

insight, one that can be used later to build even more extensive studies of ISIS and its impact on contemporary West Asian politics.

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## **Pax Chimerica** Asia's Contested Order

Bill Hayton. *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. London: Yale University Press, 2014. 298 pp.

Robert Kaplan. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*. New York: Random House, 2014. 225 pp.

Henry Kissinger. *On China*. New York: Penguin Press, 2011. 586 pp.

Henry Kissinger. *World Order*. New York: Penguin Press, 2014. 420 pp.

Evan Osnos. *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014. 403 pp.

The decisive collapse of the Soviet Union unleashed a euphoric discourse over a simple, yet profoundly consequential question: “So what now?” After almost a century of cataclysms—beginning with the First World War, which upended the relatively peaceful, post-Napoleonic order in Europe—there was now a genuine hope for lasting peace. Yet, the sheer weight of history, especially the violent and devastating nature of the 20th century, beckoned a more fundamental philosophical inquiry into the essence of the post-Cold War age and how it would look like.

Among progressive circles, the demise of Stalinist regimes served as a double-edged sword. The evisceration of what many saw as the perversion of Communism provided a unique opportunity to espouse a more benign, democratic, and enlightened version of Marxism on a universal scale. Finally, Marxism would escape the grip of “oriental despotism.”

At the same time, there was now less pressure on Western governments to ameliorate the excesses of capitalism. After all, as Margaret Thatcher—the “Iron Lady” who emasculated the European welfare state—brutally put it: There is no (ideological) alternative. Even social democrats had to recalibrate the coordinates of their social agenda on conservatives’ terms, giving birth to Blairite “Third Way,” which was essentially social democracy along neo-liberal lines—a hollow, if not toxic, cocktail that appalled many progressives.

The liberals and conservatives, however, were a bit more triumphalist. In *The Revenge of Geography* (2012), Robert Kaplan provides an eloquent account of the naiveté of many liberal thinkers, who (mistakenly) presumed that the collapse of the Berlin Wall represented an irreversible victory, both moral and strategic, for the West. For them, the end of Cold War didn't only mark the defeat of a dangerous adversary, but also a Voltairean triumph of human agency over the impersonal forces of history, including geography.

While Oxford University's Timothy Garton Ash expressed tremendous hope vis-à-vis the emergence of a truly free and democratic post-Soviet space, and perhaps even beyond, liberal hawks like Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of *The New Republic*, went so far as espousing regime change and Western intervention across global peripheries—not only to prevent mass atrocities, but to also universalize the march of democracy that swept Central-Eastern Europe (*Mittleuropa*).

Yet, one could argue that the most influential thinkers of the post-Cold War were the conservatives, particularly two American thinkers: Francis Fukuyama and, his mentor in Harvard, Samuel Huntington. Giving a new twist to an old trick, Fukuyama—a policy-maker at the U.S. State Department and expert at Rand Corporation—leveraged his deep familiarity with political philosophy (graduate studies) and classics (undergraduate studies) to provide a new framework for understanding the historical significance and broader philosophical implications of the end of Cold War.

Beginning with an essay for *The National Interest*, which was later on expanded into a full-blown book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama combined Plato's concept of *thymos* (pride) and Hegelian dialectics (via Kojève) to conclude, quite controversially, that the grand trans-historical debate on what constitutes the ideal form of social organization had finally come to close, with capitalist democracy indubitably coming on top.

Obviously, he wasn't counting out the possibility that many countries, outside the West, would never fully establish vibrant liberal democracies, with others, particularly the fundamentalists, even rejecting the tenets of modernity and enlightenment altogether. In his latest book, *Political Order and Political Decay* (2014), he reiterated his skepticism vis-à-vis the universal applicability of capitalist democracy, but extolled its virtues on an ideal (Hegelian) level and traction across civilizations (think of the Arab Spring or the Occupy Hong Kong and Taiwanese Sunflower movements).

Soon, however, Fukuyama's mentor stepped in, expanding an essay in *Foreign Affairs* into a full-blown book, *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996). While the title of his original essay, as Edward Said cleverly points out, (humbly) ended with a question mark, the book projected absolute certainty in both its title and content. Huntington's work proved to be more popular with the military-industrial complex, which—grappling with post-Cold War “peace dividends”—was eagerly in search of new monsters to slay.

Unlike Fukuyama, who expressed reservations with the spiritual poverty of Western societies (hence, the Nietzschean “last man” in the title), his mentor expressed certainty (akin to liberals) about the moral ascendancy of the West—and its supposed obligation to make the world safe for (Americanized) globalization. The “clash of civilizations” thesis was less an analysis of real, existing socio-religious fault-lines than a call for Western vigilance against a rising China in East Asia and, more immediately, anti-American forces—from religious fundamentalists to revisionist powers in Iraq and Iran—in the Middle East. The book was a geopolitical (rather than scholarly) blockbuster, energizing the neo-conservative wing of American foreign policy establishment, which played a critical role in the subsequent disasters in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Neglecting Freud's geopolitically poignant concept of “narcissism of small differences,” Huntington curiously ignored deep ethnic-sectarian fissures within the civilizations, as evident in the almost decade-long war between (Persian-Shia) Iran and (Arab-Sunni) Iraq in the 1980s, not to mention the millennium-old rivalry between Confucian-Communist China and Vietnam, which culminated in maritime skirmishes and a major continental war towards the end of Cold War. But the attraction of his thesis wasn't dampened by real world events. It was simply too tempting not only for sanctimonious conservatives and liberals in the West, but also the media-industrial-military complex, which was itching for a new “other” to fight against.

