

REVIEW

THE EVOLUTION INTO THE ASIAN CENTURY

Fault Lines in a Rising Asia

Cheol Bin (Jason) Shin

THE EVOLUTION INTO THE ASIAN CENTURY

Cheol Bin (Jason) Shin
Yonsei University

Chung Min Lee, *Fault Lines in a Rising Asia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016); 350 pages; \$19.95 (paperback).

One of the most profound questions in 21st century international politics is how Asia's rise will coincide with any potential shifts in the international political order. Currently, the United States stands as the global hegemon as the champion of the West and democracy, a position that it has enjoyed since the collapse of the USSR at the end of the Cold War. However, after two decades of hegemonic stewardship, the US has to an extent seen itself bogged down by various foreign interventions abroad, as well as domestic disturbances, for the last several years. Due to this instability, some observers have identified the current era as a time when US and western power will decline, only to be replaced by a rapidly increasing Asian power. In *Fault Lines in a Rising Asia*, author Chung Min Lee argues that the inexorable rise of Asia does not necessarily translate to the demise of the West.

The author argues that by most hard power measures, Asia has already risen. Hard power is the use of military and economic means to influence the behavior or interest of other political bodies. As the book mentions, in 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world's second largest economy in terms of GDP. In the same vein, in 2014, the combined GDP of China, Japan, India, and South Korea (\$33.26 trillion) easily surpassed the GDP of the United States, Germany, France, and Britain (\$26 trillion). From a military perspective, while the United States far outspends the combined military budgets of all other nations in the world, the defense budget of Asia eclipsed that of Europe. Asia is also home to five countries with nuclear weapons (China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and North Korea).

What Lee aims to accomplish in the book is to maneuver away from the frequent comparison based on numbers alone, toward a comprehensive overview of all parts of the "Asian story." To do this, it is necessary to look at both the upsides of Asia's rise, as well as the downsides. The main objective

of the book lies in analyzing the reasons for the “Asian paradox.” Lee defines contemporary Asia as a “region that has seen unparalleled economic success, but that is also home to the world’s most dangerous, diverse, and divisive security, military, political challenges.”¹ This is not to suggest that Asia’s rise was unlikely. On the contrary, no one disputes Asia’s rise, even with the slowing of China’s economic growth. What Asia needs to do, Lee argues, is demonstrate to the rest of the world its ability to prevent, mitigate, and overcome unmatched security and political dilemmas. Until Asia can offer an ideal alternative system to the current liberal democratic order of the West, its rise will not upset the existing world order and the hegemonic leadership of the US. Additionally, the West has been comparatively stable in terms of intra/regional conflict, while Asia today has some of the most pronounced security problems. In addition, Lee notes how “the sheer multiplicity and magnitude of Asia’s security threats dwarf those of other regions.”² No other region in the world is like Asia because of the amalgamation of wide ranging political deficits mixed with the historical tensions and legacies that continue to fester nearly 70 years after the end of WWII.

The book is divided into six distinct chapters grounded in a proposed theoretical framework. While some books on international security provide explanations of theories in a clearly disjointed, almost robotic manner, Lee skillfully sets the pace of the book so that each chapter paves the foundation for the contents of the next chapter, thus ensuring that an average reader will be able to understand every single concept that follows from one chapter to the next. One drawback is that rather than a proposed theoretical framework as the author claims, what is provided is a multitude of valid, but external, theories that are used as evidence and support.

The first chapter is a historical overview or a recap of the events that allowed Asia to rise in the first place in the 20th century. The well-known narrative of Asia’s accelerated economic growth and development is provided, including an analysis of the Asian Tigers: South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. These regions were among the first newly industrialized countries in the late 20th century behind Japan, which had become the 2nd largest economy in the world at the time. The end of the chapter, as mentioned before, lays down the roots for the next chapter as Lee discusses the more salient features of Asia’s core challenges, such as

1 Chung Min Lee, *Fault Lines in a Rising Asia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015), 2.

2 Ibid.

great power rivalries and growing military competition. While Lee makes his best effort to cater to a general audience who may not be informed on all facets of Asian history, it seems like the earlier parts of the book are bogged down by a review of the same oft-repeated historical narratives.

The second chapter deals with the potential political challenges that face Asia today. This is accomplished through the lens of the various types of political governments that presently exist in Asia. To give a counterexample, most of the Western European and North American continent is dominated by either democracies or republic type governments. However, Asia has established democracies, one-party communist states, fragile states, failed states, authoritarian states, and mostly importantly, states in transition. While there have been success stories of Asian democracies that have emulated the successful western model, there are also failed democratic states and countries where the army has assumed power, such as in Pakistan, Myanmar, and Thailand. Due to the lack of a common governing style, this has allowed divergent values and norms to develop, continually creating security problems and common mistrust within the region.

Chapter 3 mostly explains the intended motives and aspirations of the current leaders of the international system towards Asia. These include those from countries such as the US, China, Russia, India, and Japan. Among the examples that Lee provides are that of US President Obama's pivot to Asia and Japan's current quest for a more normal security posture under President Abe. Also, while some security experts have adamantly denied the concept of a "China/Russia" alliance to counterbalance the US, Lee brings attention to this, as well as gives an explanation behind Russia's latest actions on the international scene, including its invasion of Crimea and the establishment of its own "tilt" toward Asia. The chapter concludes with a highly plausible forecast that for the next two to three decades, an intensifying struggle for mastery is going to be the new normal across Asia. Lee claims that it would be hard pressed to see a return to the tributary system that ancient Imperial China once held over its neighboring countries from the 500s all the way to the 1800s.

An issue that has been very contentious in the last several years is the power politics regarding the governance and ownership of the South China Sea. Chapter 4 discusses the growing prominence of the Indo-Pacific region as a major maritime zone of competition. From an economic and strategic perspective, the Strait of Malacca is one of the most important shipping lanes in the world. It is the main shipping channel that connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean and about one fourth of the world's traded

goods are carried across it per year.³ Lee states that as China's People's Liberation Army evolves into a more modern force with upgraded technology and munitions in both its air force and navy, other countries will grow wary and look to counterbalance China's aspirations in the South China Sea. The chapter also looks at the growing problem in North Korea as it develops its weapons program, namely with nuclear technology. These security-conscious actions highlight the possibility for escalation. That is, if one country in Asia aims to increase its military capacity, then this can create potential hotspots in the region as neighboring countries might seek to do the same, as well. While the manner of content organization is very sound throughout the book, in this chapter there seems to be a concentrated effort to try and force a storyline in the explanation of China's actions. For example, some of the actions by the People's Liberation Army may be attributable to simple defensive posturing rather than as part of a grander picture of a rising Asia.

The remaining two chapters deal with nuclear programs in Asia. Chapter 5 primarily covers the role of nuclear weapons from an Asian context. Aside from the initial countries that owned nuclear technology, both India and Pakistan managed to test and develop nuclear weapons in the 20th century. Lee goes back and discusses the "genesis of the nuclear competition in South Asia"⁴ and details an overview of the two countries' different road to nuclear sovereignty. The last chapter deals with an explanation of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, as well as how this connects to Pyongyang's array of weapons exporting networks and collaboration with Pakistan, Libya, Iraq, Iran, and Syria over the last three decades. What Lee does best in this chapter is to define and describe the asymmetric relationship and correlation between the increased development of North Korea's nuclear weapons program with the defensive postures of its two biggest neighbors (South Korea and Japan). Notably, North Korea's increased nuclear weapons technology capabilities might force Seoul's hand in devising an effective anti-ballistic missile system, and in Japan's case, trigger Japan's Self Defense Forces to adopt more proactive defense measures.

Overall, what Lee successfully explains in his book is that while Asia has had unparalleled economic success in the 20th century, it likewise has its share of entrenched security dilemmas. Instead of a black and white portrayal of Asia rising up as an unstoppable force in the 20th century with a helpless West observing from the sidelines, Lee explains that whether

3 Donald Freeman, *The Straits of Malacca* (Toronto: McGill-Queen University Press, 2003), 37.

4 Lee, *Fault Lines in a Rising Asia*, 53.

Asia manages to improve or overcome traditional geopolitical problems and potential new zones of strategic competition in the 21st century will have more of an impact on the shaping of the regional order. Until such problems are resolved, Asia's rise may persist, but will not be synonymous with an Asian-centric world order. Lee concludes that even if the current century can be labelled an "Asian Century," it is impossible to label the region itself as a place where political cohesion or collective action will be easy to make. As mentioned in the book, "Asia is much too broad, diverse, and complex to conveniently include it under one huge geographic roof."⁵ A very enjoyable read for an avid follower of either international politics or security studies, *Fault Lines in a Rising Asia*, instead of providing an alternate explanation to the rise of Asia, seeks to clarify many of the misconceptions that laymen and scholars alike may have regarding the topic. **Y**

5 Lee, *Fault Lines in a Rising Asia*, 78.