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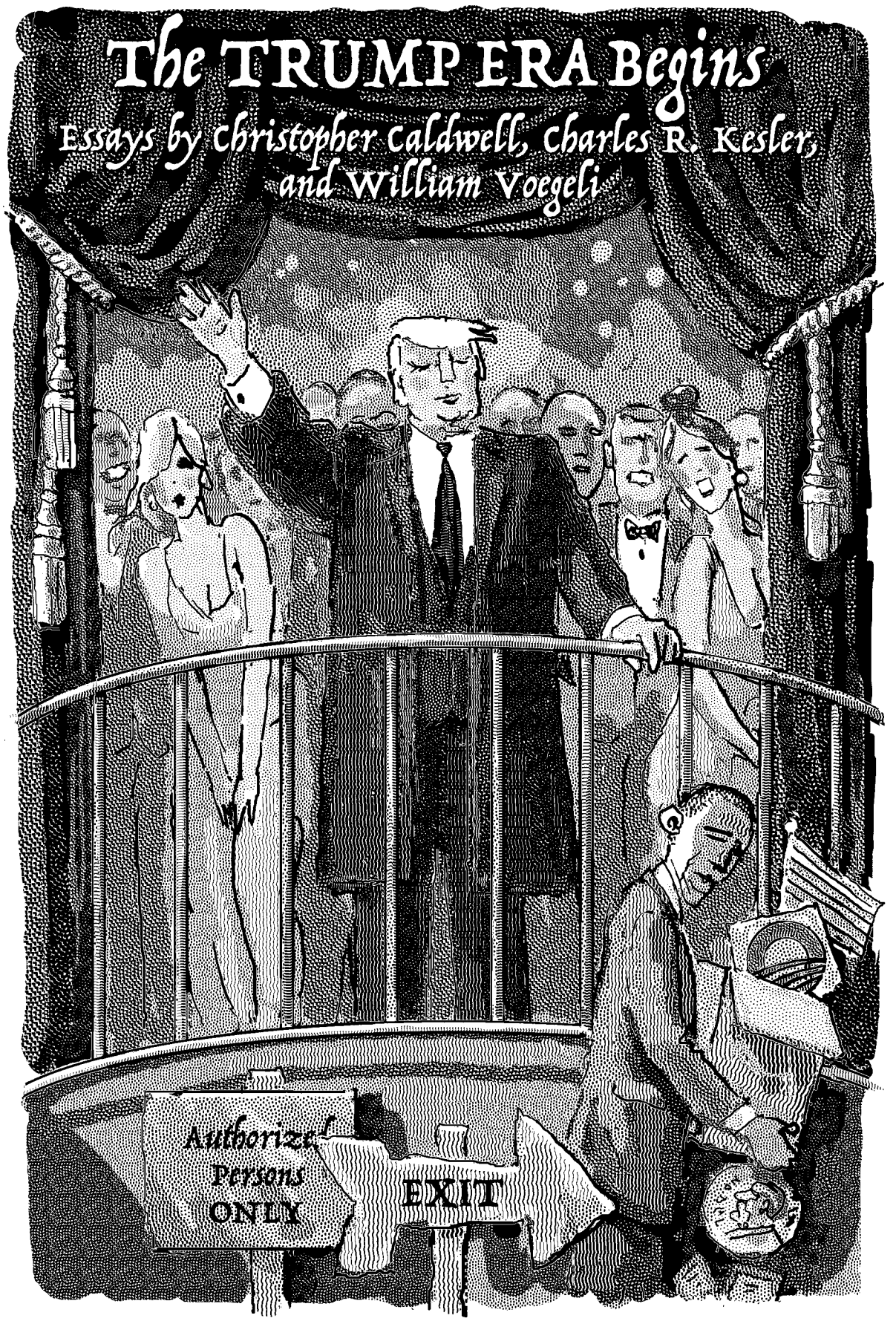

