Is a Nuclearized South Asia Safer?

India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia

By Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur

(Paperback)

Taking the model of David Kang and Victor Cha’s classic debate on engaging nuclear North Korea, Indiana University’s Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur of the US Naval Postgraduate School go head-to-head over Asia’s other nuclear flashpoint, India and Pakistan. Ganguly is a “proliferation optimist” who argues that 1998’s twin South Asian nuclear tests have stabilized the region, and that India and Pakistan are constrained by each other’s nuclear arsenal. Kapur is a “strategic pessimist” who believes a “weak, dissatisfied state” (e.g. Pakistan) is prone to aggressive, destabilizing behavior based on holding the ultimate trump card. He argues that South Asia’s big powers have avoided full-scale conflict despite nuclear capabilities, and that Pakistan’s nuclear card has emboldened it to launch provocations in the disputed Kashmir region. Ganguly replies that Indo-Pakistani crises tend to de-escalate due to fear of the mushroom cloud in both New Delhi and Islamabad.

In the final chapter, the authors discuss points on which they agree. They concur that the region’s gravest security threat are non-state terrorists actors, the most dramatic example being the 2008 Mumbai attacks. They call this South Asia’s “sorcerer’s apprentice” dilemma. Originally funded by states, today, “jihadi organizations, like the magic brooms in Goethe’s tale, have taken on a life of their own.” The pressing question is “who will now play the role of sorcerer and rein in the jihadists?” It is a daunting task for which nuclear arsenals are utterly useless.

Reviewed by John Delury, Assistant Professor of International Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul and a book review editor for Global Asia.
Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750
By Odd Arne Westad
Basic Books, 2012, 528 pages, $32.00 (hardcover)

Why China Is The Way It Is

Bancroft Prize-winning historian Odd Arne Westad’s Restless Empire is much more than a simple history of Chinese foreign relations since the 18th century. It is a richly detailed, elegant meditation on China’s search to define its role in the world, and answer that elemental question: What is China? For now, he feels, China is an “enduring empire that increasingly behaves like a modern nation-state,” so anyone seeking to understand its foreign policy has to begin at the height of the Celestial Empire 300 years ago.

Westad masterfully relates China’s vertiginous 19th-century decline, restless 20th-century experimenting with modernity and its dizzying resurgence today. He casts fascinating new light on China’s love-hate relationships with pre-World War II Japan, the post-war Soviet Union and today’s United States, revealing an almost desperate search for a model of how to be a modern power. The most original material comes as Westad explores the significance of the many foreigners who shaped China’s path, as well as China’s own diaspora, whose people created the global networks that allowed it to grow so rapidly in recent decades. Westad sees Beijing continuing to switch between a worldview that is “outward-looking, seeing opportunity” and one that is “looking inward, sensing danger.” Restless Empire is a learned history of how that double vision formed over centuries.

Reviewed by John Delury
Why do some nations prosper economically, but not others? Turning from conventional wisdom and seeking answers in geography, culture, policies and strategies, Daron Acemoglu of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and James Robinson of Harvard University focus on “extractive” and “inclusive” institutions. Inclusive institutions are central to economic success as they “allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in economic activities that make best use of their talents and skills and that enable individuals to make the choices they wish.” The authors argue that politics determines economic performance by shaping and structuring economic institutions. In particular, “inclusive” political institutions, which combine centralization with pluralism, are crucial to economic prosperity, whereas “extractive” political institutions instead concentrate power in the hands of a narrow elite. They are thus naturally accompanied by extractive political institutions (inclusive ones tend to uproot those economic institutions that expropriate the resources of the many, erect entry barriers and suppress markets so that only a few benefit).

In this thought-provoking book, readers will find a tight theoretical explanation of the historical elective affinity between a particular type of institution and economic performance, but also its implications for many emerging market economies of our time.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty
By Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson

A good way to resist lofting grand, superficial generalizations on China’s economic boom and its global import is to grapple with the complexity of a changing China by focusing on individuals. Chinese Characters does just that, creating a mosaic portrait of Chinese society out of 15 meticulously painted profiles. We meet a sprightly 70-year-old Taoist adept, a hyper-nationalist “angry youth” and fiercely independent pursuers of truth, from a historian of the Cultural Revolution to a scientist studying the Yangtze River dam to a legal scholar being exiled over his calls for constitutional government.

Each chapter is like a non-fiction short story, many in an engaging first-person, that transport the reader from cosmopolitan Shanghai out to restive Muslim border areas in Xinjiang Province and equally tense and unhappy parts of Tibet. Editor Jeffrey Wasserstrom, a Chinese historian at the University of California, Irvine, explains that the profiles reveal China as “a place where identities can be taken on and shed with surprising ease, in ways that can be exciting or exhausting, traumatic or confusing, or, in many cases, all of those things at once.” Just as fascinating are the inadvertent profiles of the contributors, a diverse group of “foreigners” who speak Chinese, have lived for long stretches in China and struggle to keep up with the pace of change in a country at once rapidly globalizing and yet still profoundly insular. The common element is that they are gifted writers, making Chinese Characters both an illuminating portrait of contemporary China, but also a delight to read on literary merit alone.

Reviewed by John Delury

Chinese Characters: Profiles of Fast-Changing Lives in a Fast-Changing Land
Edited by Angilee Shah and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom
University of California Press, 2012, 244 pages, $24.95 (paperback)
China's Soft Power and International Relations  
Edited by Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu  

Any book today on China’s rise must struggle to attract attention from serious readers, given the fact that much, perhaps too much, has been written and discussed on the topic over the past decade. This book, a collection of selected essays presented at two international conferences organized by University of Nottingham, however, stands out over the accumulated literature in two senses: First, whereas most discussions on China’s rise have so far focused on the country’s economy and military, this book shifts the focus to another, often neglected, side of China’s rise — namely, its soft power initiatives.

The authors delve into different facets of China’s soft power in great detail, including China’s official discourse of a “peaceful rise,” “peaceful development” and “harmonious world,” its public and cultural diplomacy worldwide, and its foreign aid and economic diplomacy, particularly targeted at developing countries. Second, this book, reflecting China’s own perspectives and voices, stands in stark contrast with the “China Threat” perception that has arisen not only in the West, but also in Asia and other parts of the world. No doubt, China’s soft power policies are intended, at least partially, to assuage the concern about China associated with the rise in its hard power. This book, therefore, may well serve to provide readers with a better understanding of China’s recent diplomatic initiatives, and how China is seeking to balance between hard and soft power, between assertive and reassuring external behavior.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, Director of the Public Diplomacy Department at the Korea Foundation and a book review editor for Global Asia.
This book is an introduction to “East Asian pop culture,” a new field of study and practice that has emerged in the past two decades and is defined by the author as “a loosely-integrated network of media industries and related practices, which exceed any framing that focuses on a particular location.”

National University of Singapore sociologist Chua Beng Huat describes East Asian pop culture’s dual face: a regional cultural economy and politics. As the former it is the regionalization of entertainment media industries in East Asia, consisting of production, distribution, circulation and consumption of cultural mass products as commodities. While this is largely a standard facet of global capitalism today, East Asian pop culture as cultural politics is more complicated, particularly when turned into a soft power resource, and when governments in the region competitively use it to increase their clout in the context of historical legacies, regional conflicts and border disputes. “While the flow of pop culture is spatial and borderless, the local economy, in both production and consumption, is historical and national,” Chua argues. “The two logics inevitably rub up against each other.”

This book is full of resourceful knowledge and empirical analysis and is strongly recommended for scholars, students, practitioners and general readers interested in this emerging field.

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