The Unfolding of a New Geopolitics

Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World

By Tim Marshall

This book is an ambitious attempt to explain current world affairs through both physical and human geographical factors. Tim Marshall, former foreign correspondent for Britain’s Sky News television, covers practically the entire world, divided into 10 countries/areas — Russia, China, the US, Western Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India and Pakistan, Korea and Japan, Latin America, and the Arctic — each making up a chapter.

In the two centuries of modern geopolitics, nation states are the predominant actors, and great-power rivalry for control over places and spaces is its central feature. It is an invention of the modern West, and now we are witnessing its return amid China’s rise, a new Cold War, and America’s pivot to Asia. But there is another face of geopolitics unfolding, particularly in the Middle East. The legacy of European colonialism left the Arabs grouped into arbitrary “nation states” with leaders tending to favor whichever branch of Islam, and tribe, from which they themselves came. Marshall argues that the second phase of the Arab uprising after the failed Arab Spring of 2011 is well into its stride, but it takes the form of the complex internal struggle within societies where primordial identities and guns are far more powerful forces than either Western ideals or the arbitrary notion of the nation state. Geography has always been a prison of sorts, argues the author, but geopolitics as we know it has at least two faces: modern geopolitics and geography’s revenge on it.

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

Economic sanctions vs. Soft power: Lessons from North Korea, Myanmar, and the Middle East

By Nikolay Anguelov

The increasing futility of economic sanctions on Russia, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea and the Middle East triggered University of Massachusetts professor Nikolay Anguelov to probe the issue in an interdisciplinary way. He partly concurs with, but goes beyond, the early 1990s arguments that as economies become more interdependent, it gets easier for sanctioned nations to minimize their impact by finding “black knights” — alternative trading partners and investment sources.

Anguelov uses multinational companies to explain sanctions’ ineffectiveness. MNCs see higher profits in sanctioned countries than in competitive markets, i.e. economic rents in the absence of competition, lower labor costs, environmental mitigation technology, and so on. More business activity means more rent extraction and protection for political and business elites, thus strengthening their grip. To break this vicious circle, Anguelov proposes MNCs and FDI as a vehicle for soft-power dissemination.

Anguelov proposes MNCs and FDI as a vehicle for soft-power dissemination.

Hard Power in a Velvet Glove

Putin’s Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy

By Marcel H. Van Herpen

A New Cold War appears to be taking shape between Russia and the West since Moscow’s annexation of Crimea. Russia is vying for its spheres of influence well beyond its “Near Abroad” — the former Soviet territories. But less well known than its assertive external behavior is the Kremlin’s soft-power offensive accompanying its imperial ambitions. Marcel H. Van Herpen, director of the Cicero Foundation, explores the other side of Russia’s hard-power offensive.

Russia’s new soft-power front has been shaped since the early 2000s, and has intensified, particularly since 2008. During this time, the notion of soft power in Russia was transformed from the “power of attraction” into the “hard power in a velvet glove,” with, the author argues, three components: “mimesis,” attempts to copy Western public diplomacy through the medium of such organizations as the Russkiy Mir Foundation; “rollback,” a strategy of attacking Western public diplomacy initiatives by curtailing, opposing and possibly forbidding the activities of Western institutes inside Russia; and last but not least, the Kremlin is inventing new soft-power instruments including legal as well as illegal activities to enhance its influence abroad. These range from hiring Western public relations firms to improve Russia’s image to setting up spy rings, illegally financing political parties and directly “buying” people. Most worrisome is the Kremlin’s instrumentalization of the Russian Orthodox Church to ideologically prop up counter-Western values, which ominously foretells the reduction of soft-power competition into a clash of values.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

Asian Nations’ Power Play

Understanding Public Diplomacy in East Asia: Middle Powers in a Troubled Region

Edited by Jan Melissen & Yul Sohn

The geopolitical context of diplomacy is inverted in this century: the public, interest groups and citizens enabled with new and social media technologies are upending the power distribution among the major actors in traditional diplomacy.