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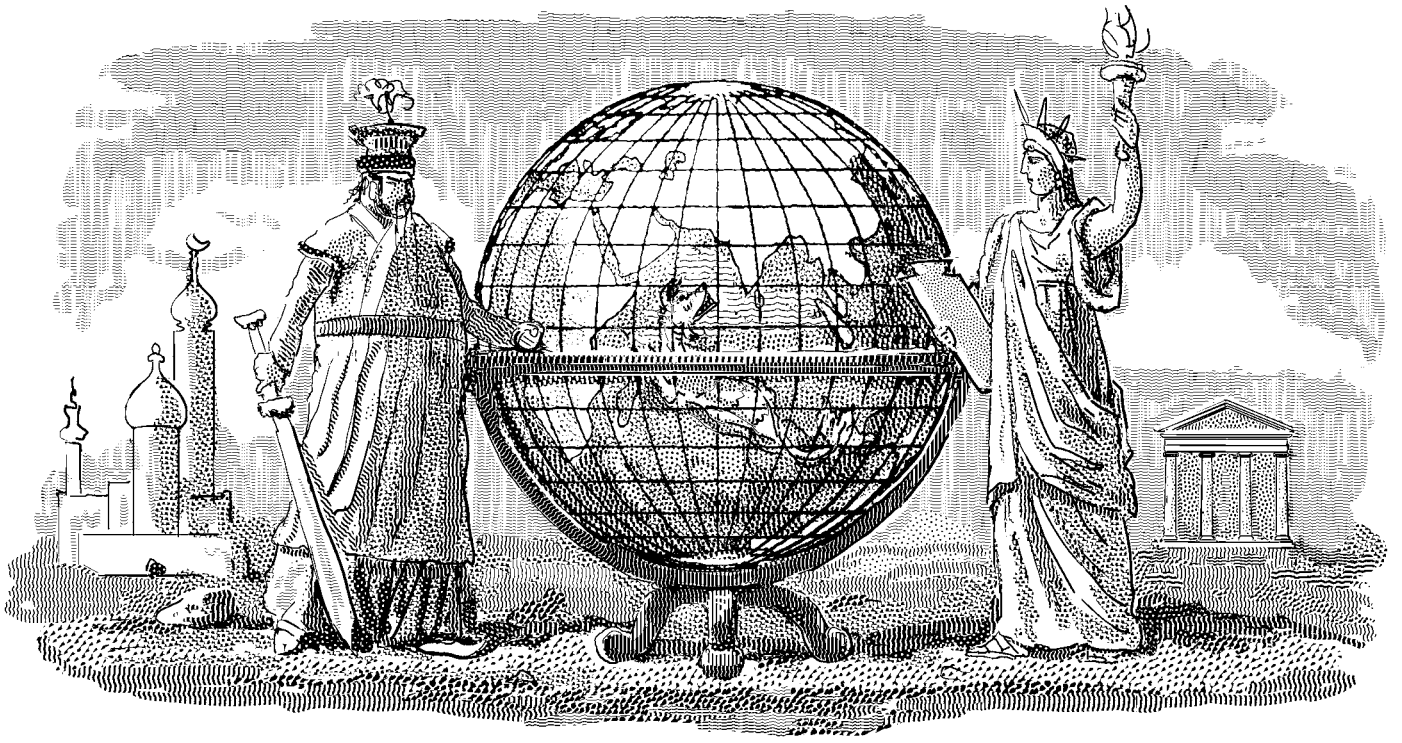
Book Review by Charles Horner

Asia Whole and Free?

The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World's Most Dynamic Region, by Michael R. Auslin.
Yale University Press, 304 pages, $30



World war i was the beginning of the end for the European Century in Asia. In China, foreign navies long dominated the coasts and, over time, the system of so-called treaty ports had spread from the coast deep into the interior. Foreign powers had wide-ranging rights in many ports hundreds of miles up the country's great rivers. It was as if foreign navies could, by right, sail at will up the Mississippi from New Orleans to Minneapolis. China's tariff revenues were also effectively controlled by foreign powers to ensure the servicing of foreign bank-originated loans.