## THE CLASH WITHIN CIVILIZATIONS

A cursory look at the Middle East and East Asia in the 21st century reveals the widening fault-lines within the Islamic and Confucian civilizations. In the Middle East, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (“Daish” in Arabic) has coincided with an intensified

sectarian warfare in the region, which has curiously brought together two historical rivals: The United States and Shia powerhouse Iran.

Confronting a common enemy in Sunni extremism, Washington (under the Obama administration) and Tehran (under the Rouhani administration) have found enough strategic incentive to strike a long-elusive comprehensive nuclear agreement after two years of non-stop negotiations—a historic deal that is expected to only strengthen and expand existing tactical cooperation between the two powers across the region, especially as “Daish” and al-Qaeda affiliate groups extend their tentacles from Morocco to Mindanao.

In fact, there are growing indications that the Iranian establishment is increasingly viewing Sunni powerhouse Saudi Arabia—widely seen as the source and patron of Wahhabism, a puritanical sect, which has provided the ideological underpinnings of today’s Sunni extremism—rather than the United States and United Kingdom as its true ideological foe.

The real threat to post-Cold War Western hegemony, however, comes from no less than China, which has both the heft and (arguably the) ambition to create a Sino-centric order in East Asia—the new pivot of history. No other revisionist power, not even Russia, comes even close. China’s economy, soon to be the biggest in the world in nominal terms, is feeding its massive military modernization program, which is anchored by the world’s second largest military budget.

As Martin Jacques, in *When China Rules the World* (2009), notes: China is no Soviet monolith. It boasts a vibrant economy, relishes a dynamic technological-scientific base and a massive pool of skilled labor, and has a long history of successful and relatively benign imperial past, which it could draw on. Though China’s turbocharged economic growth is expected to gradually slowdown in the near future, it will still feature as a gigantic, upper-middle-income country with vast resources and a teeming population.

Towering above leading scholars, legendary (and highly controversial) diplomat Henry Kissinger has devoted recent years to analyzing the rise of China, its strategic calculus, and the prospects of a post-American world. His 2011 book, *On China*, provides a valuable account of his direct experience of negotiating with Maoist China at the height of the Sino-Soviet rivalry, which paved the way for a tactical Sino-American strategic partnership. It is a masterpiece and succinct endorsement of *Realpolitik*.

In the book, Kissinger forwards two major insights. First, Chairman Mao, who feverishly fought against the last vestiges of Chinese feudalism (the essence of the Cultural Revolution), was heavily influenced by China's ancient strategic thinking, which was anchored by a vast literature going back to the *Spring and Autumn* and *Warring States* periods that ended with the victory of the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C. Related to the first insight, Kissinger also highlighted the importance of the concept of "Shi" (alignment of forces) and psychological warfare to Communist China's strategic calculus.

In his latest book, *World Order*, Kissinger talks about the two pillars of an existing *order*, which pertains to a set of mutually-accepted rules that govern the behavior of states within a specific geographical location. One is legitimacy and the other is balance of power. As far as the Asian order is concerned, it is suffering both from a legitimacy crisis (at least from China's point of view) and a seismic power shift, mainly in favor of China, but to a lesser degree also the likes of India and Indonesia.

## THE NEW BATTLEFIELD

In *Charm Offensive* (2007), Joshua Kurlantzick provides a comprehensive account of the highly successful nature of China's diplomatic outreach during the Jiang Zemin and early-Hu Jintao administrations. From the mid-1990s (after the demise of Deng Xiaoping) to the mid-2000s, China was able to lure its neighbors, thanks to a savvy deployment of economic incentives without specific policy preconditions, giving birth to what Joshua Cooper-Ramo described as the "Beijing Consensus."

It didn't take long, however, before China fell into its own moment of triumphalism. Shortly after the 2008 Great Recession, which severely undermined the economic foundations of American power, China began to flex its muscle, more aggressively asserting its territorial claims in adjacent waters. Perhaps, Beijing saw a shift in the "Shi," grasping a new strategic opening. It no longer had to bide its time and hide its ambitions, as ancient Chinese thinking advised the revisionist powers.

Akin to the United States' 19th-century Mahanian strategy of dominating the Caribbean as its exclusive zone of influence, China was now seeking its own strategic depth across adjacent waters, namely the South and East China Seas. So it was combining both the insights of Sun Tzu and Alfred Thayer Mahan.

