sometimes a lone outsider sees things invisible to the locals. One of the most insightful books about the United States, after all, was written by a Frenchman after a nine-month visit in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America.*

Evan Osnos, correspondent for *The New Yorker* magazine, lived in China for the past eight years as precisely that kind of keenly observant foreigner. He is intellectually humble enough not to overstate his claims, always a virtue with a place as vast and complex as China, but has a gift for getting to know interesting people and writing about them in unforgettable ways. *Age of Ambition* is the literary culmination of his effort to fathom a rising China by expatriating himself into the heart of Beijing.

As the title hints, the thematic structure borrows from America’s Gilded Age in the late 19th century, and Osnos’s China bulges at the seams with the same kinds of contradictory forces — robber barons and entrepreneurs, charlatans and true believers, muckraking journalists and government-paid bloggers. He is particularly drawn to social critics such as imprisoned Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and outspoken artist Ai Weiwei, men he writes about with the vividness of first-hand knowledge.

He hopes that for China’s and the world’s sake, a Progressive Era will follow its Gilded Age, as happened a century ago in the US. Yet he resists the temptation to resolve the contradictions he sees into easy answers or cheap prophecy. Instead, Osnos is that rare kind of foreigner who, when he writes, allows the social complexity of the country to speak for itself.

Reviewed by John Delury

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**How Long Can the US Rule the Waves?**

Putting flesh on the bones of US President Barack Obama’s much-discussed “pivot to Asia,” *Rebalancing U.S. Forces* looks carefully and critically at US naval presence in the western Pacific. Leading maritime scholars Carnes Lord and Andrew Erickson at the Naval War College in Rhode Island gather a deep bench of experts to examine the strategic advantages, and political challenges, to major outposts of American sea power and armed forces.

The resulting volume creates a fascinating tour of maritime Asia, from the island garrisons of Guam and Diego Garcia, where sovereignty is a non-issue, to Singapore and Australia, eager for enhanced US presence, to South Korea and Japan, where US forces are a chronic source of tension. In the face of China’s capability to be “increasingly competitive in air as well as undersea, space, and cyber warfare,” *Rebalancing* suggests that the Pentagon’s mantra of “places, not bases” needs rethinking.

The authors acknowledge the political constraints on basing and financial constraints on defense spending back home: How to ensure a flexible and powerful US presence is the dilemma rebalancing must solve. Along the way, there is also insightful analysis of China’s evolving military doctrine and strategy at sea based on close readings of Chinese sources. This is cutting-edge strategic scholarship.

Reviewed by John Delury

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**Decoding Putin’s Dreams of Empire**

Did the Ukraine crisis reveal Russia’s imperial ambitions? Has it brought the specter of geopolitics back onto the center stage of its relationship with the West? This book, written before Russia annexed Crimea, provides outright answers. Marcel Van Herpen, Director of the Ciceron Foundation in Maastricht, convincingly foretells the current crisis.

He does so first by comparing empire-building to expose Russia’s historical “genetic makeup.” In contrast to West Europe, where dissolution of empires was definitive and irreversible, Russian decolonization was immediately followed by re-colonization, as vividly shown in the Bolshevik revolution’s aftermath. Van Herpen then points to another historical trait: periods of Russian imperial expansion tended to have a negative impact on internal reform and democratization. He puts Putin’s re-imposition of authoritarianism in the political system in this context and interprets it as an internal war on political and economic reforms in order to pursue external expansion. Russia’s imperial ambition is further illustrated by a series of Putin’s wars in Chechnya and Georgia that consolidated his position, legitimized his power and let him roll back democratic reforms.

Thus, Van Herpen concludes that Russian neo-imperialism is an ongoing project. “The objective to bring Ukraine back in its orbit would become the overriding motive behind the Kremlin’s policies in the next decade.” Alas, Russia’s imperial ambition was disclosed far earlier than the author expected.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, Associate Professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and a book review editor for *Global Asia.*

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**Asian Economies Running on Empty**

Among the vast body of literature already published on East Asian development, what makes this book different is not its explanation of the “rise” part of these economies, but its focus on their slowdown. Dwight Perkins, political economy professor at the Harvard Kennedy School, explores when and why the periods of rapid catch-up growth have come to an end in 10 Northeast and Southeast Asian economies.

Perkins draws in particular on a non-measurable factor for growth deceleration. When the catch-up phase of economic development came to exhaustion in East Asia — at per capita income levels roughly a third of those of the highest-income countries — these economies began to slow.

The slowdown now depends on investing in research and development and building effective R&D institutions. Based on this observation, Perkins predicts China’s economic growth will decline significantly in coming years due to factors in both the demand and supply sides of the economy. A labor force slowdown in both quantity and quality (productivity) leaves only a rising rate of investment as a way to maintain growth rates at the level seen in the last decade. But as such high investment rates will be hard to sustain, the author argues that the obvious solution to this structural problem is to increase the share of household consumption. That, however, is easier said than done.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim
A Fix-It Manual for Modern Economies

Capital in the Twenty-First Century
By Thomas Piketty
Harvard University Press, 2014, 696 pages, $24.97 (Hardcover)

Since its publication in English in March, Capital in the Twenty-First Century has been acclaimed as one of the most influential books of the decade. Heated debates on it have surfaced in publications such as the Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Economist, making the previously peripheral French economist Thomas Piketty a rock star economist.

Why this Piketty phenomenon? There are at least three reasons. First, this is an outstanding work of scholarship, born of the author’s 15-year research into the historical dynamism of capitalism over the course of 300 years, using extensive comparative historical data across 20-plus countries.

