The End of the Asian Century
War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World's Most Dynamic Region

By Michael R. Auslin
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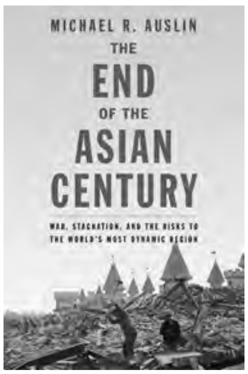
Reviewed by Zhiqun Zhu



Highly acclaimed, well-conceived, and clearly written, Michael R. Auslin's new book is a valuable addition to the discussion and debate about the future of Asia, the world's most dynamic and consequential region in the twenty-first century. The book contains seven chapters. Chapter 1 maps out five discrete yet interrelated risk areas in Asia that may spell the end of the so-called "Asian century": unfinished political revolutions, failed economic reforms, demographic pressure, lack of regional unity, and the threat of war. The ensuing five chapters address each of these risks, and the final chapter summarizes the author's analysis and offers some policy suggestions on how to manage such risks. The book provides a fresh and somber look at some of the major problems and hot spots in the Asia-Pacific region. With so many existing, emerging, and latent risks, Asia obviously faces some of the toughest challenges, and the future may look gloomy.

On a closer look, however, one wonders which of these five risk areas are new or unique to Asia. Haven't Asian countries had such problems for a while? That they continue to grow while attempting to solve these problems is quite telling of their resilience, which the author seems to have underestimated. The title of the book is therefore a little sensational. What does the "end of the Asian century" mean? Perhaps it is premature to declare the Asian century is coming to an end. For many countries and people in the region, the Asian century is just unfolding or has not even started yet.

In diagnosing problems facing Southeast Asian countries such as Việt Nam and Indonesia, Auslin points out that poor infrastructure has hampered development. This is certainly true, but there also are the opportunities for these countries as they invest more in infrastructure. For countries at the lower rungs of the growth ladder, development is their priority and infrastructure is improving.

Auslin notes the ineffectiveness of Abenomics in Japan and Modi's reforms in India, which is true in general, but Japan's economy has been growing steadily in recent years, albeit slowly, hovering around 1 percent annually. Its unemployment rate, which reached an all-time high of 5.5 percent in 2002, has continued to drop since 2010 and remained at the twenty-three-year low of 2.8 percent as of August 2017.[1] Despite structural constraints facing Modi, India's economy grows faster than China's now. Auslin's prescriptions for India such as "rationalize public policy, reduce regulation, reduce poverty and corruption, and place the economy on a solid footing" (52) all sound fine, but aren't they what India has been doing? He singled out "failed economic reforms" and "fear" of globalization (53) as the common problems of Asian countries, which are very broad and vague, and can be said about any country with economic challenges.

Likewise, many of the problems he detects in China, such as the gross domestic product (GDP) slowdown, poor state-owned enterprise (SOE) performances, huge macro and local debts, property bubbles, and income disparities that have bothered China for a while have been addressed by the Chinese government. Few believe that these longstanding problems will cripple China's economy anytime soon, especially when the Chinese government is actively dealing with such issues. He forgets to mention that China is undergoing a transformation and is moving away from pure GDP growth to developing a green and innovative economy. Indeed, in some aspects of the new economy, China is apparently charging ahead of its competitors in areas such as infrastructure, artificial intelligence (AI), and e-commerce. With widespread e-pay services, for example, China is quickly becoming a cashless society. Problems that these countries face such as income disparity in India, slow progress in structural reforms in Japan, *chaebŏl* reforms in South Korea, and corruption in Southeast Asia are nothing new, either.

The author's discussion of how competition has become tougher for Western businesses in China is very interesting. He quotes a Midwesterner from the US who has been working in China for over two decades as saying that when a Chinese company is worried about foreign competition, "They send goons to your door . . . They play by Chinese rules" (30). This is obviously an exaggeration or mischaracterization of how businesses operate in China. It is true that foreign businesses face stiff competition and theft of intellectual property rights in China, but it is unclear how this is related to the author's thesis that the Asian century is coming to an end.

According to the author, the immediate cause of rising insecurity in Asia is that China has grown stronger and become more assertive, even coercive (9). This is highly debatable, especially from the Chinese perspective. One can argue that Chinese foreign policy has been reactive rather than aggressive. For example, it was Japan's September 2012 nationalization of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands that triggered China's strong response, which led to rising tensions in the East China Sea. It can also be argued that China's reclamation activities in the South China Sea, which raised regional security concerns, was in response to earlier reclamations by other disputants such as the Philippines and Việt Nam. In a typical exercise of double standards, when these smaller powers reclaimed land and occupied the disputed islands, the international community largely remained silent. From China's perspective, the US policy of "pivot" or "rebalance" toward Asia under President Barack Obama intensified great power rivalry in Asia and contributed to tensions in the region.

