More Than Just Threats and Benefits

As the world economy’s center of gravity shifts to Asia and as China’s military rise prompts concerns about the risk of geopolitical conflict in East Asia, understanding the nature of China’s foreign relations is key. This timely volume takes a long-term view of China-Northeast Asia relations, from the post-Mao “opening and reform” period from 1979 to the present. Analysis by scholars from the US, China, Japan, Russia and South Korea provide interpretations that complement familiar international relations realist-liberal analysis or Sino-centric area studies approaches. China’s neighbors haven’t just reacted to it but have long had their own priorities, prejudices and interests determined by history and culture. For its part, China has focused on two primary goals: enhancing national security while pursuing economic growth and modernization. Beijing’s leaders have considered both threats and benefits to China from individual foreign countries. Their strategy has been multifaceted: offsetting the Soviet Union’s threat by aligning with the US, reaching out to Seoul and Tokyo to minimize indirect threats from US allies in Northeast Asia, and single-mindedly pursuing military modernization. In contrast to China’s relations with South and Central Asia, in Northeast Asia public opinion, geopolitics and historical controversies are a source of division, offset in part by the economic benefits China offers its neighbours as a focal point for global production and supply chains. Ultimately, pragmatism, not ideology, has shaped China’s relations with its neighbors, now reinforced by the foreign-policy assertiveness of Xi Jinping.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.

Human Persistence at China’s Heart

It’s all too rare to hear from Chinese intellectuals and commentators directly. Xu Zhiyuan is a Financial Times (China) journalist and former Bloomberg editor whom artist Ai Weiwei calls “the most important young Chinese intellectual of his generation.” This unusual collection of 80 or so very short commentaries published in Chinese media outlets outside mainland China offers a reflection on multiple aspects of Chinese politics and society. Reading Xu is a reminder of the importance and pleasure of the essay form in addressing a range of issues over an extended period (the pieces cover 2007 to 2015).

Xu’s vivid portraits include both leading political figures and ordinary Chinese, and capture China’s rapidly changing character. Uncompromising in criticizing the authoritarian and sclerotic character of China’s political system, Xu remains at heart optimistic about its long-term future. While accepting it will take much time for politics to change, he takes heart in the role of ordinary Chinese as the primary agents of economic and wider social change. Yet there are warning indicators amid this process of rapid change, as intensifying materialism creates a cohort of Chinese elites who are “rootless” and unconnected to “the land beneath their feet.”

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.

Superpowers Are Not Born of Luck

With US President Donald Trump feeling the need to “Make America Great Again” and his critics warning of a retreat into isolationism, it helps to keep in mind how relatively recent are this sense of decline and pessimism. Brands offers a compelling interpretation of US foreign policy from the 1970s to 1990s. He charts the transition from the post-oil shock, post-Watergate period when Americans dwelt on their relative decline, though the optimistic Reagan years to the triumphalism of the early post-Cold War era, when a dominant US embraced its “unipolar moment.” Brands’ innovative account, based on newly declassified archives, argues that this transition was neither rapid, predictable nor inevitable. America’s emergence as the sole superpower resulted from both global structural changes and, most important, strategic choices by a series of US administrations. At the core is Ronald Reagan, whose shrewd awareness of the Soviet Union’s structural failings, and faith in US exceptionalism, enabled him to promote liberal democratic values internationally, while building a neoliberal economic consensus that underpinned globalization. Reagan’s success was not singular, it followed underappreciated policy achievements under Jimmy Carter and was reinforced by wise choices under George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. This narrative of success was at times offset by policy failures, particularly in the Middle East, that have contributed to challenges today. But Brands argues that the adaptive, iterative process of successive administrations thinking and acting strategically explains US dominance in a pre-multipolar world.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.
Regime vs. Money in North Korea

The dual face of North Korea is no longer surprising. On one side, Pyongyang has been stepping up its nuclear and missile provocations, conducting its sixth nuclear test in September and launching an ICBM-class Hwasong-15 in November. On the other side, society has been undergoing profound transformation through the “bottom-up” marketization since the Great Famine of the 1990s. How can one reconcile these contrasting faces?

