

Region in the shadow of two giants

Review by David Pilling

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Asia Alone: The Dangerous Post-Crisis Divide from America, by Simon Tay, Wiley, RRP£16.99

Last month, [Hillary Clinton told delegates at an Asian security gathering](#) that the US supported the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The US would be willing to facilitate multilateral negotiations, the secretary of state said. Twelve of the 27 nations attending, including Vietnam and other countries that have long-running maritime disputes with China, supported her initiative. [Beijing was unhappy](#). It claims almost all of the South China Sea – with its shipping lanes and oil and gas deposits – for itself. China prefers to deal with its neighbours one by one, rejecting attempts to “internationalise” the issue.

After years of neglect during the presidency of George W. Bush, when the US was distracted by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Barack Obama, the “Pacific president”, is seeking to re-engage with a fast-changing Asia. Mrs Clinton’s intervention signals that Washington has not forgotten the wider region in its rush to cement ties with China and India, the really important kids on the block. *Asia Alone*, an intelligent and readable book, is an excellent guide to the dilemmas behind the Obama administration’s regional push.



Simon Tay, a Singaporean academic, fleshes out an Asian perspective in an area too often colonised by outsiders. Better still, he avoids the carping tone of those from the region who extol the tired righteousness of “Asian values”. His is a pragmatic, international voice that sees virtue in some sort of US presence in a region caught in Chinese headlights.

Mr Tay is too subtle to want the US to act as sheriff, a counterweight to China’s growing power. Instead, his thesis goes as follows. Since the second world war, the US has acted as an imperious, if largely benign, presence in the region, keeping the peace (Korea and Vietnam aside) and championing economic growth. “The enduring common reference for Asians has been the US,” he writes. “Like spokes joined to a central hub, Asians have been more closely connected to the US than to each other.”

That subservient arrangement is over. It began to splinter after the 1997 Asian crisis. The two sides fell out over bitter medicine prescribed by the International Monetary Fund, a body closely associated with the US. Since 1997, Asia has prospered, albeit on the back of US demand. The region has become more politically integrated, and a complex network of trade agreements now binds it together. Meanwhile, many Asians feel the US has stumbled – morally (in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay), and economically (on Wall Street).

Mr Tay doesn’t mourn the passing of the old, pupil-mentor relationship. But he does see dangers in a vacuum. The US could drift into protectionism, Asia into hubris-induced isolation. “The sense that most Asian nations and especially China are relative winners from the crisis is palpable,” he says. And while he agrees that Asia needs to consume more and ship less of what it produces to the US, he worries such economic rebalancing – if not countered by political rebalancing – could set both on separate paths.

This is a real, if perhaps distant, possibility. Mr Tay thinks it would be dangerous. Part of his concern is, indeed, over Chinese power. “A new tributary system to a risen China is one scenario for Asia, with the spread of the Beijing consensus and perhaps a reincarnation of ‘Asian values’ to justify the strong role of the state,” he writes. He also fears that without their US “lead partner”, Asians could bicker, or even fight. Being alone could ignite disputes like that in the South China Sea; fan the flames of old animosities like that between Japan and China; or kindle new ones, perhaps between China and India.

Despite progress by the Association of South East Asian Nations, which has nurtured a fledgling sense of regionalism, Asia lacks the stabilising institutions of the European Union, he argues. “American dominance has rankled with them, but Asians have no history of unity, and no agreed vision of leadership to step into a future with Asia on its own.”

In the last third of the book, Mr Tay urges a new kind of trans-Pacific relationship, with the US as a tempering influence, “an essential partner with vital interests in the region”. In slightly strained language, he invokes what he calls the “Power of &”. The region need not choose between the US

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and China, but should build bridges to both. Only a strong, but more humble America can pull off the trick of dealing with an emerging superpower and a fast-growing region, he says. The alternative is for Asia to go it alone. In Mr Tay's opinion, that is a challenge for which it is not yet ready.

The writer is the FT's Asia editor

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