The Uncertainty of Finding Security

South Korean president Park Geun-hye calls it “Asia’s paradox”: the striking contrast between growing economic interdependence and intensifying security conflict. It is particularly acute in Northeast Asia, as Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul spar viciously over unpopulated islands and historical issues even as they grow trade, investment and economic co-operation. For a rigorous examination of the paradox, this book is an ideal place to start.

University of California at Berkeley political scientist T. J. Pempel assembles an all-star group of Korean, Japanese, Chinese and US scholars to probe the meaning of the “economy-security nexus” for Northeast Asian countries. Collectively, the authors show how the gap is widening between maturing economic interdependence, institutionalized into multilateral organizations, and the security dilemmas and political conflicts that are impervious to efforts at co-operation and dialogue. Each chapter brings a fresh perspective: Tai Ming Cheung, for example, shows how East Asian states are experimenting with forms of “techno-nationalism” and “techno-globalism” to achieve security and prosperity. Jong Kun Choi adds an illuminating chapter on how historical disputes could derail political relations and yet have had negligible impact on economic interdependence. Pempel at the end is optimistic that economic synergy of the Reischauer Center of East Asian Studies

Reviewed by John Delury, an Assistant Professor of International Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul and a book review editor for Global Asia.

The New Continentalism: Energy and 21st-Century Eurasian Geopolitics

With the world’s attention fixed China’s rise, here is a book that puts its development in the bigger picture of the re-rise of Eurasia. As maritime disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea dominate the headlines, here is a book that talks about continents and even “continentalism.” And in the age of social media and virtual reality, here is a book that puts old-fashioned geography back into study of geopolitics. Kent Calder opens new vistas in our understanding of global power politics by tracing the energy flows transforming the planet and arguing that location still matters. The synergy between Middle Eastern, Russian and Central Asian gas and oil producers with their East Asian energy consumers is binding Eurasia together again in a way not seen since unification under the Mongol Yuan Empire. Elegantly combining theories of international political economy with sweeping research on petro-states and their Asian buyers, The New Continentalism lays out a complex geopolitical argument on a solid empirical basis. Building on his previous regionalist approach to international relations focusing on Northeast Asia, Calder, director of the Reischauer Center of East Asian Studies at Johns Hopkins SAIS, here is more ambitious in mapping how Eurasia is becoming a “vast interactive political-economic entity, under the powerful, deepening impact of energy interdependence.”

Reviewed by John Delury.

It’s Still Location, Location, Location

here is a book that puts old-fashioned geography back into study of geopolitics.

Stranger Than Fiction: North Korea

It is startling how little serious writing there is to be found on North Korean society. Fortunately, there are pioneers like Heonik Kwon, Suk-Young Kim and Sonia Ryang, who use creative research methods to understand life as experienced by North Koreans. Ryang, an ethnic Korean who grew up in Japan and now teaches in the US, draws on ethnography to unearth the cultural logic of North Korean life. Her questions are the most fundamental: what is the meaning of love, war and self in the unique North Korean context? Unable to conduct field research, Ryang devises an ingenious substitute in close readings of popular literature and film from the 1950s to the 1990s, looking for clues to how meaning is constructed among characters in the texts. The answers open up the core of being North Korean. Men and women love one another through society is structured around a permanent “state of emergency” in which apocalyptic war with the US is imminent. The notion of self is inherently and utterly political — there is no space for meaningful individuality apart from ideological commitment to the nation, the Party and the Leader. With such insights, Ryang hopes to restore humanity to a people who reduced in the world’s imagination to goose-stepping automatons.

Reviewed by John Delury.

Can China Keep Avoiding Alliances?

As China takes its seat at the table of great powers, forming alliances will be a natural part of the process. In Asia, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are all in need of China’s security guarantee, and are loyal to China’s security guarantee, and are loyal. Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam have security interests that conflict directly with China. As for the rest, including South Korea and Thailand, strategists in Beijing should start looking for ways to “befriend” them. Known for his distinctive brand of “moral realism,” which blends classic power balancing theory with Confucian notions of justice among states, Yan argues that Beijing has a duty to “make friends” in Asia and globally — starting with proto-alliances in which it safeguards middle powers and small states in the region in return for their fidelity as allies.

Reviewed by John Delury.

Inertia of History: China and the World in the Next Ten Years

Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Beijing’s prestigious Tsinghua University, is one of China’s most influential strategic thinkers. He has won the attention of senior leaders and enjoys the adulation of his students, in part for being willing to question established wisdom. In his newest book, for now available only in Chinese, Yan challenges a core principle of China’s foreign relations philosophy: avoiding alliances. The approach served China well when it was struggling to rise out of backwardness and develop its economy, but in the coming decade, as China takes its seat at the table of great powers, forming alliances will be a natural part of the process. In Asia, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are all in need of China’s security guarantee, and are loyal to China’s security guarantee, and are loyal. Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam have security interests that conflict directly with China. As for the rest, including South Korea and Thailand, strategists in Beijing should start looking for ways to “befriend” them. Known for his distinctive brand of “moral realism,” which blends classic power balancing theory with Confucian notions of justice among states, Yan argues that Beijing has a duty to “make friends” in Asia and globally — starting with proto-alliances in which it safeguards middle powers and small states in the region in return for their fidelity as allies.

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