Byung-Yeon Kim, economics professor at Seoul National University, sets out to unveil the real North Korean economy and draw implications for the future of the belligerent regime. Assessing the extent of marketization at both household and business level, using data from surveys of refugees in South Korea and Chinese firms that do business with North Korea, he concludes that market activities are ubiquitous and uniform across heterogeneous groups of the population and regions. Corruption, too, is now deeply entrenched, as party members and state officials also rely heavily on informal economic activities. Kim found equilibrium formed among three actors — the dictator, government officials and market participants — who prefer high bribes as their payoffs. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action seeks to freeze Iran as a nuclear threshold state. With this clear difference in nuclear advancement, Patrick and Jaclyn O’Brien McEachern group the two as “illicit nuclear aspirants” who pose a grave threat to international peace and security.

Economic consequences or incentives must be hefty to sway North Korea and Iran.

With North Korea’s ICBM-class missile launch in November, Kim Jong Un declared “completion of the historical task of a state nuclear force.” Iran, meanwhile, has not yet tested either nuclear bombs or their carriers. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action seeks to freeze Iran as a nuclear threshold state. With this clear difference in nuclear advancement, Patrick and Jaclyn O’Brien McEachern group the two as “illicit nuclear aspirants” who pose a grave threat to international peace and security.

What can diplomacy with Iran teach that can be applied to North Korea, and vice versa? The authors compare the two to draw analytical policy implications. Navigating their histories, domestic economic and political systems, ideological orientations, foreign and security policies, and human rights records, they find no meaningful commonality beyond their bilateral animosities toward the US. Based on the “stop-and-go” progress of both nuclear programs, however, they suggest that while a nuclear weapons-free Iran and North Korea is an ultimate goal of diplomatic accommodation, this is complex and must proceed in steps. Economic pressure and incentives can help lead to tactical shifts, but the authors argue that economic consequences or incentives must be hefty to sway North Korea and Iran, where political and security goals rank for higher than economic ones. Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

North Korea, Iran and the Challenge to International Order: A Comparative Perspective

By Patrick McEachern and Jaclyn O’Brien McEachern

Routledge, 2017, 188 pages, $124.58 (Hardcover)

How are Iran and North Korea alike?

The rise of Eurasianism in the post-Soviet space is a prominent political phenomenon today, as much as the rise of populist nationalism is across the Atlantic. Both gained political momentum through popular resentment: while the latter is associated with the resentment of the left-behinds of neo-liberal globalization since the 1990s, the former is a reaction to the unraveling of the Soviet empire. But Eurasianism is several approaches, not one. This volume of articles, by 16 authors of diverse backgrounds, explores variants and aspects since the 1990s. The book views Eurasianism as much more than primarily a Russian nationalist or conservative ideology, or a set of views informing Russian foreign policy, while its focus is on Eurasianism’s political uses by different political entities, including the Russian Federation, areas within Russia (Tatarstan), and beyond (Kazakhstan, Hungary, Turkey, Germany). Core elements shared, and contested, by the different streams of Eurasianism include the meanings of Eurasia as a distinctive civilization, a collective identity linked to the Eurasian space, and a fundamental incompatibility between Russia-Eurasia and the West. Ideologues such as Aleksandr Dugin and Alkhasen Prokhanov put some muscle into these common denominators by adding anti-Western geopolitics and Russo-centrism, effectively making it a radical populist ideology. Although Vladimir Putin’s government has officially kept its distance from this radical version, the authors note that the Kremlin’s Eurasian turn is unmistakably evident in its foreign policy, particularly in Putin’s third presidency.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

Silk Road: Making China Great Again

Since Chinese President Xi Jinping announced it in 2013, the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative has become the defining concept of China’s foreign policy. Some analysts cast a critical eye, arguing that it is just an empty shell or a vacuous political slogan. Nadège Rolland, senior fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research, reveals in this lengthy monograph the serious motivation behind the initiative, using Chinese sources — official, academic and media.

Foremost, Rolland argues it is a grand geopolitical strategy to mold Eurasia to Beijing’s ambitions for regional preponderance, not only in material terms, but also in ideological and normative terms. To back this, he details the initiative’s top-level supervision, the financial and intellectual resources devoted to it, and the early-harvest projects already visible in each of the six proposed economic corridors. Locating the Belt and Road in the broader context of China’s regional and global aspirations, Rolland goes on to argue that it reflects a new Chinese identity as a risen great power. Under Xi’s “Chinese Dream” vision, he seeks to return China to its rightful place at the world’s center, looking back to the “heyday of imperial China as a model.” Rolland thereby suggests that Washington, its friends and allies need to think more holistically about China’s regional strategies, and recalibrate their approach in terms of both hard and soft power.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

