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BOOK REVIEW: Passing 'baton of pre-eminence'

Doug Bandow

WHEN CHINA RULES THE WORLD: THE END OF THE WESTERN WORLD AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW GLOBAL ORDER

By Martin Jacques

Penguin Press, \$29.95, 550 pages

Reviewed by Doug Bandow

Even before the financial collapse, the old order was crumbling. A new order, dominated by China, was emerging. So argues journalist Martin Jacques, author of "When China Rules the World."

Mr. Jacques believes the People's Republic of China will be a great power, and soon. More significantly, he predicts that the PRC will supplant rather than accommodate the West.

It's a radical message. Mr. Jacques observes: "Even now, with signs of a growing challenge from China, the West remains the dominant geopolitical and cultural force. Such has been the extent of Western influence that it is impossible to think of the world without it, or imagine what the world would have been like if it had never happened."

The gap between West and others is closing. The "baton of pre-eminence," as Mr. Jacques calls it, will be passed yet again.

The most obvious contender for replacement global leader is China. However, will Beijing really "rule the world," and if so, when?

China once was a great empire. The communist revolution reimposed a harsh unity and stability, leading Mr. Jacques to argue that the Maoist era laid "the foundations of China's extraordinary transformation."

Perhaps, but surely the same result could have been achieved without costing tens of millions of lives. Nevertheless, the PRC was ready to excel when it began experimenting with economic reform three decades ago.

The result has been what Mr. Jacques calls a "contested modernity." He cites Japan as well as China in suggesting that the Asian model differs from that in the West. In fact, he argues: "The picture that emerges ... is not the scale of Westernization but, for the most part, its surprisingly restricted extent." Even so, the degree of Western influence remains significant in nations which once embraced xenophobia.

Mr. Jacques believes the West will be forced to rethink its role: "The bearer of this change will be China, partly because of its overwhelming size but also because of the nature of its culture and outlook. China, unlike Japan, has always regarded itself as universal, the center of the world, and even, for a millennium and more, believed that it actually constituted the world. The emergence of Chinese modernity immediately de-centers and relativizes the position of the West. That is why the rise of China has such far-reaching implications."

Of course, merely thinking of oneself as the center of the world isn't enough, as imperial China discovered. But today China's potential is immense. Writes Mr. Jacques: "The combination of a huge population and an extremely high economic growth rate is providing the world with a completely new kind of experience." Moreover, he contends, China is a "civilization-state," which requires us to "understand not only China's economic growth, but also its history, politics, culture and traditions."

All true. Nevertheless, achieving its potential is not automatic. Mr. Jacques acknowledges that China remains a poor country. The PRC may have difficulty sustaining its growth, as well as solving serious environmental problems. Other challenges include ethnic divisions and vast economic differences between rural and urban populations and inland and coastal provinces.

Even more daunting may be China's limited political development. Mr. Jacques dismisses the argument "that China is now ready for, and should become, more or less forthwith, a multi-party democracy based on universal suffrage." However, the lack of opportunity for individuals to choose political leaders, influence government decisions and hold authorities accountable also yields instability.

Even the Chinese government admits to thousands of often violent protests nationwide. The communist party's legitimacy now is based on delivering economic growth. Failing to meet popular expectation could prove disastrous.

Even if the country successfully navigates all these minefields, China's rise is likely to be paired with the slightly slower rise of India. The latter is likely to overtake China in population and has embarked upon the same road of rapid economic growth - while figuring out how to make democracy work. Even if it rules, China might not rule alone.

Mr. Jacques has much to say about China's likely impact on the international system. But perhaps his most important message for the United States is that America's dominance already is slipping in East Asia. Notes Mr. Jacques: "One of the consequences of China's growing economic importance has been that the great majority of countries in the region have become more closely aligned with it."

It will take years for China to match, let alone exceed, American military strength. But for far less money China can deter U.S. intervention. The PRC does not need carriers if it can sink America's carriers. The United States will not be able to afford the money necessary to maintain perpetual military dominance.

Indeed, the changing economic balance, argues Mr. Jacques, "is what is slowly and irresistibly eroding American global pre-eminence." Still, that does not mean Beijing will have the geopolitical field to itself.

China will remain surrounded by nations with which it has been at war in the past - India, Japan, Russia and Vietnam. Other countries, such as Australia and South Korea, already are wary and well-armed. Some of yesterday's basket cases, like Indonesia, are progressing as well.

Mr. Jacques is hopeful that China "may prove to be rather less overtly assertive or less determined [than the West] to impose its will and leave its imprint." Nevertheless, he believes the West will find itself ousted from its position of pre-eminence. He claims: "The United States is entering a protracted period of economic, political and military trauma. It finds itself on the eve of a psychological, emotional and existential crisis."

"When China Rules the World" is the work of a thoughtful provocateur. The rise of China is changing the world. The result may not be as great, swift or certain as Martin Jacques expects. Nevertheless, the ultimate impact of the revival of this ancient civilization will be profound. American policymakers should be thinking about how best to adapt.

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