nuanced and empathetic individual than the figure in the standard historical accounts. His achievements in counter-insurgency and nation-building initiatives in Southeast Asia were far less a function of traditional intelligence activities or the use of military force (which Lansdale felt was of limited utility), and much more of his capacity to understand local cultures and develop a genuine rapport with a wide cross-section of individuals, including leaders such as Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam and Ramon Maglayasay in the Philippines. This more reliable picture of Lansdale offers valuable insights into how US involvement in Vietnam might have played out very differently had circumstances been different; it also provides lessons for how the US might better approach the challenge of nation-building today.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright, Senior Lecturer, University of Cambridge, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia, Chatham House, and a regional editor for Global Asia

Era of Strangeloves and Sober Strategy

By Rodric Braithwaite

The specter of nuclear war is never far away, as Kim Jong Un’s provocations and Donald Trump’s pledge to build the US weapons arsenal attest. Retired British diplomat Rodric Braithwaite has written a compelling account of the international relations of the nuclear era. From the Japanese bombings in 1945, he charts the nuclear age, detailing the strategic, political, diplomatic, scientific and technical implications of the bomb on both sides of the Cold War.

The outline is familiar, but the book breaks valuable new ground in exploring both US and Soviet perspectives, mining new archival material in English and Russian and, in the process, humanizing the protagonists on both sides, be they politicians, generals or scientists. It also examines the role of smaller nuclear powers such as the UK and France, and of activists and civil society in campaigning to halt proliferation. Reliance on nuclear deterrence presented critical dilemmas for policy-makers, given the weapons’ power to destroy. The problems persist and suggest caution and humility as essential for world leaders in managing the bomb’s awesome capabilities.

Braithwaite recognizes that luck and pragmatism have helped ward off global Armageddon, but he also notes the moderating role of politicians in averting disaster — a lesson one hopes is not wasted on Trump or his North Korean counterpart.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright, Senior Lecturer, University of Cambridge, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia, Chatham House, and a regional editor for Global Asia
Moral musings on North Korea

North Korea and the World: Human Rights, Arms Control, and Strategies for Negotiation
By Walter C. Clemens Jr.
University Press of Kentucky, 2016, 464 pages, $39.95 (Hardcover)

Walter Clemens was a Cold Warrior for peace. One of the first American graduate students to do research in the USSR (back in 1958), he spent decades studying the Soviets and Chinese, looking for ways to reduce tensions and secure peace. After the Soviet Union’s fall, he turned increasingly to the last archetypal Cold War state, North Korea. His latest book focuses here, but it is better thought of as a meditation by a wise elder who has spent his life grappling with the problems of peace and justice.

He starts by delving into the history of the Korean Peninsula all the way back to its mythical founding. If you are serious about denominatorization and human rights, Clemens is saying, you had better start a couple of millennia back to understand the country and people with whom you are dealing. From history, he moves on to policy. Before plunging into the diplomatic ins and outs, however, he grapples with the underlying moral dilemma of whether it is right to “negotiate with evil” in trying to improve human rights and reduce the risk of nuclear war. Former US Vice President Dick Cheney famously rejected that possibility, but Clemens takes theologian Reinhold Niebuhr for his moral compass, arguing that it is possible to confront the evil of human rights abuse while also engaging the North Korean regime in peace talks.

North Korea and the World concludes with “strategies for negotiation,” and could not be more timely.

Reviewed by John Delury, Associate Professor at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies and book reviews co-editor of Global Asia

Japan, China and the Meiji Model

The Japanese Empire: Grand Strategy from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War
By S.C.M. Paine

This is an elegant encapsulation of Japan’s rise and fall from the promising “Meiji modernization” in the 1860s to the Pacific War disaster in the 1940s. Paine, University Professor of History and Grand Strategy at the National War College, has written landmark books on the three wars Japan fought in its imperial phase: the first Sino-Japanese war (for Korea), the Russo-Japanese war (for Manchuria) and the Pacific War (for Asia). Having looked at those conflicts from the perspective of Chinese, Russians and Americans, here she focuses on the Japanese dimension.

She deftly explains the underlying causes of conflict beyond the proximate, and victory or defeat’s unintended consequences. A central argument is that early 20th-century Japanese leaders made a basic category error, self-defining as a continental power, not a maritime power. From this mistaken identity, catastrophe ensued for Asia and eventually for Japan. Readers will inevitably see Paine’s study in light of today, where China by accounts appears in the Meiji model’s first phase (“a domestic phase of institution-building”). Paine does not ask if China will move to phase two (“a foreign-policy phase of wars to win an empire”). But her authoritative study offers a useful historical point of comparison and an implicit warning to Chinese grand strategists, given the spectacular failure of phase two.

Reviewed by John Delury

A Rogue, a Pariah and All In Between

North Korea and Myanmar: Divergent Paths
By Andray Abrahamian
McFarland, 2018, 246 pages, $19.95 (Paperback)

Andray Abrahamian is uniquely qualified to write a book on North Korea and Myanmar, having lived and taught in Rangoon and been a frequent visitor to Pyongyang. He sees Myanmar’s defining condition as “fracture” caused by the country’s daunting ethnic and religious diversity, while for homogenous North Korea, the central problem is external “division” from South Korea and the external threat of the South’s ally, the US.

Myanmar’s founder, Aung San, negotiated a unified state that has been in low-grade civil war ever since. North Korea’s founder, Kim Il Sung, started a war to unify the country but, after defeat, had to live with a Cold War that continues still. These founders’ legacies came together in an extraordinary convergence around the year 2010, when Aung San’s daughter emerged from decades of house arrest to become a national leader, and in the same year Kim Il Sung’s grandson was announced to the world as heir apparent. Aung San Suu Kyi received the Nobel Peace Prize and became a darling of the international community — until the tragedy of the Rohingya crisis threatened to return Myanmar to “pariah” status. Kim Jong Un was mocked, feared and written off as crazy — until a sudden turn of events now makes it appear likely he will hold summits as a statesman with the presidents of South Korea and the US.

North Korea and Myanmar continue to surprise us, in large measure because of the limits of our understanding of and access to them. Abrahamian has made a major contribution to filling that gap.

Reviewed by John Delury

All Aboard China’s Railway Ambitions

High-Speed Empire: Chinese Expansion and the Future of Southeast Asia
By Will Doig
Columbia Global Reports, 2018, 107 pages, $14.99 (Paperback)

By now, everyone (in Asia at least) has heard of the One Belt, One Road Initiative. Will Doig explores a lesser-known offshoot of Beijing’s gargantuan infrastructure ambitions: the idea of a Pan-Asia Railway that would run from Kunming, in the Chinese southwest, to Singapore, linking Laos, Thailand and Malaysia along the way.

Like so much of China’s booming trade and investment linkages around the world, Beijing’s “railroad diplomacy” is forcing Southeast Asian countries to confront a dilemma — is it “safe” to invite Chinese money? Can they protect their “sovereignty and identity” from the repercussions of borrowing on Chinese largesse? These questions represent a profound historical irony, given how in the 19th century the Chinese themselves struggled, and ultimately failed, to manage the arrival of the West’s superiority in wealth and power. Now, “the heavy hand of China” is what Southeast Asian leaders and publics “both yearn for and fear.”

Doig writes vividly out of his reporting trips to places like Boten, the Chinese-built “mini-Macau” on the Laos side of their border; Bandar Malaysia, a controversial terminus development outside Kuala Lumpur; and Forest City, islands built for Chinese expats just off Singapore. High-Speed Empire is a short, fast read, but offers much food for thought.

Reviewed by John Delury