As the balance of power rapidly shifted in China's favor—thanks to its robust economic growth and accelerated military modernization program amid American recession and shrinking military budget—the Asian powerhouse also began to launch a doctrinal challenge, which essentially challenged modern international law and the American-led liberal international order.

In *The South China Sea*, Bill Hayton provides arguably the best analysis yet of China's so-called "Nine-Dashed-Line" claims, which are based on so-called "historical rights" doctrine of Beijing. As Hayton cogently explains, there is hardly anything historical or right with China's claims in the area.

The Nine-Dashed-Line (formally announced in 2009, after Malaysia and Vietnam effectively internationalized the disputes by taking their claims to the United Nations) was mainly a modern Chinese construct, a kneejerk (and ill-informed) nationalist reaction amid the violent collapse of the Qing dynasty in the early 20th century—followed by decades of warlordism and brutal Japanese occupation that only ended after a vicious civil war between nationalist and communist forces.

As far as modern international law is concerned, China's sweeping territorial claims, which embraces much of the South China Sea like a domestic lake, not only violates the rights of other littoral states (particularly within their 200 nautical miles Exclusive Economic Zone), but also freedom of navigation in international waters. As Rober Kaplan, in *Asia's Cauldron*, explains, China's growing maritime assertiveness has imperiled a decades-long period of stability and prosperity in Asia, provoking the emergence of a string of informal alliances on China's peripheries.

In a direct rebuke of Huntington's thesis, Kaplan shows how even Vietnam has put aside its historical animosities with Washington in order to push back against its fellow Confucian northern neighbor. Perturbed over the possibility of a Chinese-dominated Western Pacific, the United States—under the so-called Pivot to Asia (P2A) policy—has come to the rescue of its allies (Japan and the Philippines), explored new alliances with India and Vietnam, expanded rotational military presence in Malaysia and Singapore, and has launched a free trading deal (Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement), which is aimed at countering China's economic preponderance in East Asia.

Confronting Chinese revanchist maneuvers in the East China Sea, post-war Japan—an insular island, which was deeply influenced

by Chinese civilization throughout centuries—has also gradually revisited its pacifist foreign policy, with the nationalist Shinzo Abe administration pushing for a more pro-active projection of the Northeast Asian country's (half-concealed) military muscle in concert with a “diamond of democracies,” composed of the United States, Australia, India, and increasingly the Philippines.

The problem, however, is that the United States no longer has the kind of military wherewithal to fully constrain China's ambitions. As a result, Kaplan implicitly suggests that a Sino-American co-dominion is perhaps inevitable in the region, giving birth to what can be called as “Pax Chimerica.” The term “Chimerica” was actually first coined by historian Niall Ferguson and economist Moritz Schularick, who explored the deep state of economic co-dependence and symbiosis between the two superpowers. After all, China needs American technology and markets as much as America needs Chinese credit and cheap labor, not to mention their entwined currencies.

The problem with much of the contemporary international relations scholarship and punditry, however, is the tendency to ignore domestic sources of foreign policy. Among all contemporary writers, Evan Osnos (currently with the *New Yorker* magazine) arguably provides the most sober and accurate account of the domestic sources of China's international ambitions.

In *Age of Ambition*, Osnos de-Orientalizes China, dispensing with Halford Mackinder's prejudicial “yellow peril” commentaries, in favor of a levelheaded understanding of the complex domestic forces—unleashed by capitalist expansion, demise of communism as an ideology, and a fraught but blossoming relationship with the ancient (Confucian) past—that are driving modern China. Similar to the United States in the late 19th century, China is gripped by a zeitgeist of ambition, both on the personal and collective levels.

Osnos provides a nuanced understanding of the concept of “China Dream,” which is the reigning slogan of the Xi Jinping administration. He shows how the rise of popular nationalism and the growing influence of the military—thanks to the Patriotic Education program that was introduced after the demise of the Soviet Union—has served as a major impetus for greater assertion of China's historical claims in adjacent waters.

Unwilling to democratize the Chinese political system, and still insecure with his grip on power amid a precarious anti-corruption crackdown and shaky market reforms, Xi has not shied away from



tapping into nationalist rhetoric in order to strengthen his popular base, if not establish his own cult of personality (against his opponents).

It is Osnos's book, more than any other contemporary work, which provides a vivid picture of the vast impersonal forces, which are driving China's growing territorial ambitions. The *Age of Ambition* is a strong reminder of how all politics is after all domestic. And this means that the trajectory of the South and East China Seas disputes will depend not only on inter-state balance of power configurations, but also, if not ultimately, on the domestic dynamics of China.

We are now not exactly in a post-American world, but also not in an American-dominated era, as exemplified by China's immense success in its assertion of territorial rights, as well as the establishment of alternative financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that directly challenging the Bretton Woods System (BWS). This is why, as far as the East Asian order is concerned, we are perhaps heading into (if not already in) a "Pax Chimerica" era, where China is the preponderant economic power with growing military ambitions, while the United States is the preeminent naval power with an anemic economy.

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