A Monumental Quest for America’s Heroes

By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783
By Michael J. Green
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Reviewed by John Delury

MICHAEL J. GREEN, a prominent academic and think-tank expert, spent formative years of his career in government as senior director for Asian affairs in US President George W. Bush’s National Security Council. It was there, intensely frustrated by the historical shallowness of government briefings, that he got the inspiration to write By More than Providence, which he hopes will provide foundational historical knowledge for future generations of American policymakers working on Asia. Taken together with Victor Cha’s Powerplay (on the post-1945 formation of US alliances in Asia), one is tempted to say that these colleagues at Georgetown University and the Center on Strategic and International Studies are leading a renaissance in “historically informed grand strategy.” This is a welcome development for American debates about the country’s proper role in Asia.

There are, of course, many different ways to hold up what the Chinese like to call the “mirror of history.” Friedrich Nietzsche famously delineated three dominant styles: antiquarian, critical and monumental:

• Antiquarian history is what we now — often dismissively — call “academic history,” written by and for scholars interested purely in what happened, rather than in drawing larger lessons for the present.

• Monumental history is closer to today’s “popular history;” it targets a wide circle of readers and seeks to inspire them to action by recounting heroic tales of the past.

• Critical history — sometimes labeled “revisionist history” — is the antithesis of the monumental. It judges the deeds and values of bygone eras harshly, and asks the reader to do better than those who came before.

By More than Providence fits neatly into the Nietzschean category of monumental history. The book is structured around the heroic thoughts and deeds of people who, collectively, designed a uniquely American approach to grand strategy in the Asia-Pacific that current policy-makers would do well to carry forward into the future. Green distills this strategic design into a single, iron law: “The US will not tolerate any other power establishing exclusive hegemonic control over Asia or the Pacific.” From extending the Monroe Doctrine into the Pacific and asserting an Open-Door Policy for China to defeating Japanese militarism in the Second World War and containing Soviet communism in the Cold War, right down to Barack Obama’s “Pivot to Asia,” these diplomatic landmarks and military campaigns defend what Green sees as a core principle of preventing any rising power from achieving hegemony. By stopping rival hegemons in time, the United States ensures that the Pacific flows west, exporting American goods and values to Asia, rather than blowing east, preventing Asian powers from posing a threat to the US homeland.

Irony is not the strong suit of monumental historians, and Green fails to acknowledge the irony in his own thesis, namely, that Americans tend to carve out one exception to the rule of zero tolerance for hegemons, and that is the US itself. Indeed, the current geopolitical tension in the Asia-Pacific boils down to whether the US can settle for shared or partial hegemony, and whether Beijing can do the same.

PROVIDENCE, DESIGN AND CONTINGENCY

The concept of “design” is central to Green’s argument, explaining the meaning behind the book’s poetic title, By More than Providence. The US did not merely stumble into its role as the pillar of security in Asia after victory in August 1945. Instead, Green argues that American predominance as a Pacific power is the fruit of centuries of deliberate strategic effort by key statemen and their advisors. Great leaders and brilliant strategists are the prime movers of this story, the agents of a history that goes back to the earliest days of the Republic in the late 18th century.

This emphasis on “design” gives rise to a danger inherent in monumental history — the temptation of teleology. Determined to find his grand design in the past so as to educate the present and future, Green runs the risk of reading history backwards and distorting its true complexity. The alternative to “design,” after all, may be contingency, rather than providence. Life is messy, reality is complicated, and international affairs do not play out according to strategic plans agreed upon in situation rooms and command centers. Common sense tells us this every day as we scroll through the news, but there is a temptation when looking back in hindsight to give things a greater sense of coherence than they deserve — whether thanks to providence (the laws of Karl Marx) or design (the great men of Thomas Carlyle). Henry Adams put it well: “history is a tangled skein that one may take up at any point, and break when one has unraveled enough; but complexity precedes evolution.” In Green’s history, however, design obscures complexity.

Consider, for example, the overarching structure of the book. Green divides his chronology into a linear story of one rising power after another — the US (1784-1899), Japan (1900-1945), the Soviet Union (1945-1989) and China (1989-present). But was the US really the rising power in the Asia-Pacific during the 19th century? The initial blow to Qing China’s hegemonic position in East Asia came in 1842 with a stunning defeat to the British in the First Opium War, and then with the erosion of the Taiping Civil War and defeat to Anglo-French forces in the Second Opium War, the Sino-centric order started to unravel. In the second half of the 19th century, Britain fortified its positions in Shanghai and Hong Kong, France pried loose Indochina, and most importantly, Japan expanded into a formidable Asian maritime power — incorporating the Northern Territories and Hokkaido, annexing the Ryukyu Kingdom and challenging Qing suzerainty over Korea. Meiji Japan’s stunning naval victory over China in 1895 added Formosa (Taiwan) to the empire, planting the flag of the Rising Sun in the South China Sea.

Green’s account of how the US acquired “stepping stones” across the Pacific — Midway, Hawaii, Guam, Manila — makes for good reading. But a linear 19th century narrative focused on the rise of the US oversimplifies the tangled skein of “great powers” contending for pieces of the unraveling Sinocentric order. Japan in particular was keeping pace with the US — even posing a latent challenge for control over Hawaii — as Meiji modernization took the form of maritime power projection and territorial expansion. As we move into the 20th century, another interpretive bias inherent in monumental history — the search for heroes — comes to the fore.
Green has a few clear favorites in the list of presidents and strategists, and taken together they embody his preferred American strategy as an Asia-Pacific power. But the reader is left wondering at times if we are learning from history, or if history is being used to tell us what we think we already know.

The first real dynamic duo in Green’s telling of the history of strategy are Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan. If Green could be reborn in any time or place, one imagines it would be as a member of Teddy’s National Security Council. He gives Roosevelt “perhaps the central place — in establishing the core tenets that guide American strategy toward Asia today.” Teddy foresaw the need for an American armada that could patrol the Pacific and the importance of promoting American values (albeit with “blatant hypocrisy,” as Green acknowledges, in the case of the Philippines). Green pairs Roosevelt with his favorite strategic thinker, Mahan. Mahan’s prophetic Influence of Sea Power in History (1890) was finally realized in Roosevelt’s “Great White Fleet” that set off from Virginia in 1907 on a voyage of Pacific power-projection that would take it all the way to Japan. It is an early apotheosis of what Green considers the ideal American strategy in the Asia-Pacific — although he would expect given his expertise on Japan. As he recounts the argument over whether Japan’s trade dependence on the US would prevent conflict or whether a “power transition” war was inevitable, the reader cannot help but think of America’s current policy debate about China. Green criticizes the lack of “strategic conceptualization” in the approach to Japan during the 1920s and ’30s, when the State Department maintained an Open-Door posture on trade policy but the War Department failed to maintain the naval predominance to backstop it.

Green argues that this incoherence — America’s inability to integrate “all instruments of national power” in the service of an overarching grand strategy — stemmed from a disad-

vantage inherent in a democratic society competing against an autocracy. Fortunately, FDR guided the American people out of their isolationism, although it took the external shock of Pearl Harbor to unify the country behind the war effort. Green gives high marks to FDR’s inner circle of military and political advisors — heirs to Mahan, as it were. “These men, operating under Roosevelt’s giant shadow, would debate and conduct grand strategy from 1941 to 1945 with an organizational efficiency and focus that the country had never known before.” FDR’s tragic mistake was that he “kept his geopolitical plans vague,” leaving a void that Cold War leaders, starting with Harry Truman, scrambled to fill. Only with the advent of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did a statesman-strategist duo on the intellectual order of Teddy and Mahan appear on the scene. But Kissinger, for all his tactical genius, belongs to the “contingentist” tradition — stretching back to Harold MacKinder — that overemphasizes the role of China in America’s Asia strategy. Green prefers the Mahanist maritime approach, anchored in Japan, and thus his favored Cold War strategist is George Kennan. He argues, in fact, that the Nixon Doctrine was rooted in Kennan’s offshore strategy of avoiding getting bogged down on the Asian continent. Nixon recognized that the balance of power in Asia was at a tipping point (the mark of a good strategic thinker), and made the proper adjustments, painful as they were.

Green frames the Cold War in terms of the rise of the Soviet Union, which, like defining the 19th century in terms of the rise of the US, raises problematic historical questions that he never fully addresses. Soviet expansion into the Asia-Pacific is the central premise of the section, yet Green only briefly mentions Moscow’s increased military spending in late 1970s (by way of criticizing the Carter administration for defense spending cuts), and then in a single paragraph tallies increases in the Soviet Pacific Fleet under the leadership of Admiral Sergey Gorshkov. Green heralds Ronald Reagan and George Schultz as the next heroic duo who rose to meet this Soviet challenge. Reagan and Schultz fully articulate the three prongs of American strategy — promoting trade, defending democracy and spending on defense — used to stop a rival hegemon. Green is rather generous in his interpretation of Reagan as a champion of democracy in Asia, excusing his embrace of South Korean dictator Chun Doo-hwan and downplaying his fondness for Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Instead, Green celebrates Reagan’s “unbounded faith in the power of democratic values” and derides “critics on the left” who fail to explain how it would have been possible to stop communist expansion without backing strongmen.

The final section of the book is framed, counterintuitively enough, by the rise of China. The chapters on Bill Clinton and George W. Bush do not leave as strong an impression — in the latter case, perhaps as a result of the author’s effort to write objectively about events in which he was directly involved. The narrative picks back up on Barack Obama, credited for being “the first president to endorse what was essentially an Asia-first policy.” But Obama does not make it onto the A-list of Asia strategists. His Pivot to Asia signaled the correct strategic intent — a
desire to shift America’s strategic center of gravity from the endless quagmires of the Middle East to the relentless dynamism of the Asia-Pacific.

But, Green argues, the administration failed to deliver. “The conceptualization and implementation of the pivot were piecemeal, inconsistent, and poorly co-ordinated.”

In his quest for heroes from the days of Thomas Jefferson to Barack Obama, Green uses history to make the case that American strategy in the Asia-Pacific should be predicated on preventing the emergence of a hegemon. Ignoring the irony of America’s own hegemony since 1945, this noble goal is to be achieved by means of a strong navy, security alliances, trade liberalization and the promotion of democracy. Did Green derive these principles from his study of the past, or is he using history to illustrate the validity of a conviction derived from his observation of the present? The danger in doing the latter is that, informative as it may be, we learn nothing new from history. We are not forced to rethink our assumptions and question our certitudes in confronting the complexity, disorderliness and strangeness of the past. Despite these limitations, which are inherent in monumental history itself, By More than Providence is a fascinating reflection on American power, and should be read by any serious student of grand strategy in the Asia-Pacific.

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