Geopolitics Back With a Vengeance

The Return of History: Conflict, Migration, and Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century
By Jennifer Welsh
House of Anansi Press, 2016, 304 pages, $18.18 (Hardcover)

Amid the Berlin wall’s fall in 1989, Francis Fukuyama’s “the end of history” thesis reverberated widely. With the end of the Cold War, humanity’s sociocultural and ideological evolution, and struggle, appeared to reach an endpoint in a triumphant liberalism. A quarter-century later, that is no longer the case.

So argues Jennifer Welsh, a former UN special advisor on the Responsibility to Protect, that history has returned with a twist and a vengeance, unfolding in at least four dimensions. She shows how barbarism has returned in the wars in the Middle East, in which the strategies and tactics of both state and non-state armed actors are flouting established principles of humanitarian law. Wars and atrocities are also propelling the return of mass migration of displaced civilians, but on an unprecedented scale, while new walls are being erected within and beyond Europe.

She also sees the return of geopolitics in Vladimir Putin’s challenges to the West in ways reminiscent of the Cold War. An equally fundamental challenge is the return of economic inequality in Western liberal democracies themselves, Welsh argues. Defying Fukuyama’s theory of the linear progress of history towards post-history, Welsh calls for the need to learn from history, from what liberal democracy did and achieved in the 20th century: individuals step up to point to injustice, demand greater equality of participation, and stand up for fairness. In this sense, history is both a source of problems and solutions. To go forward, it sometimes pays to look back.

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

How Our World Is Unbundling Again

How has humanity overcome the tyranny of distance in economic production and consumption? Richard Baldwin, professor at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, seeks to explain the varying historical patterns of globalization, with a focus on the driving forces of technology that have slashed the costs of moving goods, ideas and people across the globe — what he calls the “three cascading constraints.”

Steam- and diesel-powered transport invented in the First Industrial Revolution reduced the cost of moving goods, letting us “unbundle” production from consumption. But Baldwin argues that manufacturing’s concentration in the global metropoles helped lead to great divergence in national income between North and South. He sees the opposite, great convergence, in the “second unbundling” from the 1990s. Revolution in IT and communications has radically cut the cost of moving ideas from G-7 nations to newly industrializing countries, boosting their manufacturing capacities and narrowing the income gap with rich nations.

Baldwin sees the next unbundling propelled by cost reductions in moving people.

In contrast to the first unbundling, the second creates new production stages along geographically extended global value chains. By this line of reasoning, Baldwin sees the next unbundling propelled by cost reductions in moving people, with the main driver the virtual-presence revolution in such fields as telepresence and telerobotics.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.
Why Does Russia Behave as It Does?

Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus
Edited by Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail)
Oxford University Press, 2017, 408 pages, $29.95 (Hardcover)

Why did Russia invade its neighbors, Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014? Can it be explained by the innate imperialist attributes of the Russian state? Or, is it simply Russia’s defensive reactions to the West’s liberal encirclement, as illustrated by the eastward expansion of NATO and the European Union?

An eminent political geographer at Virginia Tech, Gerard Toal defies both accounts prevalent in the West and presents alternative narratives on Russia’s behavior through the analytical prism of critical geopolitics. He employs two critical concepts: geopolitical field and geopolitical culture. For geopolitical field, he contends that post-Soviet secessionist regions such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea and Donbass are not just “occupied territories” as claimed by Georgia, Ukraine and some Western countries, but “contested territories” in which multiple actors including Russia, post-Soviet nationalizing states, people in those states, national minority groups and external powers are vying for sovereign rights and/or influence. In these contending claims, the geopolitical culture of each contender, comprising a series of geographical imaginations about “self and other” in the world and about security and defense, play a significant role. Vladimir Putin’s geopolitical revisionism to “make Russia great again” certainly lies behind its invasions, but other geopolitical cultures are at work, including that of the US.

