

The Geopolitics of East Asia: The Search for Equilibrium

Robyn Lim

Reviewed by Neil James

Professor Robyn Lim, an Australian, holds the chair in international relations at Nanzan University in Japan. Prior to this she held posts with ONA, PM&C and DFAT and at various Australian and South East Asian universities.

In a time of strategic flux and the relative decline of ideology as a major cause of strategic friction, *The Geopolitics of East Asia*, and the message of its subtitle, provide a timely reminder of the geo-strategic tectonic plates underlying the East Asian region irrespective of the ideologies, personalities or diplomatic fads of any particular time.

The book's thesis is that the geopolitics of East Asia has several underlying themes of geostrategic continuity underwritten by geography, economics, culture and the continual search for strategic balance between the great powers since the 17th century. A key argument deployed is that there is an East Asian quadrilateral compromising Russia, China, Japan and the United States, and that the tensions between them result from the quest for equilibrium irrespective of their comparative strengths or the ideologies governing each one at any particular juncture.

This is a daunting task in a book the publishers specified must come in under 80,000 words. Professor Lim accomplishes her aim with an introductory essay, five historical chapters, a chapter covering contemporary issues and a conclusion. All include the broad perspectives, incisive analysis and forthright language that make Professor Lim stand out among what often passes for contemporary tenured academic thought and discourse. While a book of this length on such a broad topic must, of necessity, include much synthesised content her summaries also feature original observations that add to our understanding of the broad and bold themes explored.

Chapter 1 discusses East Asian history from the beginning of the 16th century to the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905 following Japan's defeat of Russia. In her second chapter, Professor Lim discusses the unstable balance in East Asia between 1905 and the mid 1930s that led, almost inexorably, to World War II. The strategic contest between Japan and the United States, egged on by Stalinist Russia, is covered in Chapter 3 with most of the discussion centring on the contests of the 1935–41 period, rather than the detail of the cross-ocean maritime campaigns that destroyed Japanese power over the ensuing four years.

The final two chapters cover the Cold War. The first summarises the myriad political currents swirling round decolonisation, the rise of communism and the resultant offensive and defensive wars to contain it. The second discusses the latter phases of the Cold War from the West's defeat in Vietnam to its eventual triumph over the Soviet Union

(and belligerent Maoist zealotry) in the late 1980s.

In the final chapter, Professor Lim touches with a sure hand on most of the major contemporary strategic issues, developments and trends. In her conclusion she neatly pierces several recurring myths and delusions that reinforce the quest for diplomatic certainties and comfort rather than a propensity to confront reality.

The 14 pages of notes buttress the high standard of the book overall. As well as the usual citations they include numerous brief explanations and the background to issues that would otherwise clutter the main text. The five-page bibliography is comprehensive. It is also laid out in a format that is easily readable, an increasingly uncommon phenomenon in modern publishing. Finally the eight-page index is effective in a work of this length, especially in a subject area bedevilled by changes in the historical usages of spelling foreign names among two alphabets and three character systems.

Professor Lim has, however, been badly let down by her publisher in regard to the only two maps, both small but large-scale, monochrome versions. One covers, on one page, the region bounded by northern Australia, the Arctic Ocean, Moscow and the Aleutians. The other depicts the North-East Asian region centred on Manchuria. Both maps are marked with small print but still fail to detail or otherwise easily indicate many of the locations mentioned in the text. A work on geopolitics requires clearly drawn, readable and comprehensive maps not the third-rate versions offered here.

The Geopolitics of East Asia, within its limitations of size and requirement for summary rather than detail, is a masterful work. Its occasional oversimplification invokes the odd twinge of reflexive counter argument but the book contains no obvious or serious errors of fact. This is a book that has the sure touch of both an unbowed practitioner and a scholar, and in each case one comfortable with the milieu of debate in North America and North Asia rather than just Australian perspectives. It should be required background reading for Australian diplomats, strategists and senior commanders and those who aspire to otherwise comment on Australia's national strategy.

One final question the book generates is why Professor Lim has not been snapped up by a university or think-tank in her own country. She would certainly be a breath of fresh air in a country where strategic debate at an academic and wider level has greatly suffered from an insufficient turnover of participants over the last three decades, and more recently a marked degree of intellectual atrophy. Perhaps her reputation for being a somewhat hard-edged critic of the academically complacent has told against her. On the evidence of *The Geopolitics of East Asia*, Australia is much the worse for her apparent intellectual exile. ♦

Robyn Lim, *The Geopolitics of East Asia: The Search for Equilibrium*, Routledge, London, 2003, Casebound, 198pp., RRP \$89.00.