In this newly forming context, Jan Melissen, senior research fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, and Sohn Yul, a professor at Yonsei University, gathered 11 experts to examine the growth of the soft power concept and the rise of public diplomacy in East Asia, incorporating six East Asian cases (Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea). The authors argue that East Asian middle powers use public diplomacy as a strategic tool to compensate for their hard power deficit. Differences are revealed in these powers’ public diplomacy practices not only from their Western counterparts, but also among themselves by examining varying national approaches to public diplomacy. This can also help overcome rather than stereotypical images of East Asian international relations that stress one side of reality: a preference for traditional Westphalian state-to-state relations.

This volume is good for a better understanding of how Asia’s new middle powers see ways of enhancing their impact on regional and global affairs in a radically transformed international system.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.
Chinese Strategy, Then and Now

Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History
By Feng Zhang
Stanford University Press, 2015, 280 pages, $65 (Hardcover)

What can the convoluted ties between Chinese, Japanese, Koreans and Mongolians around 1400 AD tell us about our own dawning era of revived “Chinese hegemony” in East Asia? Quite a bit, in the hands of a versatile scholar like Feng Zhang of Australian National University, whose first book dances nimbly on the borders of diplomatic history and international relations theory. Zhang argues for a new synthesis to explain the underlying default in Chinese grand strategy. Strong rulers in Beijing, he avers, prefer a China-centered regional order of “expressive hierarchy” that sees smaller neighbors treated with a kind of benevolent neglect, leading them to pursue “identificational” with the hegemon. But when interests collide, Beijing turns to a self-interested “instrumental hierarchy” approach, leaving neighbors to choose from a menu ranging from self-protective “defence” to outright defiance. In narrating the tangled web of China’s Korean, Japanese and Mongolian relations in the early 15th century, Zhang finds deeper patterns in China’s hegemonic relations as they oscillate from benevolence to self-interest. He ends with a challenge to today’s grand strategists in Beijing and international relations theory. What can the convoluted ties between Chinese, Japanese, Koreans and Mongolians around 1400 AD tell us about our own dawning era of revived “Chinese hegemony” in East Asia?

The Spirit of Korean Development
By Song-Young Rhyu
Yonsei University Press, 2015, 129 pages, $10 (Paperback)

Success in South Korea’s DNA?

Pestered by foreigners curious about South Korea’s “miraculous” emergence as a posterchild of economic development, political democratization and cultural dynamism, Sang-Young Rhyu has written a succinct, engaging volume to join the dots from Korean War orphans begging bread from GI’s to Psy’s “Gangnam Style.” Rhyu, a Yonsei University professor, charts South Korea’s development in three overlapping stages: economic development, democratization, and informatization and globalization (he also posits an emerging fourth stage, “smart power”).

Rhyu digs into the soil of the “Korean spirit” to unearth unique traits, rooted in culture and history, that drive leaders and masses in a relentless pursuit of collective self-betterment. Spiritual sources are led by a profound dread of poverty, an egalitarian sense of populism and “nomadic dynamism.” Rhyu vividly illustrates the spirit’s workings among political and business leaders and common people: Park Chung-hee’s drive to rout poverty; Kim Dae-jung’s politics of forgiveness; the Hyundai and Samsung founders’ distinctive visions; and, most inspiring, the true grit of the Korean people — whether students dying for freedom in the 1980s, or families selling their gold to save the economy from crisis in the late 1990s.

This is fascinating meditation, stimulating to newcomers to South Korea and experts alike.

Reviewed by John Delury

How to Escape the Nuclear Quagmire?

Denuclearization and Peace on the Korean Peninsula
Edited by Peter Hayes & Chung-in Moon
Yonsei University Press, 2015, 266 pages, $20 (Paperback)

For decades, North Korea methodically, if surreptitiously, developed its nuclear energy and weapons development capabilities. Now that Kim Jong Un has proclaimed a strategy of “quantitative and qualitative” progress on the nuclear weapons deterrent, Northeast Asian security experts are experiencing a new bout of anxiety over the growing, unchecked threat to regional peace. Chung-in Moon and Peter Hayes convened a multi-national, interdisciplinary group of unconventional thinkers to tackle the challenge head on, and this volume is the fruit of their labors. It delivers on the editors’ promise to introduce the reader to “the deep structure of the nuclear and security issues that divide the region and make the inter-Korean conflict so intractable and dangerous.”

