India Grapples With Regional Power Shift

India’s Eastward Engagement: From Antiquity to Act East Policy
By S.D. Muni and Rahul Mishra
Sage Publications, 2018, 348 pages, $58.45 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

WITH CHINA’S RISE an old story, Asia watchers are eyeing another stirring Asian giant: India. Two recent books by Indian and French scholars on India looking East offer a complementary study on its response to the regional power shift. S.D. Muni and Rahul Mishra’s book is packed with historical facts, and offers an unusual perspective showing the deep historical roots of China and India’s political and cultural ties with Southeast Asia. Frédéric Grare focuses on a rising China’s challenge to the US and the shifting regional balance driving India to decisively turn to its eastern neighbors.

Muni and Mishra recall the pioneering role of Indian nationalists, from Nehru to Tagore, in nurturing Asia’s anti-colonial nationalism long before Maoist China took on the mission. But for nearly three decades, East Asia faded from Indian awareness until the 1990s, when an isolated India, facing economic disaster, sought to revive its historic ties and forge détente with Washington. In a bid to boost its ties with Southeast Asia, where China has gained considerable ground, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s India changed from a “Look East” to an “Act East” policy. Activist slogans notwithstanding, Muni and Mishra note that India’s trade and investment have faltered because “India has suffered from delivery deficit.” They present India’s engagement with the east — from Japan, South Korea and China to Southeast — as a manifestation of seven waves of action, with the current Act East policy the seventh. Yet Japan and India’s efforts to forge new ties to deal with China have historical resonances. 1,300 years ago, Indian monk Bodhisena performed the eye-opening ceremony for the towering image of the Buddha in Nara. This richly documented book offers both a valuable account of India’s Asian policy and a resource for researchers and curious readers.

Grare sets India’s Look East policy against the backdrop of the growing Sino-US rivalry, and the changing policy approach of Japan, Australia and Southeast Asian states. Grare is sympathetic to India’s domestic constraints, but points to it limiting itself by its policy of “strategic autonomy.” US and Japanese partners consider it unreliable, while Southeast Asian neighbors are increasingly drawn to China. India’s lackluster economic reforms aren’t attractive to ASEAN compared to China’s. Asianism, in fact, is led by ASEAN, “in which India does not exercise any leadership.” Singapore stays a close friend, but the next strategic ally, Vietnam, with shared fears about China, still “sees India as a somewhat unreliable partner,” Grare writes.

Grare astutely notes the constraints under which a weaker India has to maneuver to defend its strategic interests without provoking China and still remain a reliable balancer. While India is welcome in Southeast Asia to limit Chinese influence, India’s presence and defense co-operation “are seen by its partners as both indispensable and frustratingly insufficient.”

Under nationalist leader Modi, India’s rhetoric has gone a little further, but mindful of its military inferiority to China, it has not fundamentally departed from its traditional caution. Grare, who visited the Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Telangana, refers to the rhetoric helpful because it warns potential opponents of the possibility of a larger partnership with the US. In all, Grare offers a well-documented, sophisticated survey of India’s foreign policy challenges in Asia.

Nayan Chanda is founding editor of YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia editorial board member.

Why Belt and Road Pulls Both Ways

Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order
By Bruno Maçães
Hurst, 2019, 288 pages, $26.96 (Hardcover)

It’s China’s Marshall Plan; a debt trap; a trillion-dollar folly. Ever since President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), lakes of ink have been spent explaining the project, but confusion persists. Now, Beijing-based former Portuguese diplomat Bruno Maçães has produced a smart, comprehensive assessment of what he considers a brilliant Chinese strategy to achieve world domination. He opens with a traditional recap of China’s motives — overcapacity in some economic sectors, a search for new markets and universalization of the remnibi — before diving for an explanation into China’s ancient philosophy of tianxia (“all under heaven”) and Beijing’s claim to lead post-American globalization. In five chapters, he plots the BRI’s evolution, its components and the responses from China’s needy but nervous Asian neighbors, anxious old Europe and deeply disturbed America.

