

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia-Pacific Since 1783.* By Michael J. Green. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. Hardcover: 725pp.**

Michael Green's deeply-researched and finely-written history of US strategic policy in Asia, *By More Than Providence*, could not be timelier. As the Trump administration's international policy positions swing unpredictably, apparently untethered from long traditions of American statecraft, policy thinkers on both sides of the Pacific need more than ever to understand the nature of those traditions and the interests that have driven them.

If a more conventional Republican candidate than Donald Trump had won the November 2016 US presidential election, Michael Green would almost certainly now be occupying a senior national security position in Washington. Instead, he continues to contribute to the policy debate from Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies and Georgetown University.

This history is an essential starting point for that debate. Beginning with the War of Independence and the first trading voyages carrying ginseng from New England to China — well before the United States stretched across the continent — Green records the “threats, commerce, and capacity [that] all went into the soup that became the American strategy for expansion into the Pacific” (p. 76).

Over more than two centuries, he notes, five tensions “reappear with striking predictability” (p. 6) in America's strategic approach towards Asia: Europe versus Asia; continental (China) versus maritime (Japan); the place at which the forward defence line should be established; self-determination versus universal values; and protectionism versus free trade. The national objective, America's

key leaders agreed, was to ensure that “the Pacific Ocean remains a conduit for American ideas and goods to flow westward, and not for threats to flow eastward towards the homeland” (p. 5).

Trade is one of the central elements in Green’s story, as the United States worked to prise China and its economic opportunities from the grasp of European imperialist powers. The latter part of the nineteenth century plays out as a sort of American Belt and Road initiative, as the United States extends its power westwards with the purchase of Alaska in 1867 and the annexation of Hawaii in 1898.

By the beginning of the twentieth century especially during the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt, all the elements of a recognizable American strategy towards Asia had come together. Its components included “a strong navy, a forward presence in the Western Pacific through insular acquisitions, expanded American influence through trade with and support for well-governed independent Asian states, and participation in European-style power politics” (p. 104).

This approach reflected the views of the thinker Green most admires, and who influences his own approach to the region, the nineteenth century naval officer, historian and strategist of sea power, Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mahan, Green writes, provided “the first comprehensive grand strategic concept for the United States and the Pacific — harnessing diplomatic, ideational, military, and economic tools in pursuit of national interests” (p. 80). These included “coercive tools when necessary and possible” (p. 104).

In the course of the past century, America saw off threats from an expansionist Japan and Soviet communism. It established a strong system of alliances, and supported and underpinned the open global trading system that made possible the Asian economic miracle.

It was never easy, and the book is a sobering reminder of the intractable difficulty of issues like the North Korean nuclear challenge. Pyongyang “cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear bomb”, declared President Bill Clinton in November 1993 after Pyongyang withdrew from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (p. 466).

In general, Southeast Asia figures less in the story than the central geopolitics of Northeast Asia. Countries like the Philippines and Vietnam appear more as arenas in which grand strategy takes place than as actors in the process. There is another story here but, understandably, it is not the one with which Green is concerned.

The tone of the book changes from the period the author was working in a senior position in the administration of President George W. Bush and, as he puts it, the “historian ... becomes the inside chronicler” (p. 483). Washington debates under Bush and Obama play out more as memoir than history and will require greater distance before their implications and outcomes can be clearly assessed.

Green’s conclusion, cautious and persuasive, is that US grand strategy has been “episodic and inefficient, but in the aggregate it has been effective” (p. 541).

Now, however, the long-standing Mahanian aim of preventing the rise of “any rival hegemonic power from within continental Asia” (p. 81) is being challenged more comprehensively than ever before. Using economic, military and foreign policy tools, China under President Xi Jinping presents America with a peer competitor in the region greater than it has ever known. In Green’s words, “the margin for error in American statecraft toward Asia is narrowing” (p. 428). To respond effectively, its leaders will need to master a “strategic concept at least as complex as three-dimensional chess” (p. 543).

It is hard to see signs of such mastery at present. President Trump’s protectionist trade instincts, his mixed messages on alliances and loose commitment to some of the core values of the liberal order, challenge the long American strategy Green has charted so effectively in his book. But when the United States recovers its political equilibrium and its policymakers begin to plan a new way forward, they, and their regional counterparts, will find no better place to begin the task than Green’s illuminating history.

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ALLAN GYNGELL is an Honorary Professor at the Australian National University, Canberra. Postal address: JG Crawford Building, 132 Lennox Crossing, Acton, ACT, 0200, Australia; email: [allan.gyngell@anu.edu.au](mailto:allan.gyngell@anu.edu.au).