Along the way, contributors expose the vanity of current approaches. The proposal that Seoul should go nuclear, for example, is dismissed as a “surreal” option for a host of political, military, economic and legal reasons. Can Beijing step into the breach? Other than one author’s tantalizing yet vague suggestion of a post-Six-Party Talks regional security mechanism, the Chinese gun has no silver bullets either. What of Washington? It is telling that US policy barely comes up — indirect testament to the decline of American influence on the denuclearization question.

So how to achieve denuclearization and peace? The most ambitious proposal is a Northeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone. Given the intractable nature of the North Korean nuclear quagmire, it may be that only such radical thinking can offer a way out.

Reviewed by John Delury

Chartering History Along the River

Black Dragon River: A Journey Down the Amur River at the Borderlands of Empires
By Dominic Ziegler
Penguin Press, 2015, 368 pages, $40.00 (Hardcover)

Insights, conveyed amid myriad tales of adventure and history, await the reader.

Like Twain’s Mississippi or Conrad’s Congo, rivers can enjoy a significance that transcends their topography. So it is with Dominic Ziegler’s non-fictional adventure tale “looping 4,000 miles through the heart of Asia to the Pacific mouth of the Amur.” Enchanted by what the Chinese poetically call Black Dragon River, Ziegler decided to travel the length of this serpentine “meeting ground for Asia’s great empires and peoples.”

Like any good journalist (Ziegler is The Economist’s Asia Editor), he heads to the source — in this case, the elusive headwaters deep in Mongolia, native land of that ultimate empire-builder, Genghis Khan. The Mongol’s shadow lingers over the rest of the story, as Russian czars, Chinese emperors and Japanese armies do their best to recreate even a fragment of his vast, multiethnic empire.

The highpoint of Ziegler’s journey is visiting Nerchinsk, site of a landmark 1689 border treaty between Russia and China negotiated in neutral Latin by Jesuit advisors — a tribute to early modern Eurasia’s cosmopolitanism. Ziegler ends up sleeping in a sausage factory (there are no hotels) and nearly gets himself arrested, yet sees in Nerchinsk a symbol of the special relationship enjoyed even today between Xi Jinping’s China and Vladimir Putin’s Russia — not of trust, let alone affection, but of equals. Such insights, conveyed amid myriad tales of adventure and history, await the reader.

Reviewed by John Delury
Unleashing India’s Animal Spirit

The Turn of the Tortoise: The Challenge and Promise of India’s Future
By T. N. Ninan
Penguin Books, Allen Lane, 2015, 352 pages, $29.95 (Hardcover)

India’s economic rise has spawned dozens of books, many predicting the emergence of a superpower in China’s league. An animal—a tiger, lion or elephant—is often invoked to place India in this race. T. N. Ninan, author of a fine analysis of the contemporary Indian economy, believes that despite its slow pace India, like the tortoise in Aesop’s fable, may be getting its turn. The long-time editor of the prestigious newspaper Business Standard, Ninan has summoned his first-hand knowledge to write a critical book pointing out the basic flaws that have kept India weak and poor, and, despite much chatter, out of China’s league. He lays much of the blame on poor governance, where core tasks have been failed and businesses and industry mismanaged. Corruption, waste and political chicanery have undercut whatever India’s resilient small businesses and IT entrepreneurs have achieved. While not pessimistic, Ninan’s portrait of India’s economy and politics provides a valuable antidote to cheerleading books on India’s rise.