For all his depth of research, or perhaps because of it, Maçães is conflicted. Is the BRI a benevolent Chinese plan to create a “community of shared destiny” or a cynical ploy to export its authoritarian governing methods and technology, replacing the current liberal world order? While noting China’s “stunning” support for global interdependence, he mentions neither the Great Firewall nor Xi’s support for only “economic globalization.” The BRI, he accepts, could shape globalization in China’s image and be a “conduit to export important elements of China’s political regime,” such as mass surveillance. In the end, it may divide the world into two distinct spheres of influence engaged in conflict and rivalry.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

Sea People: The Puzzle of Polynesia

Sea People: The Puzzle of Polynesia
By Christina Thompson
Harper, 2019, 384 pages, $29.99 (Hardcover)

Sea People explores one of the Asia-Pacific’s great intellectual mysteries — the origins of the Polynesian people and their expansion across the vast triangle formed by New Zealand, Hawaii and Easter Island. It is a European quest to write the history behind the oral traditions of Polynesian peoples, starting with the voyages of Captain James Cook and dialogues with his learned Tahitian counterpart, Tupia. They are led to a long line of explorers not just of Polynesia, but of its past. Some, like Norwegian adventurer Thor Heyerdahl, achieved fame in their daring efforts to re-enact the path to the Pacific (his “Kon-Tiki” journey erroneously assumed a South American origin for Polynesian settlement). Others are less well known but got closer to the truth of origins — like the pioneering 19th century historian Abraham Fornander, a Swedish seaman who became a naturalized subject of the Hawaiian king, or brilliant early 20th century anthropologist Te Rangi Hiroa, born in New Zealand to a Maori mother and Irish father.

Their stories are woven into a mesmerizing tapestry of maritime and scholarly discovery. And at the end of the story, after all the navigation techniques, linguistic markers, pottery shards, and DNA samples have been analyzed, it turns out the origins trace to Taiwan, and an adventurous people known as the Lapita who spread from the Solomon Islands to Samoa around 1,000BC. They “yoked Polynesian prehistory firmly to the western Pacific and thus, ultimately, to Asia.”

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

Sometimes, when a place has no name, someone has to make one up — as has journalist Philip Bowring in his engaging history of maritime Southeast Asia. The “empire of the winds” is a place he calls Nusantaria, stretching from Sumatra, Java and the Malay Peninsula up to the Philippines and then Taiwan (with outposts as far west as Madagascar). It can be thought of as a counterpart to Zomia, the “anarchist zone” in the highlands of Southeast Asia described brilliantly by James Scott and others.

Bowring tells the story of Nusantaria and its seafaring people from its origins to today, letting the reader appreciate the hybridity formed by “culture from India, goods from China.” India’s “peaceful rise” dominated in the first millennium, with Chinese influence coming much later than is often assumed. There are fascinating chapters on influential states such as Cham, which controlled the southern part of what is now Vietnam, and Majapahit, a 14th century Hindu-Buddhist empire that remains a touchstone for Indonesian identity today. The chapters on the Philippines and Taiwan show how waves of colonization — by Spain and the US in the Philippines, and by Dutch, Portuguese, Chinese and Japanese in Taiwan — obscured their archipelagic linkages. Indeed, the European colonial trading posts at Batavia and Singapore undermine the Nusantarian trading world from its core. Today’s contest of visions between a maritime Silk Road and the Indo-Pacific region are but the latest twists in a thousand-year-old story.

Reviewed by John Delury

Empire of the Winds: The Global Role of Asia’s Great Archipelago
By Philip Bowring
I.B. Tauris, 2019, 336 pages, $35.00 (Hardcover)

North Korean Human Rights: Activists and Networks
By Andrew Yeo and Danielle Chubb
Cambridge University Press, 2019, 333 pages, $35.99 (Paperback)

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A Struggle for Lives In North Korea

At first glance, international wishes to see human rights improve in North Korea might seem almost as quixotic as the quest to achieve denuclearization. Yet, in this deftly edited volume, scholars Andrew Yeo and Danielle Chubb show how dynamic the field of North Korean human rights work is. Contributors focus on the global network of researchers and activists that has matured over the past decade. At its center are North Korean defectors and the civil society organizations they lead, based primarily in South Korea and the US. Additional chapters evaluate the work of human rights advocates in Japan and Europe, as well as NGOs that operate across borders.

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A constant reference point in the book is the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK, whose report was released in 2014. Despite the body’s success in elevating the North Korean human rights issue at a discursive level, scholars provide little evidence of actual improvements on the ground, and contributors to this volume wrestle with potential trade-offs between external pressure for accountability and internal progress in people’s lives.

