Think of today’s international system, and we have two contrasting images of the world. One is easily found in wallmaps: a cartographic image of the globe divided by the borders of sovereign states. It depicts a state-centered geopolitical “chessboard” of inter-state conflict and contest that has existed for centuries, since the Westphalia treaties. The other is an image of the world in which non-state actors and states are interconnected like a spider web that spreads beyond national borders. The former map is marked by separations, the latter map of connections reflects people-based interactions and networks enabled and enhanced by new digital technologies.

Stressing the need for foreign-policy-makers to integrate both perspectives into their visions and strategies, Anne-Marie Slaughter, former director of policy planning at the US State Department, goes beyond the chessboard to look at web actors, who are global actors in their own right. In articulating the notion of “webcraft,” as opposed to geopolitical statecraft, she argues that networks are useful tools to be designed and managed to achieve specific foreign-policy goals. She identifies three types of networks — resilience, task and scale — that can be created, shaped and supported to address different foreign-policy challenges. In articulating the notion of “open-order building” based on the three pillars of open society, open government and an open international system.

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

The world is witnessing a tide of illiberal democracy and the rise of strongmen, from Russia’s Putin to Hungary’s Orban and the Philippines’ Duterte — and, yes, Trump. They have won electoral mandates from voters motivated by religious and ethnic nationalism, economic anxieties, and/or disillusionment with earlier weak, inefficient, or corrupt elites. They often embrace aggressive nationalism, exude an aura of personal menace and strength, and persecute earlier weak, inefficient or corrupt elites. They often make real and imagined enemies of each other. Under their reign, democracy steps backward, with ordinary people suffering.

Basharat Peer, opinion editor at The New York Times, chronicles how people in India and Turkey suffer as strongmen play out violent, exclusionary struggles, first against the Kemalist establishment, then the Gulenists, once the political ally of Ayurveda, yoga and the non-violent independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Adding to India’s modern power of attraction are Bollywood, a working democracy in a diverse, underdeveloped country, and the “Mumbai consensus,” which tries to tie economic growth with equality and inclusiveness.

This book is less about India’s soft power per se than how such potential translates into capabilities in its practice of foreign policy. Patrick Kugiel, a Polish Institute of International Affairs analyst, divides modern India’s foreign policy into three phases, depending on the prevalence of soft- or hard-power approaches. Since the late 1990s, he argues, soft power has been back in India’s mainstream foreign policy amid a more strategic stance to combine soft and hard power. But in pursuit of this, India appears trapped between its great-power aspirations and the “power of example.”

India’s Hard and Soft Choices

India, with reason, is often called a “soft power by default.” Its soft power has civilizational depth and richness, its roots traced to Buddhism, Hinduism, Ayurveda, yoga and the non-violent independence struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. This is so because today’s India is not as convinced of example. This book is less about India’s soft power per se than how such potential translates into capabilities in its practice of foreign policy. Patrick Kugiel, a Polish Institute of International Affairs analyst, divides modern India’s foreign policy into three phases, depending on the prevalence of soft- or hard-power approaches. Since the late 1990s, he argues, soft power has been back in India’s mainstream foreign policy amid a more strategic stance to combine soft and hard power. But in pursuit of this, India appears trapped between its great-power aspirations and the “power of example.”

Suffering Under the Strongmen

A Question of Order: India, Turkey, and the Return of Strongmen
By Basharat Peer
Columbia Global Reports, 2017, 170 pages, $105.00 (Paperback)

India’s Soft Power: A New Foreign Policy Strategy
By Patrick Kugiel
Routledge, 2017, 230 pages $110.10 (Hardcover)

Guilty, Sorry and All too Human

Irish journalist Paul Murphy, who spent years working in Japan, experiences the courtroom’s powerful lure as a muse for great storytelling in this wonderfully written book chronicling a year of court deliberations in Matsumoto City, population 243,000, roughly 140 miles west of Tokyo. He sat through 119 cases involving hundreds of hearings, and followed up with interviews with defendants, victims, lawyers, family members and others in the community.