Russia is Only Part of the Story

The rise of Eurasianism in the post-Soviet space is a prominent political phenomenon today, as much as the rise of populist nationalism is across the Atlantic. Both gained political momentum through popular resentment: while the latter is associated with the resentment of the left-behinds of neo-liberal globalization since the 1990s, the former is a reaction to the unraveling of the Soviet empire. But Eurasianism is several approaches, not one. This volume of articles, by 16 authors of diverse backgrounds, explores variants and aspects since the 1990s. The book views Eurasianism as much more than primarily a Russian nationalist or conservative ideology, or a set of views informing Russian foreign policy, while its focus is on Eurasianism’s political uses by different political entities, including the Russian Federation, areas within Russia (Tatarstan), and beyond (Kazakhstan, Hungary, Turkey, Germany). Core elements shared, and contested, by the different streams of Eurasianism include the meanings of Eurasia as a distinctive civilization, a collective identity linked to the Eurasian space, and a fundamental incompatibility between Russia-Eurasia and the West. Ideologues such as Aleksandr Dugin and Alkhasen Prokhanov put some muscle into these common denominators by adding anti-Western geopolitics and Russo-centrism, effectively making it a radical populist ideology. Although Vladimir Putin’s government has officially kept its distance from this radical version, the authors note that the Kremlin’s Eurasian turn is unmistakably evident in its foreign policy, particularly in Putin’s third presidency.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

China’s Eurasian Century? Political Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative

By Nadège Rolland

The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017, 208 pages, $34.95 (Paperback)

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.
Giving Up War for A Shot at Wealth

Explaining the East Asian Peace: A Research Story
By Stein Tønnesson

Chaos in America’s Korean War

King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America’s Spymaster in Korea
By Blaine Harden
Viking, 2017, 272 pages, $27 (Hardcover)

Always in Flux: Sino-US Relations

Yo-Yo Diplomacy: An American Columnist Tackles The Ups-and-Downs Between China and the US
By Tom Plate

From around 1979, East Asia moved from being one of the 20th century’s most warlike regions to one of the most peaceful. Having contributed 80 percent of “global battle deaths” in the 30 years after the end of the Second World War, East Asia plummeted to 6.2 percent in the 1980s, statistics kept by Sweden’s Uppsala University show. And that extraordinarily low level of conflict has been maintained. Explaining that transformation has become something of a white whale for historian Stein Tønnesson of the Peace Research Institute of Oslo. Working closely with a research group at Uppsala, he embarked on a multiyear, global quest to collect and distill the best explanations for the East Asian peace. In this idiosyncratic “research story,” he looks back on the process of discovery itself, introducing the key debates among peace researchers carried out against the backdrop of steadily rising US-China tensions and ongoing security concerns over North Korea.

Tønnesson critically examines his colleagues’ contributions as he argues for his own grand thesis — that the key was a decision by a critical mass of East Asian political leaders to focus on economic development. Originating in the post-war years after the trauma of the Second World War, East Asia plummeted to a low level of conflict has been maintained. Tønnesson critically examines his colleagues’ contributions as he argues for his own grand thesis — that the key was a decision by a critical mass of East Asian political leaders to focus on economic development. Originating in the post-war years after the trauma of the Second World War, East Asia plummeted to a low level of conflict has been maintained. Tønnesson critically examines his colleagues’ contributions as he argues for his own grand thesis — that the key was a decision by a critical mass of East Asian political leaders to focus on economic development. Originating in the post-war years after the trauma of the Second World War, East Asia plummeted to a low level of conflict has been maintained.

Today’s hallowed notions of a virtuous alliance are put to the test of history and fail.

Chaos in America’s Korean War

King of Spies explores the dark underbelly of the US role in South Korea during the Korean War and its aftermath by telling the story of a lowly intelligence operative who carved out a covert field in Seoul. The name Donald Nichols would pop up here and there in writings on intelligence activities in post-war Korea, but he was an obscure figure. Sensing a story, Blaine Harden dug into Nichols’ fragmentary paper trail — supplemented by interviews with those who knew him — and reconstructed Nichols’ tragic and sordid life, including his fleeting years of shadowy glory running espionage networks in South Korea.