This book has no easy answers to the challenges and dilemmas involved, but it sheds light on the transnational networks of experts and activists, many of the younger generation, looking for ways to advance the cause of human flourishing in North Korea.

Reviewed by John Delury

The Rise of the Civilizational State
By Christopher Coker
Potty, 2019, 224 pages, $15.84 (Hardcover)

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Potty, 2019, 224 pages, $15.84 (Hardcover)

When a State Is a Civilization

The burgeoning influence of exclusionary identity politics is reshaping the world. Based on identity created by common experience or characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, sectarianism, culture, nation-state, social status and class, it takes different forms in different places. Notable in this century is the rise of civilizational identities.

London School of Economics professor Christopher Coker argues that as the West struggles to defend the liberal world order, China and Russia define themselves not just as nation-states but exceptional, distinctive civilizational states with unique cultural values and political institutions. The Islamic State, meanwhile, seeks to rip up the rule book of modern world politics in pursuit of the Caliphate. Their values and worldviews pose a grave challenge to the West.

Coker argues that the civilizational state reconciles Russia and China’s geopolitical aspirations — great-power status — with their ideological aversion to liberal universalism. It is both a geopolitical project and a revolt against the world order; in this light, “geopolitics is no longer purely geographical or political; it is also sociocultural or civilizational.” Competing civilizational visions can easily collide, and the struggle might be more dangerous than those of nation-states, Coker warns. Samuel P. Huntington’s 1996 prediction in The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order has been vindicated, but for reasons very different from those he offered.

Civilians don’t clash, civilizational states do.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, Professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and Book Reviews Co-Editor for Global Asia.

Can Nationalists Make Partners?

Nationalism is back. Long tainted with 20th-century military aggression, genocide and ethnic cleansing, it today fans the flames of nativism, racism, xenophobia and religious bigotry. This book is a rare intellectual attempt to save nationalism by suggesting a middle ground between brutal neoliberal hyper-globalism and extreme right-wing nationalism.

Yael Tamir, a labor activist, politician, and scholar, advocates “liberal nationalism” and offers a three-way partnership: democracy, liberalism and the state. She urges for the nation-state to be brought back into play with the enhanced role of re-establishing a cross-class coalition that will promote a fairer distribution of risks and opportunities in the face of the failure of globalism. She argues that the current social political unrest is grounded not only in an economic crisis but also in a crisis of identity, for which the civic version of nationalism offers an insufficient, too abstract and legalistic answer. Unlike civic nationalism, liberal nationalism does not ignore the formidable role of collective identity and membership in a nation. Since nationalism is too powerful and flexible to be given up, Tamir contends that basing our commitment to, and responsibilities for, fellow nationals on things we have in common — traditions, ways of life and habits of the heart, and a desire for a better future — will tighten the social fabric and make it more resilient.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

Why Nationalism
By Yael Tamir
Princeton University Press, 2019, 224 pages, $16.42 (Hardcover)

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Princeton University Press, 2019, 224 pages, $16.42 (Hardcover)
Digital Borders, Not Physical Borders

The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy
By Ilan Manor
Palgrave Macmillan, 356 pages, $96.51 (Hardcover)

As Putin Pushes, Time to Push Back

Russia is back on the world stage. Vladimir Putin has now achieved a “Putin’s world,” claims Georgetown University professor Angela Stent, in which Moscow’s reach is clearly global, reasserting itself. What made it possible given Russia’s domestic weaknesses? Stent ventures into how Putin’s Russia has done it and what its new role means, focusing on the US, Europe, the post-Soviet states, China, the Middle East and Japan. First, she argues, Putin is adept at seizing chances presented by the disarray in the West and the indecisiveness of some of its leaders. But his world is also a product of deliberate policies. A new “Russian Idea” created under Putin identifies Russia as a unique Eurasian civilization that transcends its state borders. The idea warrants Russia’s right to a sphere of influence in lands once part of the USSR, and a duty to defend the interests of expatriate Russians from the Western threat to Russian values and interests. Putin has continuously built up the military since the 2008 war with Georgia, exploited vulnerabilities in open Western societies and exploited social media’s rise. The author sees Russia pushing to jettison the “Russian Idea” created under Putin sees Russia as a unique Eurasian civilization.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest
By Angela Stent
Twelve, 2019, 448 pages, $19.49 (Hardcover)

Can Japan Outgrow Military Anxieties?

Japan’s post-1945 relationship with military power is complicated and conflicted. The negative legacy of its Asian expansion in the 1930s and the trauma of defeat, particularly the 1945 atomic bombings, has made Japanese elite and especially public opinion keen to avoid past militarist-inspired errors. But recent regional security threats, particularly a confident and militarily powerful China and a nuclear North Korea, have gradually and subtly reshaped Japanese attitudes towards its Self-Defense Forces. Sheila Smith, of the Council on Foreign Relations, gives an authoritative account of the post-war military’s many dimensions, from the early Cold War’s cautious diplomacy, when Japan relied primarily on US protection, to debates over autonomous defense in the 1970s, through the post-Gulf War internationalism of the 1990s, culminating in today’s “proactive pursuit of peace” under assertive leader Shinzo Abe. Smith’s highly accessible account succeeds at understanding decision-making and present leaders’ motivations and constraints, and thereby shows Pyongyang as quintessentially a rational and largely consistent actor.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright

Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power
By Sheila A. Smith
Harvard University Press, 2019, 352 pages, $21.18 (Hardcover)

Know North Korea? Yes, It Is Possible

The clichéd assumption that North Korea is enigmatic and unknowable is decisively challenged by this perceptive analysis by Patrick McEachern, a serving US Foreign Service officer and longstanding North Korea watcher. Innovatively, it is structured around Q&A chapters, thematically covering the history of the Korean Peninsula, the Korean War’s impact, the regime and reveals past prospects on the peninsula. McEachern, whose earlier work applied institutional political science models to understand decision-making in North Korea, demystifies the regime and reveals past present leaders’ motivations and constraints, and thereby shows Pyongyang as quintessentially a rational and largely consistent actor.

Without minimizing the regime’s brutal, exploitative and self-serving nature, McEachern offers a cautiously positive view. His account more offers a cautiously positive view. His account more

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright

North Korea: What Everyone Needs to Know
By Patrick McEachern
Oxford University Press, 2019, 248 pages, $74.00 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

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Debate over how to combat challenges to democratic governance is often rooted in public-policy proposals, economic analysis of material threats seen as fueling populist discontent, or political science theories that explain voter dealignment and frustration. Chicago philosopher Nussbaum offers a different perspective, drawing on psychology, psychoanalytic thought and philosophy. Much of the current political turmoil, she argues, can be traced to fear — a primary trait to which we are genetically and socially predisposed. Often disruptive, fear can amplify other destabilizing emotions, notably anger, disgust and envy.

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In a lucid, elegant account, Nussbaum draws from deep historical examples, particularly ancient Greece and Rome, to show how fear can foster narcissism and a tendency to dismiss others’ interests in ways that unscrupulous demagogues can exploit. Evolutionary psychology also reveals a tendency for individuals to rush to others with reputational status, or for new information to lead crowds to an individual who may in turn urge them to demonize or marginalize other groups in society.

Nussbaum’s solution is to be found in fostering alternative, constructive emotions of hope and love, and by emulating past leaders (such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela) who lived by and powerfully advocated such constructive emotions.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright

For Cambridge political scientist David Runciman, democracy may be in crisis, but today’s predicament is new, not a repeat of past trends. Unlike writers such as Timothy Snyder, who see in populist threats to democratic governance an echo of the fascist upheavals of the inter-war years, Runciman views the weakening of democratic norms and traditions as a contemporary, not cyclical, phenomenon.

Runciman doesn’t see democratic governance as in terminal decline, but as experiencing a mid-life crisis. While anger and resentment are part of the current political landscape, complacency, detachment, and general exhaustion are also key factors in understanding why once confident polities (such as Greece and Japan) are showing signs of political wear and tear and voter disengagement. While this enervation renders democratic states vulnerable to destabilization, it doesn’t mean they are close to collapse, or at risk of capture by authoritarian forces, whether civilian or military.

Yet he also provocatively challenges assumptions that democracy is destined to remain the ideal model of government, or that it is necessarily the best suited to the 21st century and the near future. Pragmatic authoritarianism and discriminatory forms of government in which knowledge and expertise are required to participate (an epistocracy) offer partial, but ultimately unsuccessful, counter-examples. Above all, technological change and artificial intelligence are likely to reshape our political choices (for good or ill), and in ways that undermine democracy and are both gradual and inherently difficult to predict.

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