Granted, Asia has several potentially explosive hot spots in security, but the Asia-Pacific region has largely been peaceful in the past four decades. Citing a July 2014 Pew poll on the potential of war between China and its neighbors, with 93 percent of Filipinos and 85 percent of Japanese predicting armed conflict, Auslin highlights the danger of war in Asia (191). This Pew poll was conducted during the peak of tensions in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Today, the tensions in both areas have considerably receded, though disputes remain. A poll today will likely show a significant drop of those who think war is looming between China and its neighbors. Surprisingly, a real security threat posed by North Korea's nuclear program gets scant attention in the book. Yes, the danger of war in Asia should not be shrugged off, but one should also have confidence in diplomacy. The August 2017 peaceful resolution of a ten-week India–China border standoff is a recent example of how big powers can manage disputes diplomatically.

Demographic challenges are serious in the region, as the author correctly points out. Declining fertility and care for the aging population are real problems facing many of these countries. But have they reached a tipping point? Will they lead to failures of these countries? In terms of regional political unity, yes, compared to the European Union, perhaps Asia still has a long way to go toward regional integration. But multilateralism has taken a deep root in Asia, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) playing a leadership role. In fact, the Brexit type of internal strife is not found among ASEAN members. That Asian countries do not always speak with one voice does not mean that they do not share the common interest of promoting peace and development.

In the final chapter, Auslin offers some helpful policy suggestions. For example, even with budget cuts, the US should remain committed to Asia's defense and should form a set of "concentric triangles" in Asia (196), linking democratic allies and friends to better address challenges from China and Russia. The outer triangle links Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia; the inner one connects Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. Reducing Asia's security risks can happen only if these two triangles are brought together (199). This sounds reasonable but remains impractical given the various interests of these countries, and he is less convincing when he essentially argues that we can just ignore security concerns from China and North Korea and that they will have no choice but to adapt to reality (200–201).

Auslin's long-term, idealistic suggestion is to encourage democracy and liberalization in Asia. While he is right in asserting that "American-style democracy . . . still remains an inspiration for those dreaming of liberalization" and "creating an Asian future more firmly tied to liberal principles and rules is the best hope for a world in which every nation benefits" (11), he falls short of explaining why democracy has encountered challenges in Asia and elsewhere, and why, in particular, democratization in China remains so trying. He does suggest that the US should do more to "engage with ordinary Chinese" and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (219), but it is unclear whether ordinary Chinese will necessarily become more prodemocracy through such engagement and how ordinary Chinese can help promote democratic reforms in China, given that the middle class, the presumed leader of democratization, is largely reluctant to push for changes.

While much of the existing literature on Asia's future might be misleadingly too rosy, as Auslin suggests, his portrayal of Asia and his risk analysis of its future might be unnecessarily too pessimistic. Auslin succeeds in highlighting major development issues facing many Asian countries, which will be very helpful as these countries move to the next stage of modernization. But most of the problems are arguably growing pains and are unlikely to fundamentally change the dynamic development of the region. For most people in Asia, it is not an issue whether or when the Asian century will come to an end; rather, it is how to leverage globalization and promote more equitable, inclusive, stable, and sustainable development.

For scholars and policymakers who have sufficient background knowledge about the Asia-Pacific, this book is a fantastic work that will help them have a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the region, with all the real and potential problems awaiting. However, the book is not suitable as an introductory text for high school students, college undergraduates, or the general public who may need to read and benefit from a more rudimentary but more balanced survey of the region—both its achievements and challenges. Therefore, I do not recommend it as a backgrounder for high school teachers of history, government, and AP World Politics or lower-level undergraduate students at colleges, despite its scholarly and policy merits.

Predicting the future is a risky business. The so-called Asian century may or may not continue in the decades ahead, and one does not need to agree with Auslin in his judgment and analysis, but he lucidly highlights some key problems and challenges in Asia and offers a levelheaded look at this dynamic and potentially dangerous region. In this sense, Auslin's book is significant and contributes to the lively debate about the future of Asia and US-Asia relations. ■

NOTES

1. "Japan Unemployment Rate: 1953–2017," *Trading Economics*, accessed September 7, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/yceu7g2u.

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Japanese Girl at the Siege of Changchun

How I Survived China's Wartime Atrocity

By Homare Endo

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Reviewed by Anne Prescott

Manchuria, Changchun, Yangji, Tianjin. Most people will recognize that these are places in China; many could place them in or near the northeast of the country. Beyond that? The Japanese took over Manchuria and created a puppet state they named Manchukuo, some bad things happened at Changchun, Yangji is close to the Korean peninsula, and Tianjin was a treaty port. That is about all that some of us know, and perhaps a few more of us are familiar with some of the historical details of these places. But for many, these names are just a part of the blur of mid-twentieh-century history. However, for Homare Endo, these are critical sites in her personal narrative and have further meaning as keys to understanding domestic Chinese history and greater global issues that continue to resonate today.

Japanese Girl at the Siege of Changchun is Endo's recollections of her childhood experiences in China in the above-named locations. Born in China in 1941, her narrative weaves together the strands of her life between 1945 and 1953 (with a brief look back to 1944) in China in a way that few others do. With the benefit of adult insight into the significance of the events she experienced, her story is an engrossing, sobering, and thoughtful examination of many historical events that are not well-known.

The story begins with a stable family living a relatively affluent life in Changchun. Endo's father was a successful businessman who held the patents for and manufactured Giftol, a medicine that was widely used in China to combat narcotic addiction. But over the span of a few short years, the family went from a comfortable life where they enjoyed good relations with both the Chinese and Korean residents of Changchun to great