To understand Russia’s behavior, Toal proposes a “thick geopolitics,” which rests on recognition of the importance of spatial relationships and in-depth knowledge of post-Soviet places and people. Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

North Korea’s Hidden Revolution: How the Information Underground Is Transforming a Closed Society
By Jieun Baek
Yale University Press, 2016, 312 pp, $22.19 (Hardcover)

North Korea is widely known as a failed state with nuclear weapons ruled by an intransigent dynastic regime, on which neither South Korea nor the US has been able to put meaningful pressure. Over the same two decades, however, a different dynamic has unfolded in North Korean society, with spontaneous marketization from below a notable source. Four in every five citizens are now thought to rely on illicit markets in daily life. This book reveals a key driver: illicit inflows of foreign information and media, and their impact on North Koreans’ beliefs and attitudes.

Jieun Baek, a doctoral student at Oxford University, uses detailed interviews with North Korean refugees to identify three networks working in concert to push and pull information in: “compassion-driven networks” of South Korean and foreign NGOs supplying media and information; profit-driven networks of smugglers both in and outside North Korea who help move foreign media purely for money; and demand-driven networks of consumers who watch and listen to the content. Baek argues that access to foreign information empowers people, nourishing distrust in the regime, attenuating its control mechanisms, and eventually weakening its political authority. She suggests it’s time to add a new information strategy to push North Korea’s “hidden revolution” forward in order to generate positive changes from within. Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

North Koreans In the Know

Time for a new information strategy to push North Korea’s ‘hidden revolution’ forward.

Book Reviews

Back to the Future to Figure Trump Out

Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam
By H.R. McMaster

Uncertainty grips Asia over the implications of President Donald Trump’s “America First” strategy. In the search for reliable policy signals amid the noise on Twitter, Trump’s advisors are scrutinized for clues. One of the few Asia-related books written by a member of Trump’s national-security inner circle was H.R. McMaster’s Dereliction of Duty, published exactly 20 years ago. Based on his dissertation research, McMaster’s book documents how the United States stumbled into its second Asian quagmire of the Cold War. Dreading “another Korea,” President Lyndon Johnson did even worse by egging on the “Americanization” of the war in Vietnam and deceiving the American people about it. McMaster tells a tragic, cautionary tale about the “quicksand of lies” that formed around a president whose insecurity led to paranoia and insularity. Johnson punished advisors at the slightest hint of “disloyalty,” which often consisted of nothing more than confronting him with bad news. The country’s civilian and military leadership became accomplices in the president’s effort to deceive Congress and the media about the dramatic escalation of America’s military effort in Vietnam — at the cost of countless lives of US soldiers and Vietnamese people. McMaster draws a profound lesson for America’s generals, reminding them that their oath is to defend the Constitution, not the Commander-in-Chief. The duty now falls on Lieutenant General McMaster to prevent US foreign policy in Asia from falling into the quicksand.

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

Just Ask What China Wants

Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China’s Push for Global Power
By Howard W. French
Knopf, 2017, 352 pages, $27.95 (Hardcover)

What kind of power will China become in the 21st century? Rather than predicting, Howard French asks instead what kind China wants to become, and looks for answers in the past. He focuses on imperial China’s centuries of dominance over maritime Asia, when the ruler in Beijing saw himself as lord over “everything under the heavens” (tianxia). Confucians traditionally disdained the maritime, but French sees today’s strategists reviving and redirecting the tianxia tradition as part of China’s rise as a sea power.

With this historical lens, he explores the complex geopolitical contest in the South China Sea as well as the standoff with Japan in the East China Sea. His account of how easily a China-Japan clash over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands could escalate into an armed conflict that could entangle the US is especially alarming. But French is not alarmist, nor does he present war as a Thucydidean inevitability. Indeed, what he calls the “lingering place of the tributary system in the Chinese psyche” creates a preference to establish hegemony with a minimum of violence. But China’s neighbors are likely to resist the renewal of a Sinocentric order. French tells Vietnam’s long, proud history of doing so. The irony of the present moment is that as Chinese strategists develop a benevolent, neo-imperial vision for the future, national leaders in Washington threaten to undermine Asia’s liberal order from within. Reviewed by John Delury.

