

The End of the Asian Century, By Michael Auslin

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IN THE PAST TWO DECADES, Asia has seen unprecedented economic growth and a rapid expansion of the middle class. For this reason, policy experts as well as U.S. intelligence analysts have suggested that parts of Asia will supplant the United States as the preeminent global power in the coming decades, likely as soon as 2030.¹ Amidst such optimism, there is far less discussion about the continent's structural weaknesses, which may prevent the region from fulfilling this potential. In his book *The End of the Asian Century*,² Michael Auslin attempts to fill this analytical gap by mapping a series of risks in Asia, namely those that focus on stagnant economic reform, unsustainable demographics, and political unrest. He frames these and other challenges as potential precursors to armed conflict in the broader Indo-Pacific region. While the book does well to demonstrate a variety of threats to Asia's upward trajectory, Auslin fails to specify ways to address these obstacles. As he might say, the dangers facing Asia are so complex and longstanding that planning for them requires a separate volume of work.

China's regional economic and political influence is central to understanding why Asia's future remains precarious. Auslin insists that overreliance on China's economy breeds danger by obscuring the

underperformance of other players in the region. Furthermore, he warns that closer economic and military dependence on China makes countries beholden to a non-democratic power. China focuses on military security and the development of export markets, often relegating standards of human rights and accountability. Such a precedent tends to have harmful regional spillovers in other non-democratic, authoritarian countries. China's past relations with Burma's military regime and its ties to North Korea embody this troubling tendency.³ Auslin is distinctly nonpredictive and he does not necessarily envision Chinese dominance of Asia, but he also says that economic prosperity does not preclude conflict or prevent China from being a disruptive force.

Auslin also asserts that democratization can play a crucial role in securing sustainable peace in the region. The notion that two democracies are unlikely to engage in violent conflict, which is briefly touched upon in the book, means that the U.S. commitment to free elections and transparent governance should remain.⁴ The United States should remain vigilant during democratic transitions and should generally serve as an arbiter in geopolitical disputes, like the island building in the South China

Sea. Democracies like the Philippines and Indonesia feel threatened by Chinese expansion and suffer from a range of domestic challenges to stability.⁵ Religious tensions heavily influenced a recent Indonesian gubernatorial race, and the election of Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Philippines has greatly weakened democratic institutions.^{6,7} Continued American support for democratic principles will be an essential facet of continued Indo-Pacific security.

According to Auslin, Asian countries can broadly be categorized into three tiers: countries that are growing economically with a desire for greater global power, countries with declining populations, and countries with transitioning economies that still struggle with state security.

One of the biggest challenges for the United States is developing an all-inclusive Asian policy in the face of Asia's economic, political, and cultural diversity. According to Auslin, Asian countries can broadly be categorized into three tiers: countries that are growing economically with a desire for greater global power, countries with declining populations, and countries with transitioning economies that still struggle with state security. President Barack

Obama's "pivot" to Asia was the most recent, discernable U.S. policy toward the region. Its basis was containing China's economic and military rise with trade and security agreements, a goal it has largely failed to accomplish. Such a broad "pivot" to Asia, without more aggregated policy, obscures that the United States must engage very differently with each country tier. The real challenge is for the United States to balance these targeted policies in the face of conflicting interests. For example, the U.S. must find a way to constructively work with China, a country in the first category, while guarding second- and third-category nations such as Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines against Chinese overreach.

As Auslin's book is largely confined to describing an array of challenges, it is up to policymakers to decide how best to approach second- and third-category countries. Second-category countries, namely South Korea and Japan, are higher income but are contending with economic stagnation and demographic decline.⁸ As two of the strongest Asian democracies, the United States must continue to engage with both nations on trade and security, helping these nations continue to thrive as liberal democracies. This is especially necessary if President Donald Trump reduces U.S. assistance for democracy promotion.⁹ If the United States ceases to engage in active democracy promotion abroad, it can still support democratic allies to serve as examples for the Indo-Pacific region.

Low-income category-three countries might be the biggest challenge for U.S. engagement. Most of the countries are newly independent with shorter and more

unfamiliar relationships. As a result, the U.S. has less of a concrete policy history that can serve as a useful reference point. For the U.S., the best course of action is to continue to bring these nations, which are largely centered in Southeast Asia, into inclusive economic networks. Auslin acknowledges the weakness of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but this does not mean that efforts to unify smaller Asian nations are overly ambitious. Despite obstacles, entities like the European Union demonstrate how economic cohesion can lead to greater political unity and broader regional stability.

Notably, shadows of the threats described by Auslin are manifesting today. North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has become far more aggressive than his father, South Korea's democracy is threatened by business corruption seeping into the political world, the underground and "black money" economy of India has impacted its national policy planning, and China is contending with an economic slowdown and the continued concentration of political power.¹⁰ More concerning is that the United States seems to be retreating from some of its long-lasting global commitments. Asian countries of all tiers need to help facilitate regional development, but the United States must continue to serve as an influential partner.

Auslin's explanation of Asian threats is thorough. He gives due attention to both smaller countries that have experienced radical political transitions, like Thailand and Myanmar, as well as larger, more established Asian powers like China, India, and Japan. If the goal of the book was to caution policymakers overly optimistic about Asia's continued rise, he succeeds. However, policymakers within and outside of Asia need and will continue to seek concrete steps that can be taken to manage the many threats present in Asia. In so far as the book will spur policymakers into action, it is far closer to a starting point than an end point.

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- 9 Bryant Harris, Robbie Gramer, and Emily Tamkin, “The End of Foreign Aid as We Know It,” *Foreign Policy*, April 24, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/24/u-s-agency-for-international-development-foreign-aid-state-department-trump-slash-foreign-funding/>.
- 10 Ben Blanchard and Benjamin Kang Lim, “Exclusive: Xi set to consolidate power in China by curbing Communist Youth League,” Reuters, September 30, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-politics-league-exclusive-idUSKCN1200OL>