Second, Piketty’s findings disclose “inconvenient truth” in capitalism’s evolution, which evokes a sympathetic response from readers as much as it poses a challenge to the established economies and economists alike. He reveals the “powerful capitalist mechanisms” pushing toward widening inequality in income and wealth. One core argument of this book is that the widening gap has been particularly evident when the rates of return on capital are greater than an economy’s growth rates, which the author sees as more likely the case than not in this century.

Based on these findings, Piketty suggests such ambitious policies as a progressive global tax on capital, which seems unrealistic, though his ideas pose a challenge to the conventional wisdom on socio-economic requisites for democracy, but democracy has survived there more than six decades. How has this been possible? This book explores India’s democratic “exceptionalism,” or improbability (if not impossibility), from structural and political perspectives.

On the structural dimension, Ashutosh Varshney, an international studies professor at Brown University, finds that the structure of India’s sense of identity cuts across religion, language, caste and tribe, and thus contributes to forging democracy. The dispersed identity structure may have generated many conflicts, but their intensity has rarely reached the level to constitute an existential threat to the entire nation.

Varshney goes on to identify political leadership and institutions as crucial in facilitating democracy in India’s nation-building and democratic consolidation. Mahatma Gandhi sought to build “unity in diversity” while the Congress Party functioned as an umbrella-like, inclusive institution. Gandhi’s early leadership in constructing Indian nationhood was succeeded after independence by Nehru, who played a vital role in consolidating democracy: securing the Congress Party’s unique position, regular elections, the primacy of the Constitution, and minority rights.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

How India Kept Democracy Alive

Battles Half Won: India’s Improbable Democracy
By Ashutosh Varshney
Penguin Global, 2014, 432 pages $15.01 (Hardcover)

How does one write yet another biography of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi after hundreds of books and tens of thousands of pages have been devoted to understanding the man? One of India’s premier historians of modern India, Ramachandra Guha has found a way: by not being trapped by the 100 volumes of Gandhi’s own writings and autobiography. Those, of course, are invaluable sources, but could be limiting. By turning his searching gaze to Gandhi’s life in South Africa — a harsh nursery for a peaceful revolutionary — Guha has brought a new perspective. In his meticulous focus on hitherto unexplored official documents, letters, papers and articles, studying the often unknown lives of those around Gandhi in South Africa, where he spent 22 years, Guha shows how Gandhi was made into the man the world came to know.

Gandhi, in this book, was not born for greatness but grew into it. A struggling Bombay lawyer driven by events he fell into, ideas imbued from friends and his own struggle, grew from a moral humanitarian into an activist ready to lead a nation to freedom. In trying to win rights for the minority Indian population against the Afrikaner state power, he had realized the futility of violence and developed satyagraha, the tool of non-violent protest that later shook British rule in India. His failures as a family man, not glossed over by Guha, humanize him. A visionary leader emerges as deeply complex, tormented by his own angst. This is no hagiography of a saintly father of a nation, but a story of the making of a saint who remains human.

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

The Journey From Man to Mahatma

Gandhi Before India
By Ramchandra Guha
Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, 673 pages, $35 (Hardcover)

In late summer of 1990, US President George Bush senior proclaimed there was a “New World Order.” Since then, political scientists have struggled to define the world that emerged from the ruins of the Soviet empire: unipolar, multipolar, post-American, the world of a 3-D chessboard, a G-Zero world. Now Amitav Acharya has thrown his hat into the ring with a term of his own. He finds the new world order most resembles a multiplex cinema. Instead of one movie called “America,” he sees it as several movies running in different theaters but in the same complex. America is only one of the shows among many others, even if it’s the biggest. Acharya notes that the many other shows often hamstring American order rather than propose an alternative form of global governance. But he disputes the alarmist scenario that an end of US hegemony could produce acute multipolar rivalries and fragmentation as at the end of the 19th century. What will then replace American world order? The likely outcomes are a global concert of great powers or a regional world. Acharya argues that rising powers will be strong enough to thwart a return to unipolarity under the US, but not powerful enough to dominate the world. The kind of regionalism he envisages need not be “an alternative to universalism, but a stepping stone to it.” In this slim, stimulating volume, Acharya breaks some new ground.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

The Greatest Show in the Multiplex?

World Order
By Amitav Acharya
Polity Press, 2014, 150 pages, $19.95 (Paperback)
Understanding North Korea: Indigenous Perspectives
Edited by Han Jong-woo & Jung Tae-hern

North Korea is one of the most commented upon countries in the world, yet English-language media coverage and expert analysis is often devoid of the most obvious place to go for insight — South Korea. Understanding North Korea valiantly takes up the cause of filling that void by presenting, in English, writings by more than a dozen of South Korea’s foremost North Korea experts.

Conducting research in their native language and seeing North Korea through the prism of shared “Koreanness,” these scholars write with an intimate and in many ways unparalleled familiarity of the North Korean power structure, socio-economic system and foreign relations. Former South Korean Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok writes with penetrating insight into the mercurial nature of North Korea-China relations; volume editor Han Jong-woo innovatively characterizes North Korea’s economy as undergoing a “market feudalism” transition; and Kim Keun-sik and Lee Gee-dong explain why Kim Jong Un appears to be stable despite the odds.

Although the critique of the failure of US policy toward North Korea goes perhaps too far, blaming Washington for a host of complex issues, nonetheless this should be required reading for everyone trying to fathom Pyongyang’s actions. By introducing some of the best Korean scholars and making their writings accessible to English speakers, Understanding North Korea makes a significant contribution to the deceptively simple task described by its title.

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