But at least China was still independent. China's neighbors had become outright colonies. The British Raj included seven of today's countries, principally India and Pakistan. On mainland Southeast Asia, only Thailand had remained self-governing; the other countries were either British or French dependencies. Off shore, the Indonesian archipelago was owned by the Netherlands, and the Philippines by the United States. To the north, Japan, a latecomer to the world's imperial competition, owned Taiwan and Korea, and would acquire Manchuria *de facto* in 1931.

In this sense an Asian Century began in 1919 as countries there began the recovery of their independence in the wake of Europe's self-destruction. World War II was the *coup de grace*. By the late 1950s, many Asians had begun to feel that the balance between Asia and the West had not only been restored but was going to return to an earlier era of Asian ascendancy. In 1957, Mao Zedong announced that the East Wind was now prevailing over the West Wind. In 1965, Lin Biao, Chairman Mao's closest comrade-in-arms, called for waging a Maoist-style People's War throughout the Third World so that the World Countryside would overcome the World City. This particular recipe for a rise of Asia in general and for a rise of China in particular was taken very seriously by the United States, which made great efforts in opposing so-called Wars of National Liberation, most famously in Vietnam.

In the late 1970s, china changed course dramatically by emulating the high-growth economies of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. This was a new recipe for China. It has thus far been a success for the ruling Chinese Communist Party, to the point that Martin Jacques's *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (2009) was a runaway international bestseller. Even more, the 21st century has been imagined as an Asian Century, not merely because of China's transformation but also because India has finally awakened from its economic slumber. In the summer of 2016, the Asia Development Bank forecast that by 2050 Asia will be generating half of the world's GDP. Even today, Japan's economy is about equal to that of Germany's and Britain's combined. Against this, the European Union appears to be coming apart, while the annual economic growth rate in the United States is hovering at below 2%.

Such statistics have helped fuel the idea of a Rising Asia. The notion worked its way through the world of politics and became a fixture of both Left and Right. The Left was made unhappy by the collapse of the Soviet Union because there were no longer any credible military or ideological challenges to American hegemony. Wouldn't a resurgent Asia become the next counter-America? And though the Right certainly wished for the collapse of

the last evil empire still standing—that of the People's Republic of China (PRC)—it worried that widely-bruited prognoses of China's collapse were premature and could beget complacency in the face of the PRC's power projection in the South China Sea and Central Asia.

In the face of this twin-tined conventional wisdom, Michael Auslin should be commended for taking on the daunting task of putting aside convenient slogans and wading into the here-and-now of Asia as it actually exists. His new book, *The End of the Asian Century*, is timely because a well-grounded sense of the continent still lags behind the breathless commentary about it. In part, this has to do with the simple fact that learning about Asia requires demanding academic study and energetic exploration on the ground. Indeed, the idea of Asia as a single thing is hard to reconcile with the astonishing diversity of a place with many millions of Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, Christians, and, especially, Muslims. The world's most populous Muslim country is Indonesia, with Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh close behind. Political origins also matter. The continent has three major nuclear-armed powers: the People's Republic of China, a Leninist police state founded by Mao; the Republic of India, a parliamentary democracy founded by Mahatma Gandhi; and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, a state which describes itself as "based on Islamic principles of social justice," founded by Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, and Cambodia are, formally, constitutional monarchies.

A resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, Auslin is not on a mission to find some deeper underlying unity beneath this great variety. Others have tried, of course, not least spokesmen for "Asian Values" or "Eastern Spirituality," as such. Still, a shared history of once having been European colonies or, at the least, objects of Western imperialism and—let us not be afraid to say it—racial condescension, has created shared resentments. But it has also created hundreds of millions of European language speakers, even more purchasers of iconic Western brand-name products, and an aspiration to be modern in a world where the West, not the East, decides what it means to be up-to-date.

