FINANCIAL TIMES
6 December 2018

China, America and the road to a new world order

As Pax Americana declines, are we headed for a Sino-centric future — or the absence of any global order at all?

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"A whole new world," the street urchin Aladdin promises Princess Jasmine in a song from the 1992 hit film. "A new fantastic point of view . . . A whole new world, a dazzling place I never knew." And sure enough, the world that is ultimately revealed conforms to a comforting Disney narrative that upholds the US soft power tropes of freedom and social mobility. Love triumphs, the urchin marries the princess and a repressive, authoritarian sultan sees the light.

Just as that Oscar-winning song was released, a whole new post-cold war world was indeed being born. The fall of the Soviet Union appeared to show that authoritarian powers perish through stultifying oppression and that animal spirits must be free to be productive. The US world view, underpinned by liberal democracy and open markets, seemed unassailable.

It did not last. The US-led unipolar world has stumbled and miscarried, helping to foster a mini-boom in books that seek to identify a new order emerging from a thicket of questions.

Does the rise of China — which used authoritarianism as a spur to mobilise productive forces — presage a new illiberal world order? Does the undeniable eastward shift of economic dynamism mean that Asia is set to become the centre of the world? Will the "Belt and Road Initiative", a grand Chinese-powered initiative to finance and build infrastructure in more than 80 countries, end up by banishing the ideals of the European Enlightenment and replacing them with the rituals of tianxia, an atavistic Sino-centric new world order?

These are crucial inquiries. Each of the three authors reviewed here — **Peter Frankopan**, professor of global history at Oxford university; **Parag Khanna**, a Singapore-based academic and writer; and **Bruno Maçães**, a former Portuguese government minister — brings a different perspective and, for the most part, reaches different conclusions.

Frankopan's book is a sibling to his widely acclaimed *The Silk Roads*, from 2015, a history of the ancient trading routes that once linked China to the world. The new volume, *The New Silk Roads*, swaps history for a pacy, bang-up-to-date exploration of how China's commercial and political heft is changing the way the world works. It is at its most charming when the author traces the reverberations of the Middle Kingdom's gravitational pull.

So strong is the thirst for French wine, for instance, that several venerable chateaus have changed their names to appeal to Chinese drinkers. Château Senilhac in Medoc has been renamed Château Antilope Tibetaine (Tibetan Antelope), Château La Tour Saint-Pierre has become Château Lapin d'Or (Golden Rabbit), while Château Clos Bel-Air is now Château Grande Antilope (Big Antelope). Similarly, demand for air travel has so far exceeded the supply of pilots that a regional Chinese airline, Xiamen Air, has been offering salaries of $400,000 or more for those with the required qualifications.

Commercial dynamism propels China's rise and its projection of influence overseas. Much of this clout is set to come through the financing and building of about $1tn in infrastructure projects in so-called "Belt and Road" countries, many of which cluster along the ancient Silk Roads. But China's growing power need not alienate it from the west, Frankopan argues. "The success of one part of the world is connected to that of the other — rather than coming at its expense," he writes. "The sun rising in the east does not mean that it is setting in the west."

In a hopeful world, this might be true. But the west is already splintered by internal angst. The rise of a new superpower that rejects electoral democracy, distrusts the rule of law, dismisses western definitions of human rights, sees the US as a military rival and is led by a single authoritarian party is bound to rattle nerves in Washington and in the capitals of its allies.

As an example of basic incompatibility, none is more stark than the incarceration of about 1m people from China's Muslim minorities in the north-western region of Xinjiang. The reader is left to shudder at the values that any future Sino-centric world order might comprise. "These are difficult and dangerous times," Frankopan writes. On the one hand, the US is trying to shape the world to its own interests, using the stick rather than the carrot. On the other, China is raising fears that it may be intent on building an empire "by design or by default".