Reviewed by John Delury.
Why Openness Benefits China

Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China
By Julian Gewirtz
Harvard University Press, 2017, 416 pages, $39.95 (Hardcover)

In his 1969 book To Change China, historian Jonathan Spence traced a centuries-old pattern of Westerners who overestimated their capacity to shape China to their ends. Julian Gewirtz adds a new chapter, with a twist, to Spence’s grand narrative of Sino-Western contact. In Unlikely Partners, Gewirtz probes the familiar story of China’s economic reform by focusing on the international exchanges that helped Deng Xiaoping’s architects develop their experimental blueprint for a wealthy China. But rather than looking at how Westerners tried to change China, he reconstructs the ways in which Chinese used foreigners to change themselves.

Drawing on a rich array of Chinese-language sources, Gewirtz documents the fascinating intellectual and policy debates of the late 1970s and 1980s, when Deng encouraged economic thinkers to learn from abroad for the benefit of the People’s Republic. Although Gewirtz does not fundamentally revise our understanding of China’s “reform and opening,” he reveals the depth of China’s contacts with foreign experts and shows how those exchanges informed and inspired reform efforts back in Beijing.

One of the most important connections turns out to be with Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Yugoslavia. Cutting-edge socialist bloc thinkers like János Kornai provided a conceptual vocabulary for Chinese reformers in the 1980s, and their protégés are leading policy-makers today. For Gewirtz, the moral is that China benefits from not just flows of goods but also exchanges of ideas, and a strong and prosperous China is also an open one.

Reviewed by John Delury.

A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA
By Joshua Kurlantzick
Simon & Schuster, 2017, 336 pages, $28 (Hardcover)

Since the CIA was born, debate has raged over how to strike the right balance between intelligence and covert action. In A Great Place to Have a War, Joshua Kurlantzick argues that the clandestine paramilitary operation in Laos — a little-known, brutal addendum to the US war in Vietnam — marked the triumph of covert action and the start of the CIA’s militarization. It was in the Laotian highlands, providing covert aid to General Vang Pao’s Hmong army and ordering an endless stream of bombing runs, that the CIA shifted its basic purpose from spying to killing.

Kurlantzick writes vividly on the American and Hmong personalities who fought the Secret War, and those who hid it from the US public. The codename Operation MIRAGE was a tragic irony for a war running itself, with no coherent path to victory. Laos finally fell to Communist forces as an afterthought to the Paris Peace Accords, leaving the CIA’s proxy militia to fend for themselves. Yet a mythology of “success” in Laos lasted for decades in agency lore.

Kurlantzick departs the Laos paramilitary model was revived after 9/11, when the CIA again looked more toward killing than spying. His broader claim will be debated, as will his account of a conflict shrouded in secrecy. But for bringing light to a forgotten war that unleashed horrific violence on what remains one of Asia’s poorest nations, his book merits attention.

Reviewed by John Delury.

The Day the CIA Picked Up a Gun

India’s Hard Path to Peace With China

Dragon On Our Doorstep: Managing China Through Military Power
By Pravin Sawhney and Ghazala Wahab

Defending a country is too serious to be left to diplomats and politicians. That is a key argument in this book written by two Indian defense writers, one a former Army officer and the other a journalist. With an impressive mastery of detail on the past six decades of India’s conflict and rivalry with China and Pakistan, the authors call for building a modern army and an integrated approach to defending the country.

The authors are blunt and critical at the outset: “Let alone China, India cannot even win a war against Pakistan.” And India’s armed forces are double the size of Pakistan’s. The reason, they say, is that while India has built a large force, Pakistan has managed to forge its army into a tool of power. The failure to marshal India’s industrial and military resources into a military power commensurate with its size and ambitions is laid at the door of India’s politicians and diplomats who have “appraised” of China for short-term benefits. The case in point is the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement with China that gave all the advantages to China. “India is perhaps the only country in the world,” the authors write, “where foreign policy with nations having disputed borders — China and Pakistan — is made with disregard to military advice.”