The cases range from the extraordinary — a husband and wife who try to burn their house down to kill their daughter and themselves to escape the shame of losing the house through financial difficulties, a man who beat his 91-year-old mother to death — to the ordinary — pimping and drug use among current and former yakuza members and petty theft among the elderly. With a judicious selection of cases, Murphy masterfully portrays the almost ritual process of confession and abject contrition by defendants, as well as the shame of family members, that characterize court proceedings in Japan, where 99 percent of cases result in conviction. He intersperses his accounts of cases with interviews of defendants, as well as the shame of family members, that characterize court proceedings in Japan, where 99 percent of cases result in conviction. He intersperses his accounts of cases with interviews with defendants, victims, lawyers, family members and others in the community.

The book dabbles in the geopolitical implications, but the making.

Guilty, Sorry and All too Human

True Crime Japan: Thieves, Rascals, Killers and Dope Heads: True Stories From a Japanese Courtroom
By Paul Murphy
Tuttle Publishing, 2016, 256 pages, $16.95 (Paperback)

China’s presence overseas lets it be considered, at a minimum, an empire in the making.

China is now a major builder of the developing world of roads, railways, telecom networks and the like. The title of Toh Han Shih’s book, Is China an Empire?, would have been unthinkable in 1978. But, as Toh shows in this book, it is now a major builder of the developing world of roads, railways, telecom networks and the like.

An Empire in the Making, at Least

Is China An Empire?
By Toh Han Shih
World Scientific Publishing, 2017, 292 pages, $38.00 (Paperback)
Lighting the Legacy of Ho Chi Minh

Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology
By Tuong Vu
Cambridge Studies in US Foreign Relations, 2016, 320 pages, $30.00 (Paperback)

Alone in a tiny Paris room, Ho Chi Minh read Lenin and wept. He had found Vietnam’s path to independence. The attraction may have been superficial, but Ho emerged a dedicated communist working for world revolution, Vietnamese scholar Tuong Vu shows. When North Vietnamese tanks crashed the presidential palace gates in Saigon in 1975, it was the culmination of an epic national struggle. But Vu argues that more than a nationalist victory, it was celebrated by Vietnam’s dedicated communist leaders as a victory of the Marxist-Leninist state. Relying on newly accessed internal party documents, he sets out to dismiss “enduring myths” on Vietnamese nationalism created by American-centric scholars. Rather than nationalists, Ho and his comrades were doctrinaire communists who used Marxist organization and assistance to win Vietnam’s independence. Vu has kept a veritable appraiser of scholarship dating to the 1960s that argued that communist leaders as a victory of the Marxist-Leninist energy were largely burnt out by the 1980s, but they perished until. Even in the 1970s with an opening to normalize relations, Vu sees no such “missed opportunities” in the 1940s for Vietnam to be won over. Even in the 1970s with an opening to normalize relations with the US, Vietnam blew it by sticking to its revolutionary demand. Vietnam’s revolutionary energies were largely burnt out by the 1980s, but they lingered in political culture and institutions, blocking the country’s integration with the world. Its leaders’ ideological affinity with China and wariness of imperialist America still dictate their policy today.
Reviewed by Nayan Chanda, founding editor of YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia Editorial Board member.

Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?
By Graham Allison
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017, 384 pages, $18.00 (Hardcover)

Seldom does a Chinese communist leader cite an ancient Greek historian on foreign policy. But in 2013 Xi Jinping told some European visitors, “We must all work together to avoid the Thucydides trap,” assuming they all knew what he was alluding to. But credit for popularizing a historian from two millennia ago and his prognostication of the inevitability of war between states goes to Graham Allison, who coined it in 2012, adding new vocabulary to policy discourse long before the publication of this latest volume.

Allison tests Thucydides’ hypothesis in 16 cases and finds it accurate in all but two.

Not If We Go to War, but When

Do Fear Populism’s Global Barriers

Grave New World: The End of Globalization, the Return of History
By Stephen D. King
Yale University Press, 2017, 304 pages, $16.00 (Hardcover)

As the 2008 financial crisis triggered an avalanche of commentaries on the “death of globalization,” so has the populist revolt in a number of countries. Economist Stephen King found in Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel Brave New World inspiration for his book’s title, but don’t be alarmed: his arguments are less dire and more nuanced. Globalization cannot operate in a vacuum, he argues, and needs a framework such as one offered by Britain’s 19th-century empire and commitment to free trade. Since then, the Bretton Woods arrangement has mildly curtailed national sovereignty and self-interest to let trade and globalization flourish. But in recent years, as Montesquieu foresaw, growing inequality bred by globalization has undermined the contract that binds a state to its people. This has led to opposition to global integration, as shown in the UK’s vote to leave the EU and the rise of Donald Trump. King offers a readable digest of growing global economic integration and notes the misery of the bottom half of income groups in North America, Western Europe and Japan. While huge wealth has been created for a tiny minority, disruptive forces such as migration, technology and money flows have adversely affected the rest. Goaded by populists, the newly disaffected crave the nation state’s safe harbor from the vicissitudes of Western-style globalization. If they succeed in building barriers, King concludes, “it really will be a Brave New World.” Interestingly, the author does not address the fate of globalization in China, India and the rest of the world, where there is a hunger for greater global integration.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

Social History of Calamitous Times

The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History, 1962-1976
By Frank Dikötter

Authoritarian leaders, when threatened or in the face of policy failures, often turn on associates or attack the institutions of government. In the case of China, nothing better exemplifies this than Mao Zedong’s decade-long Cultural Revolution, a campaign against the past to bolster his authority and undermine his rivals. It has been the focus of many accounts, both academic and memoirs, but Dikötter offers something new with a genuinely comprehensive social history that views the turmoil from the ground up.

With access to previously unexplored archival records, he documents the tragedy with visceral immediacy. The third of a three-part social history of China under Mao, this work documents how the Great Leap Forward’s catastrophic failures in the 1950s and the de-Stalinist challenge of a reformist Russia under Nikita Khrushchev encouraged Mao to unleash social forces that destroyed the lives of millions of Chinese. From the anarchic destruction of the Red Guards to the tidal wave of violence that swept away so much of physical and artistic heritage to Mao’s use of the military to control his chaos, Dikötter situates the reader vividly inside this upheaval in a way simultaneously illuminating and deeply disturbing.

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.
What Really Made Modern Japan?

The Japanese and the War: Expectations, Perception, and the Shaping of Memory
By Michael Lucken
(translated by Karen Grimwade)

The Second World War’s end in 1945 is often used as a handy punctuation point to make sense of Japan’s political transformation and evolution of its modern national identity. In this innovative, elegant account, French scholar Michael Lucken presents an alternative historical framework, divided into three periods: the 1930s to 1943, focusing on Japan’s territorial expansion and ideological consolidation; 1943 to 1952, when Japan experienced retreat and ultimately defeat, including US-led occupation; and the post-war era, in which memory and collective self-awareness issues still shape contemporary political life.

Lucken draws on a diverse, rich body of material in Japanese that embraces social, cultural and political history. Through readings of literature, film, philosophy and social practices, Lucken demonstrates persuasively that simple progressive-conservative dichotomies often fail to capture the complexities of modern Japanese history.

Most notably, he highlights Japanese society’s pluralistic character. Without minimizing state efforts to impose a single political narrative associated with the Emperor, or how Hiroshima and Nagasaki have contributed to a widespread victim consciousness in today’s Japan, Lucken sensibly reminds us of the diversity of views (often bitterly contested ones) on the past. Also, by offering a distinctive French perspective on events typically addressed by English-language scholars, Lucken provides comparative insights from European encounters with warfare and political authoritarianism that underline the unique aspects of Japan’s extended wartime experience.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright

Japanese Society and the Politics of the North Korean Threat
By Seung Hyok Lee
Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2016, 182 pages, $16.85 (Hardcover)

Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s ability to develop a strategically focused, proactive foreign policy is sometimes seen as proof that day-to-day politics has at best a limited role in shaping Japan’s diplomacy.

This new account of Japan’s North Korea policy persuasively challenges this assumption. By detailed analysis of Japan’s response to North Korea’s 1990s and 2000s missile launches, primarily during Junichiro Koizumi’s premiership, Lee convincingly shows the importance of social discourse and public opinion in shaping the policy choices and reactions of Japanese politicians and bureaucrats. By examining a wide body of Japanese source material, including media editorials, opinion polls and leading political periodicals, he highlights how public opinion has sometimes channeled and constrained political and bureaucratic opinion, and fostered a more hawkish and critical official policy towards North Korea.

A nuanced reading of Japanese public opinion also shows the limitations of much international-relations literature on post-Cold War Japanese foreign policy. Lee’s analysis shows that the unique nature of the North Korean security threat to Japan, the wider international diplomatic context, the role of individual political leadership and, most importantly, changing public attitudes have all contributed to critical changes in Japanese foreign-policy priorities.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright