**Supreme Leader: The Biography**

*The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un*  
By Anna Fifield  
Public Affairs, 2019, 335 pages, $28.00 (Hardcover)

As nuclear negotiations remain stalled and ominous signs gather like storm clouds over the Korean Peninsula, the world might once again find itself with no choice but to pay attention to the 35-year-old Supreme Leader of North Korea. Fortunately, Kim Jong Un is no longer the enigma wrapped in a mystery that he was in 2017, before he met with five foreign heads of state and embarked on nine visits outside his isolated country.

The Great Successor is the first serious attempt at a biography of the no-longer hidden Kim. Anna Fifield distills her intrepid reporting from both sides of the DMZ for *The Washington Post* since 2014, adding dogged research on Kim's formative years before he took over North Korea in 2011. She tracked down anyone who met the Supreme Leader, from exiled relations in the US to the Japanese sushi chef who knew him as a boy. She larder around the school he attended in Switzerland, chasing down every scrap of information and insight into what made him into his father's choice for heir. New details emerge on Kim's internal workings of North Korean politics. He is also relatively young, with potentially decades of rule ahead of him. It is too early for a definitive biography. But Fifield puts key pieces of the puzzle together, contributing an important first-draft of history.

Reviewed by John Delury, Associate Professor at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies and Global Asia’s Associate Managing Editor.

**Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present**  
By Ben Kiernan  
Oxford University Press, 2019, 656 pages, $24.95 (Paperback)

You could fill a library with books in English on “Vietnam.” But the vast majority tell the reader very little about the land, people and country known today as Việt Nam. Instead, you would learn about Americans and the tragic war they fought in a far-off place they understood very little about.

Yale University history professor Ben Kiernan puts Vietnam back in the center of its own story. He paints a giant canvas stretching to prehistoric times, and weaves in environmental changes right up to today's climate crisis (if there is a central theme in this sweeping book, it would be water’s role Vietnamese history and identity). Kiernan balances the distinct regional elements, exploring the rise and fall of the Hindu Cham Kingdom as inseparable from a history that inevitably favors its northern rival state, Đại Việt.

The inward focus can leave gaps: There is relatively little on the Vietnam policy and strategy debates in Beijing during its long era of imperial influence, as well as Paris during France’s shorter stint as colonial occupier. That changes during the American War; Kiernan relies heavily on declassified CIA histories to reconstruct developments in the South. He ends with post-war Vietnam’s shift from militancy to economic dynamism. In light of millennia of history, the reader can appreciate how Hanoi will tread into the future of great power rivalry with profound caution.

Reviewed by John Delury

**Letting Vietnam Tell Its Own Story**

*Vietnam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*  
By Ben Kiernan  
Oxford University Press, 2019, 656 pages, $24.95 (Paperback)

**Theory Bows to Messy Reality**

*Asia’s Quest for Balance: China’s Rise and Balancing in the Indo-Pacific*  
Edited by Jeff M. Smith  
Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 334 pages, $80 (Hardcover)

International relations orthodoxy holds that when one state in a system rises, others will at least try to balance against it, spending up on defense (“internal balancing”) or courting allies (“external balancing”). Rarely, a state might “bandwagon” with the rising power, on the principle of “if you can’t beat them, join them.” As a final alternative, some states might theoretically hedge their bets through equidistance. Asia’s Quest for Balance tests the theories against the messy realities of actual behavior of small-states and middle powers across the Indo-Pacific. The chapter-length summaries by country experts are lucid, useful snapshots of a strategic landscape that seems to defy the theoretical choice of balancing, bandwagoning or hedging. Most countries instead try to combine the three approaches in a pragmatic spirit.

The volume as a whole does provide evidence, however, for increasing alarm over China’s rise, at a time of weakening confidence in America’s role as a guardian of stability. That trend manifests as rising defense spending as well as “internal balancing” — most interestingly, the emergence of more security linkages among Asia-Pacific countries. But no one in the region has abandoned “engagement” — staying closely connected to the rising power of China. In some cases (Jakarta and Manila, for example), there appear to be gaps between the foreign-policy establishment’s counsel of proactive balancing, versus political leaders’ contentment with engagement. Another gap, though, may be opening between “hard balancers” led by Australia, Japan and India, and the “soft balancing” approach of most ASEAN countries.

Reviewed by John Delury

**Ties That Bind Ever More Weakly**

*India, China, and the World: A Connected History*  
By Tansen Sen  
Roman & Littlefield, 2017, 560 pages, $39.00 (Paperback)

As China rises steadily to global influence and India steps into a future as a great power in Asia, the question of what binds these ancient civilizations takes on increasing salience. Tansen Sen, historian at NYU Shanghai and director of the Center on Global Asia, explores the langue durée of Sino-Indian connections, from Buddhism’s spread in the first millennium to today’s Belt and Road Initiative.

In pursuit of connection points, Sen introduces a rich variety of third parties who mediated the relationship over the ages, such as Liang Qichao and Rabindranath Tagore to the post-war “peaceful co-existence” creed of leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai. Yet Sen stresses that the centrifugal forces of disconnection — or outright discord, as in the 1962 border war — have long outweighed the centripetal bonds of linkage. Sen suggests deep skepticism for the recent discourse of “Chindia,” with its invented past of geo-civilizational brotherhood. If this book is any guide, India-China relations will be shaped profoundly by the Asian and global context in which they intersect.

Reviewed by John Delury
**What’s Eating Liberal Democracy?**

Liberal democracy as a political mechanism for processing conflicts “in liberty and civil peace” has been in retreat for two decades. Adam Przeworski, professor at New York University and a prime theorist of democracy and political economy, traces the possible causes and future prospects. Identifying three signs of the current crisis — drastic erosion of traditional party systems, rise of a radical Right and Left, and erosion of representative democracy, and decline in public support for democracy — he explores economic, political and cultural causes, although no rigorous causal relations are established. He pinpoints unprecedented economic stagnation of lower incomes and inequality, and the intensity of political divisions and people’s preferences and actions antagonizing members of other groups.

**Przeworski attends keenly to the failure of political institutions in managing conflicts.**

Most important, Przeworski attends keenly to the failure of political institutions in managing conflicts in an orderly way by structuring and absorbing conflicts, and in regulating them via rules. What concerns him is democracy’s “subversion by stealth.” Democratic “deconsolidation” now taking place appears rather as a process of gradual erosion of democratic institutions and norms. The author is moderately pessimistic because he finds the current crisis not just political; it has deep roots in the economy and society. He sees no signs of improvement in these combined realms.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

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**Japan’s Slow Road To a New Identity**

Japan has pursued liberal value-based foreign policy under Shinzo Abe, mostly targeted at balancing an increasingly assertive China together with the US. Abe’s foreign policy has been shaped and propelled by a new Japanese identity rebaptized from a postwar “abnormal” to a “normal” country that can wage wars to protect its sovereignty, no longer relying on a US security umbrella. The rebuiling has evolved since the 1990s but driven by Abe’s political conviction to build a “new” Japan that he calls a “beautiful country.” This is an outsider’s view of Japanese identity reconstruction and its effects on Japan’s domestic, foreign and security policies, which Michael Kolmas, professor at Metropolitan University Prague, labels as “revisionism” of the Yoshida doctrine. Japanese revisionism built up from within society, not simply as a response to the changing international system; the author sees in Abe not a pragmatist, but an “identity entrepreneur” with a clear vision for Japan.

**Kolmas labels Abe’s narratives — constitutional change, foreign and security policies, which Michael Kolmas, professor at Metropolitan University Prague, labels as “revisionism” of the Yoshida doctrine.**

Japan’s march towards a “normal” country, Kolmas anticipated, because the revisionist projects are more complicated and nuanced than generally anticipated, because the revisionist projects are constrained by the pacifist identity long embedded in Japanese post-war political and social institutions. Japan’s march towards a “normal” country, Kolmas thus concludes, will only continue in steps, not leaps.

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

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**Crisis of Democracy**

By Adam Przeworski

Cambridge University Press, 2019, 250 pages, $24.99

(Hardcover)

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**North Korea-US Relations: From Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un**

(2nd ed.)

By Ramon Pacheco Pardo

Routledge, 2019, 266 pages, $149.95

(Hardcover)

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**The Church as Policy-Maker**

By Dmitry Adamsky

Cambridge University Press, 2019, 376 pages, $83.74

(Hardcover)

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Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

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**Analytical Outlook for North Korea**

Dramatic turns have unfolded on the Korean Peninsula in the short span of the past two years. The “fire and fury” mood in late 2017 turned into a series of attention-grabbing summits and dialogues between Donald Trump, Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae-in up until the Trump-Kim Hanoi summit in February this year, which was followed by a stalemate in both the US-North Korea denuclearization talks and inter-Korean relations. What went wrong and what will happen?

Ramon Pacheco Pardo, Reader at King’s College London and KF-VUF Korea Chair at the Institute for European Studies of Vrije Universiteit Brussel, offers an account of North Korea’s policy towards the US, and the evolution of its nuclear policy, in particular, from the early 1990s. He locates the chronology of Pyongyang’s nuclear policy in an analytical framework of an asymmetrical bargaining process between a weak power and a superpower, and argues that Pyongyang has used an evolving combination of the bargaining tactics available to weak powers to seek the normalization with the US except bandwagoning: balancing between Beijing, Moscow, Seoul and even Tokyo; soft balancing: participation in international regimes but only reluctantly; and, of course, brinkmanship.

Based on his analysis of North Korean behavior, Pardo contends that denuclearization of North Korea, if an option at all, should most probably only take place after the normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington, and that a multilateral framework should be useful to support the steps to be taken before normalization takes place.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

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**Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy**

By Dmitry Adamsky

Stanford University Press, 2019, 376 pages, $83.74

(Hardcover)

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Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

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**The Church as Policy-Maker**

Dmitry Adamsky, professor at the IDC Herzlia, Israel, splits the three decades since the Soviet Union disintegrated, Russia finally succeeded in building a new national identity by the 2010s, in which the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is crucially embedded. The ROC and a nuclear arsenal are now seen by Russian elite and a majority of people alike as the guardian of Russia’s spiritual and national security.

This book traces the evolution of Russia’s search for a new identity with a focus on the nexus between the ROC and the state in general, and its nuclear complex in particular, since the Soviet collapse.

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Reviewed by Taehwan Kim
**China’s Ideological Past Returns**

**China’s New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong**

By Jude D. Blanchette

Oxford University Press, 2019, 224 pages, $27.49 (Hardcover)

Political contestation and ideology matter, even in authoritarian systems that appear to have embraced technocratic modernization and political centralization. This is the core point in Jude Blanchette’s fascinating exploration of identity and intellectual discourse in contemporary China. Contrary to the conventional Western interpretation of Chinese communism as a system that has paid at best lip service to Maoist ideology while focusing on rapid economic growth and social modernization, Blanchette sees China as in the grip of a fierce battle over ideas, in which New Left intellectuals, politicians and activists are seeking to resurrect and re-legitimize the centrality of Mao.

Though interviews and an exhaustive reading of both polemical and substantive Chinese writers, and via a close analysis of the impact of neo-Maoist websites, such as the influential “Utopia,” Blanchette reveals a new radical and left-wing populist movement challenging the leadership of Xi Jinping, driven by nostalgia for China’s Maoist past, resentment at widening economic inequality, and amplified by anger at foreign powers and institutions seen as increasingly discriminatory towards China. Xi may be seeking to co-opt and manage this trend, but the warning is that there are powerful and emotional political forces shaping contemporary China that could disrupt the country in ways not entirely dissimilar from the Cultural Revolution’s disruption.

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.

**A Challenge to Convention**

This is an ambitious and sophisticated study of Chinese political thinking from the 6th century BC to the present. Youngmin Kim adopts a non-nationalistic, non-essentialist approach that rejects many conventions of Chinese historiography.

Kim challenges the teleological assumptions of Hsiao Kung-chuan, who viewed current Chinese political ideas as the culmination of centuries of prior thinking. He also objects to the assumption that “China” was monolithic or a coherent unitary-state, but rather recognizes that the concept of China is itself a political and normative construction. Not only is China’s political identity variable and contestable, it is also not necessarily inherently authoritarian or monarchical. Equally importantly, the tendency by some social scientists to assert overly deterministic notions of “Confucianism” risk cultural essentialism. Kim’s analysis concentrates on a number of key issues, including the notion of an enlightened community, a metaphysical republic, autonomy, politics and civil society, and the idea of empire now and past. Above all, and most importantly, Kim shows that all political thought, including that of Chinese writers, is shaped by one’s particular intellectual inheritance, and in this we find an invaluable insight into the inherent diversity of Chinese political thought both now and in the past.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.