The title of their well-written book is about China’s power, but it devotes much space to Pakistan, which they see as an integral part of the Chinese challenge. Absent a deal with Pakistan on Kashmir, they write, India can never be at peace with China.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda, founding editor of YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia Editorial Board member.

Southeast Asia’s Politics Unpacked

Southeast Asia and the Rise of China: The Search for Security
By Ian Storey
Routledge, 2013, 385 pages, $54.95 (Paperback)

For those interested in Southeast Asia’s development, Ian Storey’s book is essential reading. A Singapore-based veteran watcher of the region, Storey astutely clarifies its complex politics. In the four years since the book’s publication, its value has only grown, as China’s rise has morphed from its proclaimed “peaceful” nature to a more belligerent posture.

Storey covers the evolution of China’s relations within the region from the 1950s into the 21st century, tracking the dramatic changes with a plethora of detail. It is worth remembering that when ASEAN was formed in 1967, China’s People’s Daily denounced it as “an out-and-out counter-revolutionary alliance rigged up to oppose China.” It was a time when China-based broadcasts by Southeast Asian insurgents routinely called for the overthrow of the puppets of imperialism.

Since then, China has sought to appear a reliable friend of ASEAN, promoting peace and harmony.

Storey first traces a clear chronology of China’s relations with Southeast Asia from both perspectives. He then studies China’s relations with Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. A third section looks at its relations with maritime Southeast Asia, including often ignored Brunei and East Timor.

Amply documented, the book will inform serious students of Southeast Asia, while its clear prose and easy style will appeal to general readers too.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda.
**Diplomatic Delving Into India’s Choices**

Independent India has had many smart, world-class diplomats, but they have mostly been reticent to pen a candid record of their tenure. Shivshankar Menon, one of India’s most knowledgeable, experienced diplomats who shaped foreign policy as national security adviser to the prime minister and foreign secretary, follows this tradition. His book is an interesting, intellectual history of policy-making, but shuns anecdotes and observations that one of his experience could have provided aplenty. He highlights five foreign-policy dilemmas and India’s choices: the signing of the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement with China (criticized by some, such as the authors of Dragon On Our Doorstep, reviewed on p.133); the Civil Nuclear Agreement with the US; the decision not to retaliate militarily at Pakistan for its involvement in the Mumbai attacks of 2008; its role in Sri Lanka’s fight against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam; and its pledge of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons.

In this gem of a book, economist Arun Kumar debunks the notion that Modi’s dramatic ban would get rid of the black money that has long plagued the Indian economy. If anybody is qualified to tackle the issue, it is Kumar, who has emerged as the country’s authority on the “black economy,” a widely used but little understood term. For him, it boils down to “all the activities in which black incomes, property income, incomes generated, and not reported to direct tax authorities.” He estimates that at 62 percent of current GDP, or US$1.4 trillion.

Modi clearly and succinctly shows that a misunderstanding of how black money is generated and flows into the economy led Modi to aim at the wrong target and cause widespread pain and disruption in the economy, of which over 80 percent is reliant on cash, without denting the black economy. Only an incorruptible government with political will can implement short- and medium-term strategies to end it. Demonetization is no silver bullet. Reviewed by Nayan Chanda.

**Understanding the Black Economy and Black Money in India: An Inquiry into Causes, Consequences and Remedies**

By Arun Kumar

Aleph Book Company, 2017, 144 pages, 399 Rupees ($6)

**How Not to Beat the Black Economy**

On the evening of Nov. 8, 2016, as Indian TV readied to show the US presidential election results, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stunned the country. From that night, 1000- and 500-rupee notes would cease to be legal tender. Modi explained that it would end the curse of “black” money and stop terrorists using counterfeit currencies for finance.

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**Will Japan Succumb to Authoritarianism?**

Abe Shinzo’s election as Japan’s prime minister in December 2012 marked a new political era. Arthur Stockwin, a veteran British observer of Japanese politics, and colleague Kweku Ampiah give a detailed, incisive analysis of what they characterize as the “2012 political system.” Warning of a potential swing to a more authoritarian and far-right leadership, they highlight dangers of the new current political climate, while stressing a need to rethink conventional assumptions about Japanese politics and society.

In place of the pre-Abe reactive foreign-policy and consensual norms, in which Japan’s governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) offered a broad church of personalities and policy preferences, political elites are now more single-minded and overtly nationalistic. The authors see Abe himself as pragmatic in policy presentation, but privately committed to pushing a revisionist view of history and a revision to Japan’s unamended, US-authored post-war Constitution. In this, Abe and the right are depicted as broadly out of step with Japanese society, which prefers the pacifist norms and less-interventionist posture of the past.

This is a valuable overview of Japan’s postwar politics, including the LDP’s return to political dominance and the opposition Democratic Party’s collapse, while offering a detailed analysis of some more controversial aspects of Abe’s leadership, including a new State Secrecy Law, Japan’s new collective self-defense legislation, “Abenomics” and Japan’s regional and global foreign policy. Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright, Senior Lecturer, University of Cambridge and Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia, Chatham House.

**Rethinking Japan: The Politics of Contested Nationalism**

By Arthur Stockwin and Kweku Ampiah

Lexington Books, 2017, 312 pages, $110 (Hardcover)

**Assessing Asia’s Risks and Challenges**

Challenging usual views of Asia’s future unreservedly positive, Michael Auslin is cautious, stressing the high degree of risk over the Indo-Pacific region. He innovatively presents an integrated risk map with five primary challenges for Asian countries: failure of economic reform, demographic pressures, unfinished political revolutions, absence of an effective region-wide political community, and threat of Asian conflict. Sensibly avoiding cast-iron predictions, Auslin lays out a time-horizon in which the risk of intra-regional conflict is the most immediate challenge, followed by medium-term economic stagnation and the long-term risk of wider political disorder rooted in a clash between authoritarian leadership patterns and popular aspirations for democratic representation. The solution is for the US to engage actively by aligning with other liberal-minded states in developing a new, interlocking regional security architecture, promote a rules-based order, wider trade liberalization, greater labor mobility, expanded student exchanges and a louder European voice in regional economic activity. Auslin’s analysis draws strength from its wide-angle perspective, and he draws on personal observations and discussions. His prescriptions predate Donald Trump’s election and his more nationalist agenda, but Auslin’s case for an engaged, globally oriented America remains compelling. Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.

**The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World’s Most Dynamic Region**

By Michael R. Auslin

Yale University Press, 2017, 304 pages, $22.80 (Hardcover)
Age of Anger: A History of the Present
By Pankaj Mishra
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017, 416 pages, $16.07 (Hardcover)

Amid the new wave of populist politics and rising nationalism in Donald Trump’s America and certain parts of Europe, it is common to point to economic disadvantage and declining trust in traditional elite establishments as the explanation for this trend.

Pankaj Mishra argues for a more deep-seated, historically rooted cause. Populism is the product of a global explosion of anger fueled by anomic and disaffection with a modern culture of materialism and anodyne internationalism. Framing his analysis around the contrasting philosophical traditions of Rousseau and Voltaire, Mishra sees present trends as a powerful rejection of Enlightenment rational thought in favor of a romanticized attachment to pre-modern notions of nation, grounded in myth, ethnic homogeneity and a sense of victimization.

Mishra focuses his analysis on a subtle study of the intellectual roots of 19th century German Romanticism, Russian revolutionary and anarchist thought, and early 20th century Italian fascism. This history is also linked closely to trends in extremism today, including the religious and ethnic intolerance of the BJP in modern India, authoritarianism in Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Turkey, or the sharp nationalist and xenophobic turn of Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

The analysis is particularly compelling for combining intellectual history with a close reading of literary works and contemporary culture. Mishra convincingly shows that our mental frameworks for understanding dramatic, often unexpected political and social change must be re-oriented to account for the role of emotion and affect, as well as quantifiable, rational self-interest. Without this broader perspective, we risk underestimating how decisively global order is being challenged and the need for a new paradigm of international relations.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.