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Philip S. Golub's stated purpose in writing this book is to chronicle “the end of a long sequence of world history in which power and wealth were durably concentrated in the hands of a few Northern societies and states, and the beginning of a new sequence in which the world will revolve around plural if interdependent centers of gravity” (pp. 12-13). Golub begins by reviewing theories of recurrent patterns of hegemonic ascent, supremacy, decline, and succession that reflect the cyclical rhythms of capitalist expansion. Change, we are told, derives from general crises, with one hegemony leading to another and the center of world capitalism shifting as one relatively stable historical configuration tends toward disintegration and another takes its place. In this worldview, China's reemergence is the latest in the series of restructurings and recenterings since the modern world system emerged in the sixteenth century. Golub is sympathetic to dependency theories, though observing that they suffer from broad-brush treatment because they fail to incorporate historical and institutional factors and do not explain how some parts of the former South were able to break out of the subordinate status in which developed countries had placed them. Such theories, he points out, tend to assume that the state is either in retreat or actually vanishing, being submerged by global mechanisms outside its control. States become the agents of a new transnational order of domination and resistance, as epitomized in Karl Marx’s description of the state as the executive committee of the capitalist class.

This, says the author, has obscured the nexus between capitalist development and the state. Looking back over the evolution of modern capitalism, as opposed to the merchant capitalism of the earlier era, Golub finds that the relative autonomy of capital and the state has varied from moment to moment. At times, the state has relaxed control, allowing capital to roam the world freely, while at others it has reclaimed control. The respective autonomy of state and capital varies in accordance with historical flux and sociopolitical circumstances at both domestic and
international levels. The world capitalist economy allows room for associated capitalist development. States can, therefore, create a basis from which to bargain with multinational capitalists. The author explores how successful individuals were able to rise in the first place, and then he shifts the balance, focusing on state- and nation-building in East Asia during various phases of globalization. His analysis first considers the efforts to build modern states in China and Japan during the period of imperial globalization of the nineteenth century, next moving to an examination of the constitution or re-constitution of capitalist and communist authoritarian developmental states in the aftermath of World War II, and finally, China’s turn toward state capitalism in the 1980s.

The chapters of the book follow this sequence. After the introductory chapter, a second chapter addresses the passage from the plural and polycentric early modern world system to the hierarchical late modern Atlantic-centered system. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the internal and external factors in the re-creation of Japan and creation of South Korea, Taiwan, and parts of Southeast Asia, as capitalist developmental states.

In attempting such a sweeping analysis, authors are bound to oversimplify and even distort the historical record in ways that will upset specialists. The Qing dynasty appears less “prey” to Western capitalists than victim of the paucity of its own efforts to respond to their challenge. In perhaps the most infamous instance, the Empress Dowager Cixi squandered money meant for naval modernization on a marble pleasure boat for herself, even as Chinese warships were sunk for lack of ammunition. Contrary to Golub’s claim, the Qing did not engage in a Meiji-styled self-strengthening movement. China’s Tongzhi Restoration began in 1861; Japan’s Meiji Restoration not until seven years later. China’s abject failure alongside the stunning success of its smaller neighbor had much to do with the Chinese attitude of lofty superiority to all outsiders: as a consequence, styling themselves on the Japanese would have been unthinkable. Certain Japanese tried to help the Qing government based on alleged claims of same culture same race, but found themselves rebuffed. In the words of one observer, “the Chinese would be damned if they would take advice from the dwarf pirates [a common term of opprobrium for the Japanese, still heard at sports events and during other times of confrontation]. And damned they were.”[1] The Chinese restoration genuinely aimed at restoring a Confucian past, which since that tradition opposed such crucial components of Western strength as science, entrepreneurship, and the migration of labor, could not effectively counter foreign strength. By contrast, the Meiji reforms included sending a delegation to several of these countries to ascertain their sources of power and adapt them to the Japanese context. Hence it is often described as carrying out a revolution under the cloak of a restoration.

Another comment that will cause specialists to bridle is that the Meiji leaders “proved catastrophically successful in their state and nation-building efforts ... leading ultimately to disastrous military defeat in 1945” (p. 22). The modernization effort did not inherently segue into ultranationalism, but was goaded in that direction by the West, which first insisted on trading with Japan, then excluded its goods from their markets and even banned Japanese immigration into their countries. Such actions encouraged ultranationalism and the rise of extremist military leaders who vowed to avenge the very real slights the West had visited on them. Ironically, this might better fit Golub’s hypothesis on Western powers intentionally confining all others to a subservient position.

Golub’s analysis of the next phase of Asia’s reemergence is characterized by profound distrust of US motives. American “hegemonic ambitions,” readers are informed, did not mesh with political liberalism, economic liberalism, and
democratic idealism. Hence Washington supported conservatives in Japan and authoritarian leaders in Taiwan and South Korea. True enough, but such an analysis ignores the dearth of other options available at the time. The United States had just fought a bloody and draining war against even nastier regimes in Germany, Italy, and Japan, and the Soviet government, its ally of convenience during the war, had vowed to impose a regime that was at least as distasteful on the rest of the world. Under such circumstances, would the peoples of Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea have been better off under the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), Mao Zedong, and Kim Il-sung, respectively? The JCP, incidentally, was being subsidized by China and the USSR and, through its liaisons with left-wing Japanese labor unions, inciting strikes that threatened to derail Japan's economic recovery, which was then dependent on large cash infusions from US taxpayers that Washington hoped to reduce.

The evolution of democracy in all these countries contrasts sharply with the experience of China under Mao and North Korea under the Kim dynasty. Assuredly Chiang Kai-shek had major faults, but the Taiwanese were spared the ravages of the anti-rightist campaign, the mass starvation of the Great Leap Forward, and the cruel persecutions of the Cultural Revolution. Even now, China's human rights record is sadly deficient and dissidents receive harsh prison sentences. South Korean leaders were also far from perfect, but also far preferable to their counterparts in the Democratic Republic of North Korea. Currently, the latest Kim lavishly finances the research and testing of weapons of mass destruction while his citizens endure slow starvation and lack basic necessities.

Golub’s analysis seems to ignore these factors. Other misleading statements occur. Taiwanese historians would disagree that Taiwan officials modeled the nation’s economy on that of the Meiji state, since Taiwan's rise into the ranks of industrialized states was largely due to small, family-owned businesses: there is no equivalent of Japan's zaibatsu, renamed keiretsu postwar, or of South Korea's chaebol. Many of these morphed into giant businesses, but there was no counterpart of Japan Incorporated. Moreover, quite a few were founded by Taiwanese—i.e., those who were native to the island before Chiang Kai-shek and his followers fled there—and actually antithetical to his Kuomintang (KMT) rather than actively supporting it. For instance, Evergreen, one of the world's largest shipping companies and owner of Eva Airlines, was a major contributor to the opposition party. KMT monopolies were not the functional counterparts of zaibatsu/keiretsu, because they were party-owned and unlike Japan's giant corporations, they were often money losers that had to be funded by state subsidies.

In his analysis of the current phase, Golub gives China’s impressive economic gains the credit they deserve, though according short shrift to the factors that, while bringing about this economic miracle, may have simultaneously created within itself the seeds that will bring about its own destruction. Large-scale environmental destruction, sharp increases in the distribution of income—the author does mention these, but uses suspect figures that minimize the disparities Chinese economists themselves point to—massive corruption, and scant concern for either product safety or workplace protection for those who produce the goods may ultimately bring an end to President Xi Jinping’s “Chinese dream” of wealth and power.[2] Since the Communist Party has all but abandoned concern with the workers and peasants who were the raison d’être for its founding, plus its ongoing suppression of human rights, one must ask who are to be the beneficiaries of this wealth and power.

Golub offhandedly refers to the brutal suppression of demonstrations at Tiananmen and a hundred other Chinese cities in 1989 as “the Tiananmen events” (p. 110). He seems relatively
unconcerned with the implications of the nearly unbroken string of double-digit increases in the Chinese military budget since 1989. Statements like "China's growing military capabilities have nonetheless generated concerns in Washington" (p. 139) give the impression that it is only a Washington bent on perpetuating its hegemony, and not the governments of other states—among whom one might mention Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan—that have become worried. In the face of Chinese encroachment on its waters, Japanese debates about whether to amend constitutional provisions against the use of force are regarded as tantamount to a country "no longer bound by post-1945 self-restraint on the expression of national identity and ambition" (p. 154).

On a more general level, one must ask whether, given the disparity in cultures, types of government, and income levels, there is, or was, an Asia to emerge, or reemerge. If it is China that has emerged—a fair point—perhaps the book should be differently titled. While the People's Republic of China (PRC) does hold a commanding position in the region, Australia and New Zealand remain closer to the Atlantic alliance with Great Britain and the United States, and the United States retains an important trading relationship with most countries in the region as well as security partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The pivot to Asia policy advanced by Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton indicates their resistance to allowing China to undermine American primacy in the area.

Geographic position does not create a center of gravity. Nor do other areas of the world appear to be creating forces to counter the decline of American hegemony that Golub anticipates. A pluralistic world does not seem to be evolving. Europe is being overwhelmed by the arrival of millions of refugees from the troubled Middle East, with its always-fragile internal unity torn apart by how to deal with them. Latin America remains, as it has ever been, a continent of great but unfulfilled promise; Africa is beset with dictatorships that seem intent on amassing their respective countries' wealth for themselves not their citizens. Golub is on solid ground in asserting that blocs, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, have experienced difficulties in setting policy agendas and frameworks reflecting their preferences but is less sure-footed in setting forth alternatives.

The crucial question Golub poses is how the transition out of the Western-centered structure of international relations to a pluralistic and decentralized system could be managed. Despite Golub's belief that the evolution of this system is inevitable, it will need some guidance. Enter China as the savior. Golub points to the founding of the BRICS bank in Shanghai in March 2013 and China's establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in October 2014. Unmentioned but also relevant is Beijing's spearheading a ten-nation Central Asian development program. All are headquartered in China, which has put up the bulk of their capital as well. Where this will end remains uncertain: all of the BRICs are experiencing problems and, while the PRC's economy continues to grow at an impressive rate, it has been slowing to what its president terms a "new normal" of indeterminate size. Since much of recent growth has been achieved through substantial injections of credit, economists both inside and outside China have warned that it is unsustainable and, if not rectified through a major and painful restructuring process, could lead to economic collapse. The net result is that these Sino-centric arrangements remain of unproved efficacy or even durability. The rate of capital flight out of China may indicate that many of its citizens are not optimistic about the future.

In sum, despite the deficiencies of the Western-inspired world order and American hegemony, the reification of Golub's pluralistic interdependent world remains elusive. That said, I wholeheartedly endorse his final phrase, that the
challenge is to create the conditions for cooperation and inclusive development in the interdependent yet fragmented world that is emerging. The future is, as always, unpredictable.

Notes


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