**A History of Chinese Political Thought**

By Youngmin Kim

Polity Press, 2018, 288 pages, $48.04 (Hardcover)

**12 Steps to Fix a Broken Nation?**

**Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change**

By Jared Diamond

Little, Brown and Company, 2019, 512 pages, $21.49 (Hardcover)

Starting with the experience of how individuals deal with crises, and taking inspiration from his own challenges, geographer and polymath Jared Diamond historically considers six national case studies — Finland, Japan, Chile, Indonesia, Germany, Australia and the US — to work out what makes some countries more or less resilient in dealing with national crises. Twelve factors are key for national success: consensus that the country is in a crisis; acceptance of the need to address the challenge; delimiting the problems to be tackled; securing support from other countries and using other countries as models for adaptation; building and maintaining a strong sense of national identity; honest self-criticism; a record of dealing with both crises and national failures; flexibility; a set of core values and not having geopolitical constraints.

Diamond’s comparative approach lets him provide insight into a range of countries, but in listing so many criteria, he is in danger of being over-deterministic. In not assigning a priority to his ingredients, Diamond also risks downplaying contingent factors, such as the role of personal leadership. Similarly, in arguing for approaches that are more data-rich and reliant on quantitative analysis, he risks overlooking the more nuanced conclusions that come from more narrowly focused national analyses. Yet, valuably, Diamond’s approach prompts us to think more deeply about national resilience and how leading nations, such as the US and Japan, are adapting to today’s most pressing contemporary challenges — a theme he considers in the book’s second half and in ways that are powerful and informative.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.

**How to be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century**

By Frank Dikötter

Bloomsbury, 2019, 304 pages, $21.99 (Hardcover)

With authoritarian political trends increasingly posing a threat to the stability of democratic systems of governance, understanding the roots of dictatorship is arguably more important than ever. The distinguished historian of China, Professor Frank Dikötter, has widened his analytical remit to explore how national dictators seize and maintain power. Eschewing a theoretical model, or an immediately obvious basis for selection, Dikötter focuses on eight: Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Mao Zedong, Kim Il-Sung, Francois Duvalier of Haiti, Nicolae Ceausescu, and Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia. Two factors — a personality cult and the use of fear as an instrument for maintaining control — stand out as common ingredients. Strikingly, ideology as a central, animating factor is relatively unimportant in explaining the power of these individuals. Vanity often drove each, through a tight, at times obsessive control of their personal images via propaganda to bolster their authority. An insistence on rigid loyalty, combined with monumental architecture, and nostalgic, spiritually infused and artificial narratives of a mythologized national identity, all help to support a given dictator’s authority — but in a manner that all too often is short-lived and rapidly rejected in the wake of a given dictator’s fall from grace.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.
Over its 72 years, independent India has ridden a roller coaster, as evidenced by book titles evoking fear of disintegration in its “dangerous decade” to celebrating “the rise of Goliath.” In this clear-headed, balanced book, Jaimini Bhagwati, an economist and former Indian foreign service officer, traces modern India through its 14 leaders so far. Under India’s parliamentary system, the prime minister has to work with cabinet colleagues as first among equals, but in reality strong charismatic personalities have left their mark on the country. Bhagwati evaluates their individual imprints on policy by assessing three Cs — character, charisma and competence.

Founding Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru scores highly for the first two but poorly in the last, especially in foreign affairs. “Nehru’s misreading of the minds of China’s leaders was extremely costly for India and the consequences are playing out till now.” His daughter Indira Gandhi’s stewardship was marked by high charisma, but grave character flaws. Her “significant foreign policy achievements [like the creation of Bangladesh] were overwhelmed by the long-lasting consequences of her domestic economic failures and undermining of democratic institutions.”

Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi, just re-elected, is portrayed fairly for “extremely high” competence and charisma. But Bhagwati is muted on his character, noting his continued attempt to propagate “incorrect facts and outlandish concepts about India’s past.” He also notes that Modi’s office has centralized much government decision-making, an “unfortunate throwback to the years when Indira Gandhi was PM.”

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda