Is liberal democracy in crisis? Many sources confirm that democracy, having blossomed in the last quarter of the past century, has been globally in retreat in this century while authoritarianism is on the rise. Larry Diamond, a renowned democracy scholar at Stanford University, identifies three key elements of the democratic recession both within and outside democracies: the rise of illiberal, anti-immigrant populist movements in Europe and the US; the steady decline in the quality of American democracy; and the surge in the global power of Russia and China, which are avidly undermining democracies and liberal values worldwide. He points out that the democratic decline is particularly alarming as the external threats to global democracy from the ambitions of a rising China and the resentments of a declining Russia are coming to surface at just the moment when Donald Trump's America is retreating from its decades-long role of global leadership, and when the American model of liberal democracy is decaying from within. What can be done to reverse the "ill winds" of Chinese ambition, Russian rage, and American complacency? Without America's vigorous leadership, Diamond argues, the democratic recession could spiral into a grim new age of authoritarianism. He calls on the US to pursue a foreign policy that puts a high priority on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law by supporting democrats, pressuring autocrats, and countering the malign expansion of Russian and Chinese power.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, Professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and book reviews co-editor for Global Asia.

This book builds on the relatively neglected insights on culture to rethink the relationship between cultural diversity and international order. Christian Reus-Smit, professor at the University of Queensland in Australia, compares four perspectives on the relationship between culture and international order — realism, the English School, constructivism, and rational choice — and sets out his own alternative theory. Against the prevailing view that international orders emerge in unitary cultural contexts, he contends that cultural diversity is historically the norm. He argues that the very fact of cultural heterogeneity drives order-builders to construct “diversity regimes” that take cultural heterogeneity and construct authorized forms of difference. Cultural diversity is in this way embedded in an international order, while material power is converted into political authority. The author’s argument challenges the prevalent culturalist assumption that diversity is a problem that attends the rise of “the Rest” — first through decolonization in the 20th century and now with the shift in power to the East. This book’s insights on cultural diversity cannot be more relevant to today’s world.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

Looking Beyond Material Concerns

DRAMA’S POWER TO AVERT A CRISIS

Is the American-led postwar international order now being driven into crisis? Charles N. Edel, a senior fellow at the United States Studies Center at the University of Sydney, and Hal Brands, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, see the current world order under serious challenge, if not in outright crisis. They contend that historical amnesia lies at the heart of the current situation. Starting from the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century B.C., and reviewing successful international orders in modern human history since the Thirty Years War in the 17th century, the authors argue that a sense of historical tragedy has been a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for a successful international order throughout history.

The recollection of tragedy has often motivated states and leaders to summon their power in the service of order. When memories of tragedy faded, disorder and war befell international society. Seen in this perspective, the authors argue the current international order is under a threefold challenge: competition of norms and principles, the return of geopolitical competition, and ideological struggle between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. With potential tragedy looming on the horizon, the authors contend that the fate of the global order will hinge on whether the defenders of the liberal international order, particularly America, can muster the necessary determination to avert another slide into crisis and, perhaps, collapse. Their ability to do so will turn on whether they can rediscover the tragic sensibility before tragedy strikes once again.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

Drama’s Power to Avert a Crisis

THE MAKING OF GLOBAL INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF IR AT ITS CENTENARY

Two renowned theorists in international relations trace in this book its global evolution as an academic discipline for the past two centuries. The book, consisting of pairs of chapters, each pair devoted to a particular historical period, demonstrates that the progress of IR actually tracks quite closely the nature and practices of IR from the 19th century onwards. But then, the authors argue, contemporary mainstream IR theory is not much more than an abstraction of Western history interwoven with Western political theory. IR theory was basically geared to constructing the Western experience in “universalist” terms, and eventually leading to the persistence of American and Western dominance, namely, intellectual hegemony in the field of IR. Although this imbalance between core and periphery, between the West and the Rest, begins to break down in the post-Cold War era, the legacy of Western dominance hangs longer than it was doing in real-world IR. The authors emphasize the need for a truly “Global IR” that should incorporate non-Western IR theories based on the historical experience of the Rest. A real world structured by deep pluralism needs a Global IR that reflects this structure.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

IR Past, Present and Future

ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY: INTERNATIONAL THEORY IN A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

This book reviews co-editor for Global Asia.

On Cultural Diversity: International Theory in a World of Difference

By Christian Reus-Smit

Cambridge University Press, 2018. 274 pages, $81.30 (Hardcover)

Is the American-led postwar international order now being driven into crisis? Charles N. Edel, a senior fellow at the United States Studies Center at the University of Sydney, and Hal Brands, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, see the current world order under serious challenge, if not in outright crisis. They contend that historical amnesia lies at the heart of the current situation. Starting from the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century B.C., and reviewing successful international orders in modern human history since the Thirty Years War in the 17th century, the authors argue that a sense of historical tragedy has been a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for a successful international order throughout history.

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Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

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Around the Corner

Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency

By Larry Jay Diamond

Penguin Press, 2019. 368 pages, $20.16 (Hardcover)

Is liberal democracy in crisis? Many sources confirm that democracy, having blossomed in the last quarter of the past century, has been globally in retreat in this century while authoritarianism is on the rise. Larry Diamond, a renowned democracy scholar at Stanford University, identifies three key elements of the democratic recession both within and outside democracies: the rise of illiberal, anti-immigrant populist movements in Europe and the US; the steady decline in the quality of American democracy; and the surge in the global power of Russia and China, which are avidly undermining democracies and liberal values worldwide. He points out that the democratic decline is particularly alarming as the external threats to global democracy from the ambitions of a rising China and the resentments of a declining Russia are coming to surface at just the moment when Donald Trump’s America is retreating from its decades-long role of global leadership, and when the American model of liberal democracy is decaying from within. What can be done to reverse the “ill winds” of Chinese ambition, Russian rage, and American complacency?

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Looking Beyond Material Concerns

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Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

TRAGEDY: STATECRAFT AND WORLD ORDER

The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order

By Hal Brands & Charles Edel

Yale University Press, 2019. 216 pages, $18.01 (Hardcover)

Is the American-led postwar international order now being driven into crisis? Charles N. Edel, a senior fellow at the United States Studies Center at the University of Sydney, and Hal Brands, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, see the current world order under serious challenge, if not in outright crisis. They contend that historical amnesia lies at the heart of the current situation. Starting from the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century B.C., and reviewing successful international orders in modern human history since the Thirty Years War in the 17th century, the authors argue that a sense of historical tragedy has been a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for a successful international order throughout history.

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Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.
**Kim, Crazy? Not So Fast**

**Rationality in the North Korean Regime: Understanding the Kims’ Strategy of Provocation**
By David W. Shin
Lexington Books, 2018, 333 pages, $110 (Hardcover)

Normally, it would not be necessary to write an entire book arguing that three generations of political leaders were sane. Indeed, one of the few things upon which analysts of international politics generally agree is the premise that states behave rationally, trying to maximize their own self-interest. But in the case of North Korea, the trope of “crazy Kim” has persisted for decades, leading even sober-minded officials to worry, as the US national security advisor did in 2017, that Kim Jong Un might be too brutal to be deterred. David Shin’s book offers a methodical case for the view that Kim, like his father and grandfather before him, is a rational actor, for whom provocations are part of a deliberate strategy. A corollary is that Kim can be deterred through responsible diplomacy.

The scope of this book is ambitious, structured around nine case studies in provocations by Pyongyang that, under scrutiny, turn out to be calibrated toward reasonable goals. From the minor landmine incident in the DMZ in 2015, Shin unveils the method in the Kims’ madness. Although the North has made miscalculations and failed to achieve many of its goals, the pattern shows that the Kims did at least have clear goals and pursued them in coherent fashion. Shin, who teaches at National Intelligence University in Bethesda, Maryland, remains skeptical that Kim Jong Un will give up his nukes. But that does not make him irrational.

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

**Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy since 1949**
By M. Taylor Fravel
Princeton University Press, 2019, 396 pages, $35 (Hardcover)

Taiy Fravel’s Active Defense sets out to solve a puzzle: why did the major shifts in Chinese military strategy (in 1956, 1980 and 1993) take place during periods of relatively low threat? Fravel builds an elegant explanation based on the combination of two factors: an external catalyst and domestic preconditions.

After seeing a significant global change in the conduct of warfare, China’s military leadership initiated a shift—but only when the Communist Party was unified and stable. So, for example, the warfighting implications of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War weren’t absorbed into China’s strategic direction until 1980, after Deng Xiaoping consolidated power. The lessons of the Gulf War took less time, as the party unified around a new core leader, letting the generals work out a new “strategic guideline” in 1993. Since then, the strategic focus has been on preparing for hi-tech, “informationized” local wars. The PLA upholds the traditional military philosophy of “active defense,” rooted in the party’s past as an embattled guerrilla movement and reinforced by decades governing a large but poor, developing country.

The natural question is now: when does active defense give way? Fravel, an MIT professor, will have the answer.

**Wandering in Space and Spirit**

**In Love with the World: A Monk’s Journey through the Bardos of Living and Dying**
By Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, with Helen Tworkov
Spiegel & Grau, 2019, 288 pages, $27 (Hardcover)

Born in Nepal to an illustrious Tibetan Buddhist lineage, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche started his meditation practice as a boy. He advanced rapidly to join the elite stratum of monks, enjoying a global following based on bestselling books. Then, one night, he escaped. In Love with the World is his memoir about leaving the comfort, security and status of his monastic robes to spend four years as a penniless yogin on a “wandering retreat.”

Following in the footsteps of the Chinese monk Xuanzang, whose voyage to India inspired the literary classic Journey to the West, Mingyur Rinpoche ends up at sacred sites connected with the historical Buddha. But along the way, he confronts his physical and spiritual discomfort in the secular world of hot, crowded passenger trains and busy, chaotic railroad stations. Experiencing the profound disorientation of leaving his Himalayan retreat was precisely the point, as Mingyur looks for enlightenment in the gaps, or bardo, between the familiar and unknowable. Even after arriving at the relative tranquility of the park where the Buddha died, Mingyur has to struggle with his own death — literally, from food poisoning, and metaphorically, as he meditates on the Buddha’s teachings about impermanence.

His unvarnished account of internal struggle invites readers along on the journey, inward and outward. Purely as travelogue, the vivid descriptions of wandering northern India, interspersed with fond memories of boyhood in the Himalayas, paints an unforgettable portrait of spiritual adventure at one of the great crossroads of Asian civilization.

Reviewed by John Delury.

**Local Resistance or a Serious Pushback?**

**Xi Jinping: The Backlash**
By Richard McGregor
Penguin, 2019, 144 pages, $2.99 (Kindle)

It is almost a decade since Richard McGregor’s The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers, still the best comprehensive look at one of the world’s most powerful organizations. In his crisp new book, McGregor, now senior fellow at The Lowy Institute, traces the Communist Party’s transformations under Xi Jinping since he became General Secretary in 2012.

While many have noted the revival of Maoist elements, McGregor contends that Xi is interested not in a return to China’s socialist past, but in a quantum leap toward a post-modern surveillance state. He recounts Xi’s rise, punishing and rewarding party cadres, PLA generals and business entrepreneurs along the way. He then gives a snapshot of China’s rise, examining the increasingly negative responses of four countries — the US, Australia, Singapore and Germany. Even as Asian countries find themselves “stuck between empires,” having to balance Washington and Beijing, McGregor sees signs that resistance is spreading and strengthening. There is also pushback domestically, as Xi’s popularity seems to have peaked early last year when he removed presidential term limits.

It might be premature to claim that domestic and external pushback constitutes a full-blown backlash, but McGregor makes a thoughtful case. As the US trade war and protests in Hong Kong go on, his short book may well prove prophetic of more to come.

Reviewed by John Delury.
**Exploring a New World of Emotion**

**Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over The World**
By William Davies
Jonathan Cape, 2018, 239 pages, $39.21 (Hardcover)

**Secularism’s Hidden Dangers**

Rational, Enlightenment-era 17th-century thought can’t make sense of the political upheavals of today’s world. This is the core assumption of this innovative, multidisciplinary examination of the role of feeling and emotion in shaping such phenomena as the rise of populism and the declining faith in established knowledge and expert opinion. University of London sociologist William Davies applies philosophy, intellectual history, economics and a close reading of the impact of technology to illustrate why our interpretative frameworks and problem-solving perspectives explain only part of modern political change.

The shift to anti-establishment authoritarianism is partly a function of relative economic deprivation, the crisis in globalization, and local, subnational variations in prosperity. It is also a consequence of individuals’ deep-seated emotional need to find meaning in group identity, whether as a form of solidarity, or in more disruptive forms associated with angry and at times violent public protest.

In setting out his argument, Davies not only challenges the legacy of Descartes but offers a new perspective on a variety of thinkers, including Hobbes, Clausewitz, Freud and the libertarian economists Mises and Hayek. Narrowly focused notions of utility maximization fail to capture how pain, conflict and the emotionally affirmative, but deeply disruptive experiences of national rivalry and war (conventional and political) are fueling our new age of anxiety.

He reflects on secularism and its failure to engage with internal, personal experience.

Italian polymath Roberto Calasso, in his latest work (the ninth in ten volumes of reflections) analyses the uncertainty and insecurity that underpin today’s world. He starts by discussing Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and the influence of Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian thinker who helped establish the Muslim Brotherhood after 1945. Considering the revival of religious intolerance and the phenomenon of the suicide bomber, he reflects on secularism and its failure to engage with internal, personal experience rather than the external, socially mediated world of material existence. Secularism shares with science a tendency towards unshakeable self-belief and a failure to understand the divine aspects of human experience best reflected in myths, rituals and iconic symbolism. Yet secularism has a certainty that comes close to the convictions typical of religious belief.

Calasso then shifts his focus to interwar Europe and uses a collection of excerpted contemporary narratives from familiar writers — Virginia Woolf, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Jünger, André Gide, Robert Frost — to reflect on the forces shaping the rise of fascism. With literary and analytical skill, he conveys the sense of foreboding and fear that dominated this period while showing the commonalities between past and present and warning us of the dangerous hubris of excessive scientific certainty.

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.

**The Unnamable Present**
By Roberto Calasso
Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2019, 208 pages, $16.58 (Hardcover)

**Spirited Polemic, Poor Prescription**

**The Virtue of Nationalism**
By Yoram Hazony
Basic Books, 2019, 304 pages, $24.64 (Hardcover)

**Japan’s Changing Ambitions**

In this polemical and passionately argued book, Israeli writer Yoram Hazony defends the role of the nation and nationalism as a basis for political order. From a perspective that parallels the work of other international-relations specialists such as John Mearsheimer, Hazony critiques liberal internationalism and the universalism associated with transnational and multilateral initiatives such as the EU or the UN. For Hazony, liberalism can be bracketed with Christianity, Islam, Marxism and Nazism as inherently an imperial project that ignores the affective and cultural bonds that provide the basis for legitimate and meaningful political association. Criticising Lockean notions of individual action based on rational self-interest, he focuses on clan and tribal-based forms of identity, while unusually citing Biblical (Old Testament) practises and principles as the basis for nationalism and the eventual emergence in the 17th century of the modern nation-state.

While detailed and elegantly argued, Hazony’s argument suffers from three critical shortcomings: a zero-sum tendency to frame the choice over political order between the competing poles of nationalism versus supranationalism; an overconfident assumption that nationalism is a self-regulating phenomenon focused on protection of the state free from the risk of offensive military expansionism; a minimization of the role of cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity within some, albeit not all, contemporary nation-states. Hazony ultimately overreaches in prescribing a revival of nationalism as a solution (arguably a dangerous one) to the problems of the present.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.

The concept of a new order was contested, amorphous and kept changing. Far from a clearly defined strategic plan, the nature of the Co-Prosperity Sphere was defined by different Japanese actors in varying ways. Initially, it had a distinctively imperial character. By 1942, it resembled a political-economic collaborative project involving a dominant Japan and subordinate states in the region, but by 1943, as the tide of war changed, it embodied a more nuanced but still self-serving effort to frame the order in terms of national self-determination and equality.

Uniquely, Yellen approaches his study from a comparative perspective, contrasting policy-makers in Tokyo with the views of national elites in Burma and the Philippines. These exploited the political changes to foster their own political aspirations, and in the process contributed to lasting and significant geopolitical changes in the post-1945 Cold War era.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.