
Book Review: The Future is Asian by Parag Khanna

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Abstract

In The Future is Asian, Parag Khanna makes the case for a world that is shifting east. Rather than suggest that this new vitality is located solely in the rise of China or even a group of dynamic countries in East Asia, Khanna locates this shift in an expansive geographical region that extends from the Pacific Rim to Eastern Europe (West Asia in Khanna's terminology). The book is an excellent guide to evolving trends that involve Asia; however, Khanna's analysis is more descriptive than theoretical or predictive. This will leave many readers frustrated. Yet, like good journalism, the book describes dynamics while leaving ample room for readers to come to their own conclusions about their implications.

1. Full Review

The book begins with a provocation: The Belt and Road Initiative, a China-led infrastructure program that will tie together economies throughout Asia, Europe, and parts of Africa, is the most important diplomatic initiative of the 21st century. An examination of the Belt and Road Initiative is a starting point for a larger examination of what is going on in "Asia." The book is more than just about geopolitics, it is also about civilizational vitality. Khanna argues that as Western countries deal with populism, inequality, sovereign debt, and other symptoms of civilizational decline, Asian dynamism will come to define the century.

However, there is an elephant in the room with regard to this book: "Asia" is a construct the author creates to fit his empirical data. The author is able to marshall information, both statistical and anecdotal, to support the idea that something is going on beyond the

old concept of the Western-led world order. Vitality has shifted east. The author does his best to demonstrate how this shift in vitality is not just about China, or even about East Asia, but rather about a larger region we should consider as Asia (that encompasses what others would regard as the Middle East and Eastern Europe).

Yet, the map/maps the authors draw are as much about fitting the data as about predicting the data. Asia is the large region that stretches “from the Sea of Japan to the Red Sea” (p. 5). It is a region that includes Australia and New Zealand, as well as Russia, Iran, and the Gulf States. Such map-making is not necessarily an analytical sin, but this sort of flexibility means that the book is less about theory-making than it is about description.

Instead of crisp parsimony, the reader is given complexity. The complexity might be a result of the rise of the Euroasian mega-region. However, it also might be a symptom of the softening of the state system and its overlay with non-state actors. Parts of the book suggest that what is currently occurring in the world might be more complex than the rise of Asia. Khanna writes, “Historical eras are accumulating in ways that do not allow for one model to fully impose itself on the others. Instead, as Asian institutions and norms take their place alongside those of the West, they synthesize into a fusion that itself becomes the global norm” (2019, p. 23). This and similar passages in the book suggest that what is occurring in the world might actually be closer to post-Westphalia, pre-neo-medievalism, or even pre-cyberpunk.

What the book lacks are analytical frameworks and tools that the reader can apply to novel events as they occur in real-time.

If I had to find reusable theoretical tools from this book they would be:

- When looking at the future of economic power, follow the infrastructure and R&D (research and development)

investments. The most dynamic countries in the 21st century are those that are actively investing in their economies and people.

- Instead of a new “ism,” focus on how actors are innovating efficient solutions to problems of governance, as well as how other actors learn and copy those solutions.

After reading this book (a book that was written before the Coronavirus), it occurred to me that the Coronavirus was a natural test for one of the author’s claims. The book stresses that technocratic governments have been outperforming many mature (but unruly) democracies. How did technocratic governments do relative to their democratic counterparts in response to the Coronavirus? I would love to see Khanna or another scholar parse the data carefully. (Maybe someone already has!)

Will the future be Asian? Because the book defines Asia so flexibly the answer must be yes. After all, the author is not just interested in the territorially-bounded nations that comprise Asia, nor any one official grouping of Asian states. Nor, for that matter, is the book bound by its own very wide-ranging map of the Euroasian mega-region. Instead, by taking a dynamic look at Asia, the author is able to include Asian diaspora in other countries, including the Western countries. With a definition of Asia so broad and flexible, how could the 21st century not be Asian?

That being said, predictions, even the most broad-based and mild, even those housed safely in demographic and economic trends, are still vulnerable to the vagaries of history. As the 9/11 terrorist attacks, global financial crisis, numerous natural, man-made, and hybrid disasters, Coronavirus, and other routine unpredictables have demonstrated, at any moment a disruptive event can change the course of history.

This book remains an important work for understanding our 21st century moment, but it is not a sufficient one. Readers will need to be proactive in developing their own analytical tools for examining the evolving present.

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References

Khanna, P. (2019). *The Future is Asian*. Simon & Schuster.