War let Nichols become, for a period, a self-made man, “the spy who came in from the motor pool” (Harden can turn a phrase). His ability to win resources and authority over operations in South Korea was a testament to his scrappy, ruthless tradecraft — but also the chaos and callousness of US involvement in Korea. Today’s hallowed notions of a virtuous alliance are put to the test of history and fail, at least by this account. King of Spies completes a loose trilogy of Korea books by Harden. Nichols’ depressing story provides a fascinating counterpart to Harden’s dark but inspiring biographies about a North Korean fighter pilot who defected in his MiG in 1953 and a boy who, having grown up in a North Korean prison camp, fled to China and then to “Freedom” in the South.

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

Always in Flux: Sino-US Relations

Yo-Yo Diplomacy brings together his bimonthly columns for the South China Morning Post, wresting with the full range of political repression — by recalling Deng Xiaoping’s vision of preserving civil freedom under the “one country, two systems” paradigm. He criticizes Chinese leaders for being inaccessible to an open press, while chiding Americans too for failing to listen to what Chinese voices have to say. Coming to the Trump-Xi era, Plate probes the flaws apparent in both systems: rigid central command versus “two-party uncivil war.” The relentless empathy, the effort to see the relationship from both sides of the Pacific, gives Plate a distinctive voice. Reading his columns retrospectively in book form reveals the relationship’s constant ups and downs and the need for dispassionate commentary. Unsurprisingly, Yo-Yo Diplomacy concludes on an unrelenting note with columns on the challenge to US-China relations represented by the 2017 North Korean nuclear-missile crisis. Yet Plate’s fundamental optimism about the capacity for Chinese and Americans to achieve trust and co-operation shines through, even on topics as dark as Kim Jong Un and his nukes.

Reviewed by John Delury.
Oil for Security? It’s No Longer So Simple

By Bruce Riedel

Periodically, the wending river of history accelerates and hews a new course, carving up tradition. With Donald Trump’s decision to name Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, Russia forming an alliance with Turkey and Iran, and Saudi Arabia’s Muhammad bin Salman shaking things up, history is at one such moment.

Bruce Riedel’s informative book could not have come at a better time. A former CIA officer and White House official, he brings insight and valuable background to the current turn. He traces US relations with Saudi Arabia from Franklin Roosevelt to Trump through the interaction of both countries’ leaders. He begins with a fascinating account of the first contact in 1945. After his trip to Yalta, Roosevelt flew secretly to meet the Saudi king, who was whisked on board a US cruiser to formalize a deal to anchor US strategy in the region: assured access to oilfields in exchange for security. Significantly, Trump made Riyadh his first foreign stop. This time, the meetings were in palaces and Trump’s image projected onto skyscrapers. “Saudis played Trump like a fiddle, flattering him and giving his first foreign trip a glittering start,” Riedel notes in an aside. He traces the story of the nations’ relations through upheavals ranging from the threat of Iraqi invasion to Osama bin Laden’s US attacks, ending with the emergence of a brash crown prince.

Differences over Israel remain a worry. The House of Saud has made creating a Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital, a signature policy since the 1960s. Trump’s decision could now cause a rift. Reviewed by Nayan Chanda, founding editor of YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia Editorial Board member.

Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR
By Bruce Riedel


How India Made Its Return to Asia

Amitav Acharya, an established Southeast Asia scholar, has penned a timely study of India’s lesser-known role in the region. After the immediate post-colonial period, he notes, when India under Nehru sought to unite the region under a vision of one Asia, it all but vanished from the Asian mindscape.

Nehru chaperoned Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai to the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung in 1955, reassuring a suspicious Southeast Asia of an independent China’s good faith, rubbing some up the wrong way. But his planned leadership role for India disappeared in the wake of India’s ignominious defeat in the 1962 border war with China. Its alliance with the Soviet Union and support for Vietnam in Cambodia ensured it pariah status in the region even as China slowly rose.

After the Cold War, India too began what Acharya calls “returning to Asia.” Emerging as an economic power and being accepted by the West as a balancer against China have helped India slowly reclaim its role as a valued partner of Southeast Asia and largely erase the memory of its virtual banishment. Although the book is largely devoted to the early years, it also traces China-India competition in the region and globally in recent years. Acharya advises India and China to learn the art of co-operation from ASEAN, which has earned legitimacy through mutual restraint and co-operation. Reviewed by Nayan Chanda.

East of India, South of China: Sino-Indian Encounters in Southeast Asia
By Amitav Acharya

Oxford University Press, 2017, 260 pages, $34.13 (Hardcover)