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Review: “Asia’s Reckoning: The Struggle for Global Dominance” by Richard McGregor

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Asia's Reckoning: The Struggle for Global Dominance
By Richard McGregor, London: Allen Lane, 2017. Pp. 416,
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REVIEWED BY SAM WISZNIEWSKI

While current international news headlines may be dominated by Russian election-meddling, war-ravaged Syria, and a nuclear North Korea, Richard McGregor's recent book proposes yet another global issue for our times: the three-way relationship between the United States, China, and Japan. McGregor's selection is not random. These nations represent a powerful trio, respectively occupying the first, second, and third spots in the global GDP rankings, and accounting for 45% of the world economy.¹

This economic picture looms large alongside the figures of Barack Obama, Shinzō Abe, Xi Jinping, and Donald Trump, in an introduction and afterword heavily laden with McGregor's concerns for the present, most notably the fate of the "Pax Americana" that has reigned in the Pacific since 1945. (p. 15) The book's presentism is nonetheless rooted in a careful account of the past, as the first seven chapters draw from an impressive range of archival resources to historicize the three-way relationship from the aftermath of the Second World War to the turn of the 21st century. The remaining eight chapters deal with the last 17 years, and feel more like the work of a journalist than a historian, mostly relying on interviews and newspaper excerpts rather than archival sources.

McGregor's tri-polar model is an important intervention, moving away from more familiar bi-polar conceptions of global power. It nuances conceptions of the world history of the Cold War dominated at one end by the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, and at the other end by the rivalry between the United States and China. By refracting these two relationships through the prism of Japan—a buttress against the Soviets, a foyle for China, and a historically complicated, independent geopolitical power in its own right—both the present and the past are reframed in useful ways.

McGregor's concurrent attention to present and past is a strength throughout his narrative, allowing him to chart subtle continuities amid sweeping changes, and vice versa. For example he suggests that there are strategic echoes of earlier rivalries in the current US-China relationship, noting that key actors like Jeff Badger, National Security Advisor under the Obama administration and important policymaker on China, actually honed their skills and perspectives in a Bush administration far more preoccupied with a rising Japan in the early 1990s (pp.125–126). McGregor also traces the family histories of current political leaders, in particular

¹ "World Economic Development Indicators Database," World Bank, February 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/worlds-biggest-economies-in-2017/>.

highlighting how Shinzō Abe’s grandfather Nobusuke Kishi was implicated in anti-Chinese war crimes as Munitions Minister during World War II; a historical inheritance that is not forgotten—or forgiven—in China (p.31).

Indeed, the importance of history is a theme that permeates throughout the book. McGregor pays close attention to the contested legacy of World War II, and the acrimonious “history wars” between China and Japan over war reparations, the number of people killed in the Nanjing Massacre, and the definition of war criminals. This acrimony infects the highest level of diplomacy, with visits to the war memorial at Yasukuni by Japanese leaders from Nakasone in the 1980s to Koizumi in the 2000s becoming a “litmus test” that invariably triggers incensed responses from the Beijing Politburo (p.97). Crucially, McGregor demonstrates how these disagreements over history seriously impinge on economic and geopolitical relations, derailing moments of possible cooperation and raising the temperature of other tensions, notably around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu island chain (pp.267–288).

The “history wars” also serve to illustrate another pervasive theme in the book that necessarily complicates an understanding of global power relations, namely the interplay between domestic and international politics. To illustrate this, McGregor details accounts of powerful domestic factors in Japan, notably the Veterans’ lobby, which pressures leaders to visit the controversial Yasukuni shrine, and Chinese populist, anti-Japanese sentiments, which are often aggravated by the media and escalate into mass protest (pp.291–311). Both of these domestic factors serve to narrow the space for diplomatic maneuver on the international stage. Regarding the United States, McGregor notes how Trump’s play to a disgruntled domestic audience resulted in the trashing of the TPP trade deal in 2018, sending one of the strongest geopolitical shockwaves through the Pacific “since Nixon went to China” (p.344). This attention to the domestic sphere is important, and while McGregor’s account is pitched at a more general readership, it echoes recent trends among academics studying geopolitics in the Pacific.²

McGregor’s attention to the domestic sphere and the role of history sheds important light on the limitations of state power and diplomatic agency, but ultimately the diplomatic sphere remains paramount. McGregor does not pursue more novel approaches to international relations that have proven fruitful elsewhere, such as in Andrew McKevitt’s *Consuming Japan*, which focusses on consumer

² For an example of such trends, see: Nguyễn Hùng Sơn and C. J. Jenner, “Domestic Politics: The Overlooked Undercurrent in the South China Sea,” in *The South China Sea: A Crucible of Regional Cooperation or Conflict-making Sovereignty Claims?* ed. C. J. Jenner and Tran Truong Thuy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 133–148. Sơn and Jenner’s book focuses on sub-national and domestic actors, and their influence on international relations in the contested space of the South China Sea.

goods and culture, and the agency of actors and processes not usually considered to be influential on international relations.³

Moving beyond approaches and content, the very structure of McGregor's proposed three-way relationship is not without its limits. Its focus on the Pacific means rising powers like India go unnoticed, as does China's westward thrust through the Belt and Road Initiative. And within the Pacific, regional powers like Vietnam and even Russia only have peripheral roles to play. However, these gaps should invite and challenge scholars to add their own nuance and pose new questions. What might a similar three-way approach to the American, Russian, and Chinese relationship over the same time period look like? McGregor's book remains rich with detail and useful thematic takeaways, and the proposed three-way relationship remains valuable for its critical challenge to more familiar bipolar models. While obviously not achieving coverage of all actors and influences in a global international system, the model reminds us that apparently two-dimensional relationships are often affected—indeed reshaped entirely—by that which at first might seem only peripheral.

³ Andrew C. McKeivitt, *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).