Giving China the Whip Hand

Easternization: Asia’s Rise and America’s Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond
By Gideon Rachmann
Other Press, 2017, 336 pages, $25.95 (Hardcover)

Financial Times chief foreign-affairs commentator Gideon Rachmann develops the thesis in *Easternization* that our moment in world history is defined by the tilting balance of global wealth and power from West to East. For this new US edition, he adds an instructive preface on how Donald Trump’s “revolutionary” view of world affairs could rapidly accelerate the process. Indeed, he provides a helpful definition of “America First” as an anguished, resentful answer to the problem of Easternization.

But this creates a double irony. The first is that in trying to stop Easternization, Trump rejects the two pillars of the Americanization of the world order since 1945: free trade and alliances. This leads to the second irony, that Trump’s quest to Make America Great Again is likely to accelerate America’s decline and Asia’s rise. His disdain for NATO is opening a transatlantic schism that only empowers the East, and now his “America First” is endangering his own personal security. Now, as the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade accord, demands to renegotiate other trade deals and ambivalence toward alliances only strengthen China’s trade and security influence.

Rachmann wrote *Easternization* at the high tide of President Barack Obama’s “pivot to Asia,” when he tried to steady the balance of rise and decline. Now Trump, in his furious will to “win,” seems poised to tip the scales toward China and the East.

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

Asia’s Reckoning: China, Japan, and the Fate of US Power in the Pacific Century
By Richard McGregor
Viking, 2017, 418 pages, $28 (Hardcover)

In Asia’s Reckoning, Richard McGregor takes a sweeping look at the convoluted three-way relationship among China, Japan, and the US since the Nixon Shock in 1972. With a journalist’s literary flair, he paints quick, memorable portraits of the many statesmen and diplomats who managed the relationships over the decades. Having reported from Tokyo, Beijing and Washington, his storytelling benefits from deep sources on all three sides.

There are no major revelations in the account of the later Cold War dynamics, but it is illuminating to have the three perspectives woven together seamlessly. For example, McGregor adds a fresh angle to the drama of Henry Kissinger’s talks with Zhou Enlai by honing in on the role Japan played in their diplomatic minuet, as opposed to the more familiar Soviet angle. Equally fascinating is his portrait of the short-lived 1980s “golden age” in Beijing-Tokyo bilateral relations as Americans grew increasingly anxious over Japan’s economic rise and began seeing ally as rival. After the Cold War, McGregor shifts the story to focus on the “history wars” between China and Japan. Asia’s Reckoning avoids simplistic prophecies, but as implied in the title, McGregor seems to worry that the day of reckoning between China and Japan is still ahead — and US retreat from predominance in the Asia-Pacific could hasten its arrival.

Reviewed by John Delury.

A Fresh Look at Asian Regionalism

Asian Designs: Governance in the Contemporary World Order
Edited by Saadia M. Pekkanen
Cornell University Press, 2016, 400 pages, $27.36 (Paperback)

In Asian Designs, Saadia Pekkanen of the University of Washington brings together a stellar group of scholars who challenge conventional wisdom about how Asian regionalism works, offering case studies of Asian experiments in “governance” that question the usual stereotype of Northeast Asia as consumed by rival nationalism and great-power rivalry and Southeast Asia as fearing to step off the ASEAN Way. Pekkanen lays out a theoretical framework in an introduction that brings together the following explorations into less familiar institutional space, from Asian countries’ level of participation in global institutions to homegrown experiments in regional institutionalism. The broad conclusion is that Asia gets on the list of areas where globalization should have led to the rise of governance, but that when it comes to the governance vacuum, Asia outperforms the rest of the world in terms of co-operation in economic, security and human welfare issues. China in particular looks like a “governance” overachiever: very active in international institutions and experimenting boldly in regional design. Security co-operation lags behind economic integration, as David Kang shows in a post mortem on the Six-Party Talks. But on human security issues like the environment, public health and even human rights, there are signs of progress toward enhanced co-operation, albeit slow.

At a critical moment when US commitment to its leadership role in the Asia-Pacific region is under question, the experiments and trends identified by Asian Design are especially important, because they may fill the governance vacuum in the years ahead.

Reviewed by John Delury.

A Familiar Tale, Not Yet Ended

In a sweeping look at the convoluted three-way relationship among China, Japan, and the US since the Nixon Shock in 1972, with a journalist’s literary flair, he paints quick, memorable portraits of the many statesmen and diplomats who managed the relationships over the decades. Having reported from Tokyo, Beijing and Washington, his storytelling benefits from deep sources on all three sides.

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Reviewed by John Delury.

Hard Target: Sanctions, Inducements, and the Case of North Korea
By Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland
Stanford University Press, 2017, 344 pages, $49.98 (Hardcover)

Capping a trilogy of carefully-researched and policy-relevant studies on North Korea, *Hard Target* asks how far sanctions and inducements can change its behavior. Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland start from the crucial insight that effectiveness all depends on the target: what worked on Myanmar and Iran is not at all destined to work on North Korea. It is the ultimate “hard target” due to its domestic political economy, rendering it significantly less vulnerable than most states to pressure as well as temptation.

Under sanctions for so long, North Korea has grown talented at “evasion,” including exploiting “co-ordination” failures of foreign powers. Also key is its extraordinary capacity to absorb economic pain without a political impact: the regime can simply force the population to shoulder the economic burden.

On the flip side, inducements create only limited leverage. The regime is ambivalent toward economic investment gains, restricting the spillover effects that advocates of “transformational engagement” seek. The central message is that advocates of sanctions and inducements alike should have only “modest” expectations of the influence of such tools.

Reviewed by John Delury.
The Left-Behinds: Liberalism’s Legacy

When the Berlin Wall fell 30 years ago, liberalism as an ideology and a form of political and economic governance appeared triumphant. No longer. What is now happening worldwide — the return of classical geopolitical competition, the retreat of democracy and the rise of illiberal democracy, autocracy and populist nationalism — tells a different story.

What went wrong with liberalism? Edward Luce, the Financial Times’ chief US commentator, dredges up the 30-year-old Francis Fukuyama thesis on the triumph of Western liberalism in order to respond to it succinctly: “We have conjured up the enemy of liberal democracy from within.” The first and foremost culprit is the stagnant world economy, which, along with rising income inequality facilitated by neoliberal globalization, gave birth to the rage and resentment that left them stranded. As they no longer had a political party to speak for them, they reacted by voting for the likes of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, who shrewdly channeled their resentment and rage into political power. In this sense, Hasting argues that Western populism is an “illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.” What is to be done at this critical juncture? Education should equip us to be full members of society, Hasting argues, and a new social compact is needed to protect society’s weakest from arbitrary misfortune and another Enlightenment of liberal elites.

Taehwan Kim is Associate Professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and book reviews co-editor for Global Asia.

Entrepreneurialism in North Korea

We are familiar with two opposing images of North Korea: a belligerent, hermaphroditic, communist state, and a surprisingly marketized society. To delve into these contrasting characterizations, this book raises a puzzling question: how has North Korea been successful in both advancing its nuclear and missile programs and stabilizing its economy, despite ever-tightening international sanctions?

Justin Hastings, senior lecturer at the University of Sydney, finds the answer in North Korea’s agile and resilient resilience and adaptation through undergoing the Arduous March domestically, and the increasing tightening of sanctions in response to the regime’s nuclear and missile provocations.

A form of North Korean entrepreneurialism has thus emerged as an outcome of “creative corruption,” a mix of rent seeking and profit seeking in the domestic realm, while in its external dealings, North Korea has learned to respond shrewdly to greater scrutiny and active hostility. The author’s outlook for denuclearization and economic reforms is gloomy, as the success of the country’s trading networks, which shield the regime from having to make concessions or wholesale reforms, may have led Pyongyang to genuinely believe that developing nuclear weapons is really compatible with economic development.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

Communicative Power Matters

In international politics, material power matters. But its study is not sufficient to understand the emerging international order in a new media ecology in this century, in which communicative power matters. With this central problem, this book explores the nexus between international relations and communication.

The authors argue that strategic narratives — “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” — are also an instrument of power by constituting the experience of international affairs. Presenting three forms of strategic narratives — system, policy/issue, and identity — the volume shows how they are formed, projected and received through empirical cases that involve states (the US, Russia, China, Japan), transnational actors (the EU), and non-state actors (al Qaeda and the public in the Arab Spring).

The editors in particular offer a new theory of power transition, premised on the power of strategic narratives: China’s growing material power puts it in a position to be heard but does not ensure that other countries will buy into the world view it proposes between international relations and communication. While many historical power transitions resulted in total war, future ones will be different.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.
One Step from World War Three

The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies and the Crisis of American Power
By Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell
Princeton University Press, 2017, 246 pages, $19.00 (Hardcover)

Geopolitics is back. This is one of the core messages of this important analysis of US contemporary foreign policy by two Center for European Policy Analysis scholars, one of whom, Wess Mitchell, is the Trump administration’s pick for Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs.

Drawing extensively on the writings of British geographer Halford Mackinder and US classical realist Nicholas Spykman, the authors highlight the vulnerability of marginal space between key land and maritime powers in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. They argue that revisionist powers — Russia, China and Iran — are systematically undercutting US strategic, political and economic interests through a series of “probing” initiatives, testing US resolve and undercutting America’s alliance relations.

In Asia, China’s South China Sea encroachments and repeated military incursions in Japan’s territorial waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are emblematic of this trend.

The authors robustly criticize past US policy, particularly for its stress on domestic economic self-interest, reactive crisis management and tendency to prioritize deal-making with international rivals at the expense of alliance reassurance. The US is at a crisis point where its productivity gains a source of ever-shrinking jobs and aggravate inequality but ultimately render it a welcome development: idealists can dream of guaranteed basic income for all as a way to deal with the jobless future. But for hundreds of millions of workers stuck in the soon-to-be-obsolete 20th century industries in emerging countries, the new industrial revolution could prove an existential challenge, much graver than that once posed to Asia by steam-powered European factories.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.

Time for US to Give Its Allies Attention

The General vs. The President: MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War
By H. W. Brands
Doubleday, 2016, 466 pages, $17.95 (Paperback)

At a time of genuine anxiety at the prospect of nuclear war on the Korean Peninsula, it is perhaps appropriate to reflect on recent historical precedents and their lessons in thinking about presidential leadership, strategic risk and the sensitivities around civil-military relations. H. W. Brands, a historian at the University of Texas at Austin, has written a compelling and fast-paced narrative of the Korean War, viewed through the prism of two key US protagonists, President Harry Truman and General Douglas MacArthur.

The tension and controversy between these critical figures is well known, most notably the arrogance and insubordination of the general that would lead to his dramatic firing by Truman in 1951 after his public advocacy of an expansion of the Korean War into a wider conflict against China. The strength of Brands’ account lies in the vividness and comprehensiveness of his portraits of the key protagonists. We learn of the frustrations of an embattled president who showed considerable political courage in relieving a popular general who harbored political ambitions; similarly MacArthur’s hubris and blinkered military perspective emerges powerfully. As history, the book brilliantly conveys the global, diplomatic context, particularly US allies’ anxious fear that the war in Korea could escalate into World War Three. Reading the account today is a powerful reminder of the critical importance of our leaders’ strategic restraint and caution in considering the use of nuclear weapons.

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 Happens When Robots Rule?

The US is at a crisis point where it risks being seen as fickle and unreliable.

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Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future
By Martin Ford
Basic Books, 2016, 368 pages, $15.00 (Hardcover)

In 1930 John Maynard Keynes announced the arrival of a new disease, “technological unemployment.” The discovery of “means of economizing the use of labor,” he wrote, outran the pace at which new uses of labor could be found. That disease has re-emerged with a vengeance.

In this rather disturbing book, Martin Ford traces the rise of intelligent machines that not only wipe out jobs and aggravate inequality but ultimately render its productivity gains a source of ever-shrinking consumer demand. The more the entrepreneurs gain, the smaller their prospect of selling their products. Caught in the vortex caused by production gluts by robots, the economy could be sucked into a jobless death spiral.

The author outlines recent developments and the logic behind the surge of innovations that could produce such dire outcomes. Critics have dismissed such prognostication as imaginary and assured us that in the logic of creative destruction new jobs will be created for the ones lost.

As the use of robots grows fast in Japan, South Korea and China, the shrinking demography of these countries, as in much of the developed West, may render it a welcome development: idealists can dream of guaranteed basic income for all as a way to deal with the jobless future. But for hundreds of millions of workers stuck in the soon-to-be-obsolete 20th century industries in emerging countries, the new industrial revolution could prove an existential challenge, much graver than that once posed to Asia by steam-powered European factories.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda.