

Bryant University

DigitalCommons@Bryant University

---

History and Social Sciences Faculty Journal  
Articles

History and Social Sciences Faculty  
Publications and Research

---

1-2020

## Book Review: Peak Japan: the end of great ambitions

Nicole Freiner

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/histss\\_jou](https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/histss_jou)

---

normalization through high-level dialogues over a range of issues. Third, the two countries share common ground on global issues (climate change, the WTO-led global economic system, opposition to humanitarian intervention), and have a stake in bilateral trade and investment.

What, then, could undermine stability? Balancing may stabilize relations, but China is nearly five times India's size in GDP terms and may become unbearably bossy. If so, India may reach out to third parties that could exacerbate differences (Ho). Deterrence, particularly nuclear deterrence, is asymmetric: India's deterrent is not as credible (Vipin Narang). The summits, border negotiations, CBMs and official dialogues have not softened relations to the point of agreement over a range of fractious issues: the border, Pakistan's actions, the status of Tibet, India's admission to various international institutions (see Feng Liu on the institutional impasses). On global issues, for instance climate change (Liu) and humanitarian intervention, they have drifted somewhat apart. Bilateral trade and investment seem to have worked heavily in China's favour (Matthew Castle). Finally, ideas matter. Differing conceptions of international order (Miller) and mirror-image strategic cultures (Andrew Scobell) could lead to deep misunderstandings: China's classical and revisionist *tianxia* view of order could clash with India's more Westphalian, post-colonial view; and each side's self-perception—that it is defensive and the other is aggressive—could cause dangerous friction at a critical moment.

In sum, this is a stimulating volume that provides key insights into a vital relationship in contemporary international politics. It will appeal to regional specialists, but more general readers too. If it misses a trick, it is in ignoring how China and India compete in third areas—particularly in Asia—and how smaller states simultaneously exploit the rivalry and feel constrained by it. The China–US rivalry is playing out in third areas even more consequentially. Can another Paul volume help us think about how small states seek security in a polarizing environment?

*Kanti Bajpai, National University of Singapore, Singapore*

## **East Asia and Pacific**

**Peak Japan: the end of great ambitions.** By Brad Glosserman. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press. 2019. 272pp. £21.30. ISBN 978 1 62616 668 4. Available as e-book.

With the coronation of Emperor Reiwa earlier this year, it is apt to reflect on the legacy of his predecessor, Emperor Heisei, whose reign began in 1989. Brad Glosserman's new book is an assessment of Japanese society from the point of view of a US-based journalist with access to national-level politicians and opinion leaders both inside and outside Japan. Using interviews, historical research and primary sources, the book may appeal to both experts and non-experts in the field of International Relations and Asian studies broadly, and for some who specialize in certain disciplines in Japan studies.

The book begins with the claim that Japan has reached the apogee of its power in recent times under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's rule. In his introduction, Glosserman notes that while Japan has experienced a number of shocks in the financial, social, political and strategic realms, none of them have jolted the country's 'lethargy'. In the following chapters, the book explains these shocks, which include the Fukushima disaster, the global financial crisis, the clash with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the challenge to the Liberal Democratic Party and the return to conservative politics with the re-election of Abe.

Although the book makes no theoretical claims, nor are theories addressed, in many ways it is a reassertion of structural explanations (à la Chalmers Johnson) that continue to plague the study of Japanese politics in the academic literature. For example, in chapter two, 'Lehman shock', Glosserman argues that the global financial crisis exposes the nature of structural arrangements and vested interests. The term 'structural arrangements' is never adequately parsed, although a broad sweep of vested interests (the list includes the usual suspects: agriculture, automakers, the bureaucracy, etc.) seemingly undergird the structure to which he alludes.

Terms such as vested interests, entrenchment and debilitation are used to characterize national-level politics, which also point to structuralist assumptions. While these assumptions are not necessarily wrong, they are also not correct all the time. These types of arguments neglect an array of activity that is underneath national-level politics, which have been long ignored by scholars due to the time and language skills one must possess in order to gain access to them—but they are equally telling and important.

The largest weakness of the book is that it takes these assumptions as fact, rather than interrogating why they exist and how they may lead to misreadings of Japan's state and society, as well as how they continue to overshadow equally compelling explanations. For these reasons, the book falls short of offering an argument that is novel or one which sheds new light on current-day Japan.

Readers interested in international and foreign affairs will find Glosserman's overview useful. The book assembles information into a coherent narrative for a non-expert audience and may provide those who are unfamiliar with Japan with an up-to-date overview of national-level politics, key players and the major issues facing the country as it enters the era of ordered harmony.

*Nicole Freiner, Bryant University, USA*

**China and intervention at the UN Security Council: reconciling status.** By **Courtney J. Fung**. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2019. 304pp. £45.00. ISBN 978 0 19884 274 3. Available as e-book.

China's rise in world affairs has occurred in parallel with a growing involvement in global governance—both in terms of interpreting, shaping or defining norms, laws and principles, and of deeper engagement with international institutions. Think-tanks, policy units, academics and the media have spilt much ink analysing the implications of this deeper involvement. But amid a tense US–China rivalry,