But forecasts of a Sino-centric order get short shrift in *The Future is Asian.* In an authoritative book to be published in the new year, and which may well become a standard reference, Parag Khanna casts the net wider to deliver a compelling argument that Asia — rather than merely China — is the current and future lodestar for the global economy. "The most consequential misunderstanding permeating western thought about Asia is being overly China-centric," Khanna writes.

Of Asia's nearly 5bn people, 3.5bn are not Chinese. China's huge debts, rapidly ageing population and the crowding out of foreign competition from its domestic market is pulling global attention toward other Asian sub-regions, such as South Asia and south-east Asia. The whole Asia region — which Khanna defines as stretching from the Arabian Peninsula and Turkey in the west to Japan and New Zealand in the east, and from Russia in the north to Australia in the south — is already a behemoth.

It accounts for about 50 per cent of global gross domestic product and two-thirds of its economic growth. But the most arresting statistic in the 433-page tome is this: of an estimated "$30tn in global middle-class consumption growth between 2015 and 2030, only $1tn is expected to come from today's western economies".

As this vast undertow of spending power emerges, it will tilt the world. In spite of some “pockets of haughty ignorance centred around London and Washington”, the west appears certain to play a vastly diminished role in global affairs. A wave of Asianisation is set to follow the 20th century’s Americanisation and 19th century’s Europeanisation of the world, argues Khanna.

But what will Asianisation mean? This question is left largely unexplored until the last chapter, perhaps because it is remarkably elusive. Indians no more travel the world identifying as “Asian” than do Chinese, Japanese, Koreans or others from the region. Although regional institutions do exist and are proliferating, a sense of community is far less developed than, for example, in Europe. Khanna does not overstretch his forecasts, wisely restricting himself to a loosely imagined “fusion of civilisations”.

In *Belt and Road*, Bruno Maçães also sees the reach and influence of the west diminishing over the next 30 years — a prospect that he first raised in an earlier book on the rise of Eurasia. One candidate to fill the space vacated will be tianxia, in essence a throwback to the Ming dynasty, when China saw itself as residing at the centre of global power and virtue. Virtues, rather than legal ties, would be invoked; states would have relations of dependence, generosity, gratitude, respect and retribution. Ritual would reaffirm fealty.

“Tianxia will break with the Western model by moving decisively away from Enlightenment ideals of transparency and public knowledge,” Maçães writes. “Even in its formative stage the Belt and Road Initiative is an exercise in the opacity of power. There is an exoteric doctrine of the initiative and then an esoteric practice where deals are agreed upon, often with no written evidence,” he adds.

To a western mind, such a system is the antithesis of governance. Perhaps it is no wonder that so many infrastructure projects along the Belt and Road have erupted into controversy as poor countries run up unsustainable debts to build ports, bridges and railways that are barely used.

Verbal deals struck by politicians in secret are open to abuse. Tianxia may have suited the Ming dynasty but it seems much less exportable in the modern era. Nevertheless, many countries along the Belt and Road remain eager for infrastructure and investment, which China is able to supply more cheaply and more quickly than other sources.

The human urge is to find order to navigate through complexity. As Pax Americana declines, we ask, “What’s next?” But it is possible that the successor to the global system of governance we have known since the second world war is not another order but the absence of one. It is possible that the world, squeezed between the incompatible visions of a retreating US and a resurgent China, is already hurtling toward chaos.

Unlike the Aladdin fairy tale, there will be no “whole new world” but a splintered planet.

In one of the most perceptive passages in his book, Frankopan quotes an influential Chinese academic, Yan Xuetong. “We are moving away from a state in which international norms are led by western liberalism to a state where international norms are no longer respected.” Without norms of behaviour, countries may find that their only option is to cleave close to those with power — and that will ultimately mean choosing between the US and China.

The New Silk Roads: The Present and Future of the World, by Peter Frankopan, Bloomsbury, RRP£14.99, 336 pages

The Future is Asian: Global Order in the Twenty-First Century, by Parag Khanna, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, RRP£20/Simon & Schuster, RRP$29.95, 448 pages

Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order, by Bruno Maçães, Hurst, RRP£20, 224 pages

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