After his data analysis and accounts of his visits to countries in the region, Auslin lays out the five problems that, in his view "are contributing to a level of risk that the world has ignored while celebrating Asia's successes": "the failure of economic reform, demographic pressure, unfinished political revolutions, the lack of regional political community, and the threat of conflict." As his on-site inspections from one end of the continent to the other show, each of these problems manifests itself in a different way in different countries. Japan, for example, has for more than 20 years tried to reignite economic and population growth but without success. Similarly, China, for all its vaunted advances, is growing old before it is growing rich, and the police state feels threatened by its inability to contain the regime-threatening consequences of a generation of what it calls "reform and opening up." In Indonesia, the economy struggles to keep pace with an explosion of young people. In India, the country's sheer mass and what Indians themselves call "fissiparous tendencies" generate both inertia and chaos at the same time.

And yet, as Auslin observes, pressing domestic problems don't yet compel common approaches. An Asian Union is not in the offing. Instead, the continent's major powers are power-obsessed realists and their rivalries are becoming more intense. A massive intra-Asia arms race is under way and will accelerate. There are operational nuclear arsenals in China, India, and Pakistan, and maybe even in North Korea. Japan is more than capable of producing a nuclear weapon in short order. This is no longer a regional problem because intra-Asia rivalries continue to expand. India and China are competing for influence in Central Asia, China and Japan are competing for influence in Southeast Asia, and all three are competing in the Middle East. Europe used to export its rivalries to the ends of the earth and now its former wards are doing the same. Intra-Asia wars could well become the driver of world history in the 21st century as Europe's wars drove history during the last four.

As Auslin reminds us, the United States, by far the most consequential extra-regional power, has a large role in this, but what is it? Its political leaders may tout Asia's importance but America's political system is unresponsive to an increasingly dangerous situation. Among those who do pay attention, there are some who think that the United States can somehow, at low cost, manipulate intra-Asia rivalry to its own advantage. Meanwhile, Americans perennially obsessed with an Israel-Palestine "peace process" seem not to notice the breakdown of peace in, say, South Asia, which might beget not just an upsurge in suicide bombings but an India-Pakistan nuclear war.

All talk about someone-or-other's century derives from the essay, "The American Century," written in February 1941 by Henry Luce, the then-enormously influential publisher of the mass-circulation magazines *Time* and *Life*. Why fight, Luce asked. After all,

> if the entire rest of the world came under the organized domination of evil tyrants, it is quite possible to imagine that this country could make itself such a tough nut to crack that not all the tyrants in the world would care to come against us. And of course there would always be a better than even chance that, like the great Queen Elizabeth, we could play one tyrant off against another.

Luce believed that this was not enough and, besides, it was too dangerous. The United States had to act in the world in order to continue to prosper. To be sure, Luce wrote,

> America cannot be responsible for the good behavior of the entire world. But America is responsible, to herself as well as to history, for the world environment in which she lives. Nothing can so vitally affect America's environment as America's own influence upon it.

The 20th century, already an American Century by the time of Luce's writing, became even more of one in due course. A happy Pacific Century was an idea enabled by American persistence in Asia going back well into the 19th century. And there was a precedent: in Europe, after the collapse of the great empires and decades of war, violence, chaos, and disruption, American persistence was critical in fashioning a "Europe whole and free," as George H.W. Bush had put it in 1989. Michael Auslin has correctly laid out for us the difficulties in replicating this achievement in Asia, but is today's Asia an environment more daunting than that of post-World War II Europe? These days, most of the people in the world who live in constitutional democracies live in Asia—Asian values at work, if you will, in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, India, and other places. The desire for similar change in China is palpable and, like the last of old imperial dynasties, the Communist regime is squirming to escape its fate, and it is now only a matter of time, even if it may be a long time. So Asia whole and free? Why not?

Charles Horner is senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and author of Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate: Memories of Empire in a New Global Context *(University of Georgia Press).*