

An Emerging Multi-polar World: Polarized, Unstable and Dangerous

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Global Research, September 29, 2017

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July 2017

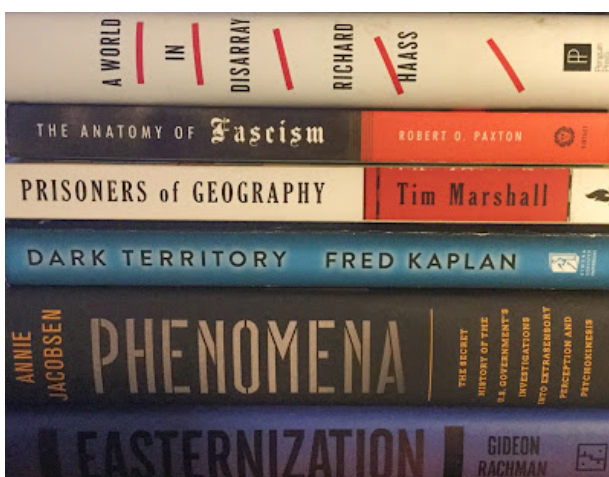
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First published in July 2017

We're in uncharted territory. On some days, as the West's domination of world affairs winds down, you can feel the wheels of history turning. A multi-polar world seems to be emerging. But so far it looks as polarized, unstable and dangerous as the one it replaces.

The Trump presidency is meanwhile turning out to be even more surreal than the campaign. If you doubt that the foreign policy establishment is concerned, Richard Haass offers a comprehensive, "insider's" corrective in *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (2017, Penguin). The message from Haass, who heads the Council on Foreign Relations, is that global rules and institutions that have kept the world relatively stable since World War II are at serious risk of being abandoned.

Written during the recent presidential race, Haass makes a convincing case for growing global instability. But he sidesteps a direct critique of Trump, calling instead for continued active engagement (defining it as a "sovereign obligation") over narrow nationalism. It's a sobering viewpoint that reflects the priorities of the internationalists who have controlled US foreign policy for most of the last 70 years



Unprecedented. We hear the word so often that it's become a cliché. But have we been here before? And is what we're experiencing an authoritarian surge or something else? In *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Vintage, 2004), Robert O. Paxton illustrates the differences between the two isms, and how modern anxieties – from immigration and economic insecurity to urban “decadence” and national decline — create conditions for mass-based, populist

nationalist movements. Fortunately, not many have taken power, or lasted for long.

Written before the recent surge of nationalist propaganda, hate crimes and “strongman” regimes in places like Turkey, Hungary, the Philippines and the US, Paxton’s concise study outlines how fascists gain and exercise power. It also identifies the obvious warning signs: political deadlock in the face of domestic crisis, threatened conservatives desperate for tough allies and ready to abandon the rule of law, and charismatic leaders ready to “mobilize passions” through race-tinged demagoguery.

On the other hand, he also advises that most real capitalists, even if they view democracy as a nuisance, would prefer an authoritarian to a fascist. The former usually wants a passive, disengaged public. But fascists, who have such contempt for people and reason that they don’t bother to justify their excesses, tend to get people excited and engaged. And not just their blame-shifting supporters.

European powers ruled 84 percent of the land and 100 percent of the seas in 1914, and the US was the world’s largest economy. What a difference a century has made. Now three of the four biggest economies are China, India and Japan. In *Easternization: Asia’s Rise and America’s Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond* (Other Press, 2016), Gideon Rachman makes a persuasive case that China is poised to dominate the next century. But he also reveals why no “Eastern alliance” is apt to replace the crumbling “West.”

As a top financial commentator for the UK’s Financial Times, Rachman has hobnobbed with ministers and business leaders worldwide, and brings some revealing encounters into his analysis and forecasts. The main issue, he explains, is whether the US and China can avoid the Thucydides Trap — the type of rivalry between an established and rising power that can lead to war. It has happened in 12 out of 16 cases since 1500.

Location could be a decisive factor, explains Tim Marshall in *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything about the World* (Scribner, 2015). For Russia, the largest country in the world, it has made power difficult to defend and provoked leaders like Putin to compensate by pushing outward. For China, in contrast, geographical features have often provided security, and now set the stage for it to become a two-ocean power (Pacific and Indian) and claim most of the South China Sea.

Marshall’s book is well-organized, fast-paced and reads like a travelogue, observing history, politics and environmental dynamics from a high altitude. The maps in the paperback could be better and the text certainly does not explain “everything.” But this is an engaging refresher and does illustrate why, despite having a great location, even America is constrained by geography’s rule.

Long before the digital age, the US government used scientists and psychics to locate hostages and penetrate secret military bases. Sometimes it even worked. This is just one of the mind-blowing revelations in *Phenomena: The Secret History of the U.S. Government’s Investigations into Extrasensory Perception and Psychokinesis* (Little Brown, 2017). For

decades, such research was publicly ridiculed as science fiction fantasy. But Annie Jacobsen has assembled the facts, from once-classified documents, former officials, and government psychics who explored this frontier.

Did you know, for instance, that the US military used dowzers during the Vietnam War to locate Viet Cong tunnels? Or that Uri Geller, the famous psychic “spoon bender” who set the CIA’s psychic research program in motion, also worked for Israeli intelligence, and later became wealthy locating ancient Middle East artifacts, oil, and minerals for mining corporations?

The difficulty with paranormal abilities was often reliability. Even when techniques were refined and endlessly practiced, only a few psychic warriors had the right stuff. Yet the research continues. The Office of Naval Research is currently exploring what it calls premonition or “Spidey sense,” while the Defense Research Projects Agency (DARPA) looks into “synthetic telepathy,” a brain-computer interface that may someday enable soldiers to “communicate by thought alone.”

During the same period, with more success, various governments have also been developing cyber capabilities. As Fred Kaplan notes in his riveting new book *Dark Territory: The Secret History of Cyber War* (Simon & Schuster, 2016), at least twenty nations are already in the game, led by Russia, China, Iran, Syria, North Korea and the US. The focus is currently on Russia’s “hybrid warfare,” the weaponizing of hacked documents to influence the presidential race. But keep in mind that information war began with the US-NATO campaign against Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic. And the first significant cyber attack, a US-Israeli operation called Olympic Games, was directed at Iran’s nuclear program. Later known as Stuxnet, it involved a cyber worm that destroyed a quarter of Iran’s centrifuges and set back its nuclear program by several years.

The trouble with waging cyber war, warns Kaplan, is that “what we can do to them, they can someday do to us.” It’s a type of blowback. In an afterword written since the 2016 election, he also points beyond the Russia-Trump operation to the next threat — denial-of-service attacks executed by thousands of household devices. It happened on October 21, 2016, when an Internet switchboard was flooded, shutting down Twitter, Spotify, Netflix and other sites.

“There are now about 10 billion IoT devices in the world,” Kaplan concludes. “Some estimate that, by 2020, there will be 50 billion. That’s a lot of bots to be enslaved for a cyber war.”

First printed in Burlington’s Peace & Justice News (July 2017)

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