His telling anecdotes enliven the account. For instance, he tells the story of former Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha’s visit to Tokyo in 1990 hoping to secure a loan for an effectively bankrupt India. Forty-seven tons of gold were placed on flights to London and Zurich to let India borrow to keep essential imports flowing. Rich with stories from many ethnic minorities fighting for their rights and autonomy.

Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma
By Richard Cockett
Yale University Press, 2015, 296 pages, $35 (Hardcover)

An academic turned journalist, Richard Cockett reported for The Economist on Myanmar as it introduced political reforms, traveling throughout the country and speaking to many citizens who for the first time could express their views. The result is a book rich with stories from many ethnic minorities fighting for their rights and for autonomy. The recent elections, which saw a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy party led by celebrated democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi, can be better understood in the context of the political churning that Cockett writes about. He provides a historical context for Myanmar’s cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse “plural society” that emerged out of the British colonial rule and intra-Asian immigration. He shows how the immigrants’ business acumen and entrepreneurship enriched the country and helped the minorities on its periphery, but also bred resentment among the indigenous Burmans. The anti-minority, repressive policy of the military junta that dominated the post-colonial period drove the country into the ground. The reforms since 2011 and recent elections open the possibility of Myanmar becoming prosperous again, but Cockett warns that this won’t happen unless a true federalism empowers the minorities—something that would require “enormous political courage from all of Burma’s rulers.”

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

The Moment India Chose Modernity

To the Brink and Back: India’s 1991 Story
By Jairam Ramesh
Rupa Publications, 224 pages, $10.99 (Paperback)

On June 21, 1991, when dour-looking Congress politician Narasimha Rao took over as prime minister of India, he was in for a shock. Handled an eight-page secret report about the country’s economic condition, he asked the cabinet secretary: “Is it this bad?” The response: “No, sir, it is actually much worse.” With foreign reserves to cover only two weeks of imports, India was on the brink of default. Forty-seven tons of gold were placed on flights to London and Zurich to let India borrow to keep essential imports flowing. The cliché about crisis being opportunity came true as the beleaguered Rao government, helped by his new finance minister, Manmohan Singh, launched reforms that laid the foundation for India’s subsequent economic rise. As the 25th anniversary of that date approaches, there will be musings about the how and why of that pivotal moment.

Jairam Ramesh, then a young Harvard-graduate Congress politician who served in the PM’s Office in the Rao government’s first 90 days, has produced a riveting book on the inception of India’s economic reforms. “What had started out as a matter of compulsion,” he writes, “soon became a matter of conviction.” In a series of reforms — from devaluation, tariff overhaul and trimming of the license-raj for industry—the Rao government launched India on a path that has made the country one of the fastest growing economies in the world today.

In addition to Ramesh’s insights from a ringside seat, the book is a valuable resource by including Rao’s personal papers, notes of conversations with Singh and minutes of Congress meetings.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

How Religion and State Meet in Japan

Komeito: Politics and Religion in Japan
By Edited by George Ehrhardt, Axel Klein, Levi McLaughlin & Steven R. Reed
University of California, Berkeley, 2014, 266 pages, $25.00 (Paperback)

Formal academic studies of the relationship between politics and religion in Japan are rare. This collection of essays exploring the role of Komeito, Japan’s third-largest political party, is a valuable addition.

Founded in 1964, Komeito is the political wing of Soka Gakkai (the Value Creation Study Association), a lay Buddhist association originally aimed at turning Japan into a “Buddhist Democracy” by promulgating the teachings of Japan’s indigenous Nichiren Buddhism. Japan’s strict constitutionally-defined separation of religion and state and the traditional absence of religion as a political identifier for voters means Komeito has often been regarded with suspicion. Appealing traditionally to the marginalized and poor, it has uniquely blended ideology with pragmatism, helping to form Japan’s first post-1955 anti-Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) coalition in the mid-1990s, but also aligning with the LDP from 1999-2009.

This volume is a long-overdue, analytical study that avoids sensationalism. It provides a comprehensive overview of Komeito’s history, electoral strategy, core-support base (particularly housewives), financial support and the gradual normalization of its status in Japanese political life. Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright, Head of the Asia Programme at the Royal Institute for International Affairs and a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Asian and Middle-Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge.
Foreign Ideas in South Korea

Multiethnic Korea? Multiculturalism, Migration, and Peoplehood Diversity in Contemporary South Korea

Edited by John Lie
University of California, Berkeley, 2014, 344 pages, $25.00 (Paperback)

South Korea’s ethnic and cultural composition is changing. As recently as 2011, there were only 1.4 million foreign residents, or 3 percent of the population. Yet very low fertility rates, an aging population and the resulting labor shortage have forced successive governments to adopt new immigration policies, including the acceptance of Vietnamese and Filipina brides for Korean farmers and a growing willingness to tolerate non-Koreans within society. The government has actively tried to stress the multicultural dimensions of Korean society, a strikingly different approach from past tendencies to stress the county’s distinctive homogeneity.

This innovative volume, with contributions primarily from sociologists and anthropologists, gives a valuable, rare and empirically rich perspective on these changes and South Korean views on the phenomena of multiculturalism, or tamunhw — a concept increasingly prominent in academic and cultural discourse in contemporary South Korea. Historical and political dimensions are addressed, including the shifting role of national identity formulation in post-1948 South Korea, and a range of migration issues, whether in relation to North Korean refugees, overseas brides, foreign workers or returning ethnic Korean adoptees. The volume also includes fascinating ethnographic studies of contemporary multiculturalism, including the experience of Black Amerasian Koreans, low-skilled workers and the role of churches in facilitating migration. South Korea is changing and this volume offers a timely insight into this relatively underexplored set of critical issues.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright

Disasters and Social Crisis in Contemporary Japan: Political, Religious, and Sociocultural Responses

Edited by Mark R. Mullins & Koichi Nakano
Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 336 pages, $102.38 (Hardcover)

Political scientists frequently argue that Japan’s polity has been particularly adaptive, citing the dominant Liberal Democratic Party’s ability to respond flexibly to a variety of crises, domestic or international, as a means of remaining in power.

This volume focuses on the domestic dimension and features interdisciplinary essays by a range of Japanese and international scholars to explore the responses of the state and society to three major crises: the 1995 Kobe earthquake, the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin gas attack, and the 2011 triple disaster in which an earthquake, tidal wave and associated nuclear power plant meltdown led to more than 19,000 deaths and displacement of 340,000 from their homes.

Most contributors had direct experience of some of these events. Regarding the earthquakes, a key reaction has been the substantive growth in volunteerism and a renaissance in civil society and popular activism, in contrast to a government response judged as elitist and part of a rightward shift in national leadership that some authors view as intolerant of dissent, insufficiently accountable and slow to learn lessons.

The volume’s value is in documenting the reaction to crisis within Japan at multiple levels. Disasters and Social Crisis in Contemporary Japan: Political, Religious, and Sociocultural Responses

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright

How Japan Handles Moments of Crisis

Political scientists frequently argue that Japan’s polity has been particularly adaptive, citing the dominant Liberal Democratic Party’s ability to respond flexibly to a variety of crises, domestic or international, as a means of remaining in power.

This volume focuses on the domestic dimension and features interdisciplinary essays by a range of Japanese and international scholars to explore the responses of the state and society to three major crises: the 1995 Kobe earthquake, the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin gas attack, and the 2011 triple disaster in which an earthquake, tidal wave and associated nuclear power plant meltdown led to more than 19,000 deaths and displacement of 340,000 from their homes.

Most contributors had direct experience of some of these events. Regarding the earthquakes, a key reaction has been the substantive growth in volunteerism and a renaissance in civil society and popular activism, in contrast to a government response judged as elitist and part of a rightward shift in national leadership that some authors view as intolerant of dissent, insufficiently accountable and slow to learn lessons.

The volume’s value is in documenting the reaction to crisis within Japan at multiple levels. Disasters and Social Crisis in Contemporary Japan: Political, Religious, and Sociocultural Responses

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright