

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

Michael R. Auslin^{*}



Michael R. Auslin, a former history professor at Yale University, opens his book with the statement, “Since Marco Polo, the West has waited for the Asian Century”. According to Auslin, the world believes that this century has now arrived, but that Asia is a fractured region threatened by stagnation and instability.

His book is based on a quarter-century of engagement with and study of Asia, and years of travel throughout the Indo-Pacific region, including three major research trips and several shorter trips starting in 2010. Auslin interviewed dozens of politicians, military officials, academics, business leaders, media figures, and ordinary citizens during these journeys.

In this book, Auslin assesses the current situation in Asia as well as its future challenges and prospects. In doing so, he separates the book into seven sections, and provides a pragmatic overview of the region. He starts by presenting the ‘risk map’ of Asia, mapping out five discrete yet interrelated risk regions, aimed at demonstrating that, “the most promising way to reduce risk is to push for greater liberalism and a strengthened rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific” (p. 10). In the second section, Auslin focuses on Asia’s economic miracle. He posits that the region has taken over the mantle of ‘the world’s workshop’ from Western countries, and alleges that this transformation has not been driven by China alone, but by many Asian countries. His main point in this section - and in this book as a whole - is that “today the economic miracle of Asia is at risk from the failure of economic reform to deal with the costs of growth, whether in advanced countries like Japan or developing nations like India and Indonesia” (p. 14).

The third chapter of the book, the Goldilocks Dilemma, explores Asia’s demographic picture based on three case studies, each of which represents a different facet of demographic risk: Japan, which has too few people; China, which is making a transition from too many people to too few; and India, whose population is still growing. In this sense, the author approaches Asia’s demographic risk in light of both its economic and political challenges.

In the following chapter, Auslin continues to detail the risks that Asia faces. He declares that, “next to the failure of economic reform, the political challenges facing Indo-Pacific nations are perhaps the largest risk area the region faces” (p. 82). In this sense,

the author hypothesizes that economic and social pressures across Asia threaten domestic political stability, and charts the challenges to democratic and authoritarian regimes alike.

Chapter five explores the questions “why can’t we all just get along?” and “why Asia isn’t a real region like Europe, meaning, why isn’t it united?” The author’s basic response to these questions is that “the Indo-Pacific may be the world’s most economically dynamic area, but [...] it is also the most politically diverse region imaginable” (p. 122). Auslin comes to conclusion that this diversity has so far prevented the nations of Asia from uniting in the way that Europe has. In addition, he suggests that this diversity has prevented the giants – China, Japan, and India – from creating formal alliances among their neighbors. In addition, there are few close partnerships.

Chapter six focuses on the potential military conflicts in the region. Auslin points out that Asia’s security is as dynamic as its politics. This, he argues, stems from the nature of Indo-Pacific nations, and adds that they are too busy getting rich to waste time on territorial disputes and making shows of military strength. From a realist perspective, states prioritize ensuring national security in an anarchic world. However, the countries in Asia have been seeking to assure their security cooperatively. Auslin alleges that “since the 1940s, Asia, like much of the rest of the world, has been living in a historically abnormal period of relative peace, making us forget that competition and conflict are endemic to human nature” (p. 152).

In chapter seven specifically, as well as in the book as a whole, the author maps a series of risk areas in an effort to diagnose dangers that may spell the end of what many have come to call the ‘Asian Century’. Through these maps, he defines five risk areas: the failure of economic reform, demographic pressure, unfinished political revolutions, the lack of regional political community, and the threat of conflict.

Since the region’s rise or fall will have a huge impact on the rest of the World, mapping the risks in Indo-Pacific region is evidently a valuable endeavor. Although the title of the book suggests that Auslin believes the Asian century is over, he urges the countries in the region to recognize the risks they are facing. In addition,

he urges them to tackle these risks so that the twenty-first century will indeed be an Asian Century, and influence the course of world history for the benefit of all nations.

OZGUR TUFEKCI, Ph.D.

Senior Editor of Caucasus International