

THE LONG ASIAN CENTURY

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The Reception of the Diplomatic Note by the Court of Peking.

Lord Macartney was appointed Ambassador to China only in 1793, and on arriving there was introduced to the Emperor who, contrary to the usual custom, graciously received him, allowed him to kneel, and bestowed on him with great liberality. He returned to England in October 1794.

It is time to rethink the “American Century,” which Republican internationalist Henry Luce [declared in February of 1941](#)—nearly ten months before the Japanese military attacked the American naval outpost on Oahu. Luce could hardly have known at the time what would transpire over the next thirty years, but the decades after Luce penned his call to impose American ideals on the rest of the world did, indeed, appear to be the makings of an “American century,” just as Luce had prognosticated.

What nearly everyone fails to understand about the “American century,” however, is that a large part of it was spent in Asia. If one includes the Middle East in wider Asia, then almost all of the “American century” was an Asian one. (Luce himself was raised in China, and China was the context for much of his idealism—another crucial but often-overlooked fact.)

Author and economist Parag Khanna's book [The Future Is Asian](#) would appear to be a signal that the tide has turned and the American century has given, or is giving, way to an Asian one. But this would appear to be more a distinction of leadership cohort than of geographical focus. Contra Khanna, I think it is not the case that the world was “Europeanized” in the nineteenth century and “Americanized” in the twentieth. Rather, Europe and America were Asianized, at least in terms of economics and foreign policy. Europe and America have long been making the journey to Asia, and not the other way around. From a world historical perspective, there have been many Asian centuries prior to this one, now said to be dawning—including, especially, the “American century” which, we are now told, is passing away.

Before expanding this argument, let us first make a germane distinction between land powers and sea powers, a very old distinction and one made again with great skill recently by historian S.C.M. Paine in her 2017 book [The Japanese Empire: Grand Strategy from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War](#). One of Paine's geopolitical motifs in this volume is that Japan, an island nation, enjoyed great success as a modern naval power following the Meiji Restoration, but was undone by the Japanese army's insistence on fighting ground wars in Asia. This is an excellent point. We can take it further and say that the Americans were able to defeat the Japanese in the Pacific because the Japanese were viewing the Pacific campaign as, disastrously, a ground campaign—holding islands—while the Americans virtually ignored the islands and pressed through, via ship, deep into Japanese Imperial territory. (Paine lays this out very nicely in her volume.)

The Americans ran into serious trouble in Okinawa, a land campaign, and were calculating the loss of hundreds of thousands more men if an invasion of Kyushu and Honshu became necessary. It was air

superiority, not naval superiority, which brought the Americans victory. Midway, after all, was an air battle fought over water, and not a naval battle—the two carrier groups never came within sight of one another and no shots were fired directly from fleet to fleet.

Once the Americans had the Mariana Islands, the air campaign could be taken directly to the Japanese homeland. The firebombing of Tokyo and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were arguably much more effective than even the unrestricted submarine attacks [on naval and merchant shipping](#) had been. Japan might have been able to defeat the Americans in the Pacific had Japan focused on sea power—her natural strength—rather than ultimately pointless and ruinous land wars on the Asian continent.

I make this detour into Pacific War history because it brings us to two key points important for this essay. First, the war between the United States and Japan was largely contrived by Stalin and the Comintern. The fact that the two greatest naval powers in the Pacific embarked on a meaningless death-match, despite being separated by thousands of miles of open ocean and having no discernible geopolitical reason for waging war, is testament not to the strategic genius of either Tokyo or Washington, but to that of Stalin and his Comintern.

Some will argue that the United States did have a geopolitical interest, namely in China. This putative interest, too, was in large part a trap laid for the Americans. For example, Australian propagandist Harold John Timperley wrote his 1938 book *What War Means* at the behest of the Nationalist forces (whose head, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, was trained at the Soviet-backed Whampoa Military Academy). *What War Means* was published by Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club, which was essentially the mouthpiece of the Communist Party in England at the time. American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's circle of Communist, and sometimes Soviet-backed, advisors and officials is widely known. The Japanese government, too, was infiltrated. Revisionist scholars in Japan have argued, for instance, that imperial household member and prime minister just before the outbreak of war with the United States, Konoé Fumimaro, was sympathetic to the Communist cause. Japan and the United States were enticed, maneuvered, into war. War in Asia.

The second point is that the battles in Asia, in World War II, pull back the curtain on what I think should be called the "long Asian century," which to my mind begins with the first forays of the Portuguese into the Asian trade at the closing of the fifteenth century. Perhaps we can define the long Asian century as the time when European sea powers sought entrée into the vastness of Eurasia, and ended up

centering much of their political activity on Eurasia as a result. The long Asian century thus more neatly explicates what conventionally in the West we have called "the Age of Discovery." The discovery of what? Of the Americas, of course, but the strategic fulcrum for geopolitics and world history has remained Asia, despite and even because of the European discovery of North and South America.

EastWest Institute senior fellow and Diplomat senior editor Franz-Stefan Gady [writes](#):

In just a little over 16 years at the beginning of the 16th century, the impoverished Kingdom of Portugal, under the House of Aviz, became the dominant power in the Indian Ocean region and laid the foundation for one of the largest and longest-lived empires in world history. Between Vasco da Gama's epoch-making 309-day voyage from Lisbon around the Cape of Good Hope and across the Indian Ocean to the docking at the Indian port of Calicut on May 20, 1498, and the death of the general Afonso de Albuquerque in December 1515, Portugal established a permanent foothold in Asia from which it would not be finally dislodged until 1999 when China repossessed Macau.

Thus begins the long Asian century. Two other Iberian monarchs, shut out of the European-Atlantic-Mediterranean economic order by Portugal and other European powers, sponsored a risky exploratory voyage by Christopher Columbus to find a new route to, not America, but Asia. From the moment of first European contact, America was an adjunct to Asia in the West.

During the age of European imperialism which followed Spain's and Portugal's forays into Asia and the Americas, it was usually Asia which was weighted more heavily in European strategic calculations. The Spanish galleons, which brought Mexican silver to the Philippines, reinforced an Asia-centric view which Jesuit missionaries also largely shared. Britain and France clashed in North America in the eighteenth century, and Britain then clashed shortly thereafter with its erstwhile colonists there over the bill for the war Britain had waged against its continental rival; but in the end the British cut their losses in North America and focused their expansionism on Asia, including of course the crown jewel of their empire: India. (Note that Boston was never once thought of as the "crown jewel" of the British imperial project.) Napoleon threw his armies into Egypt and Moscow, but sold his holdings in central North America as so much useless overhead. The Dutch gave up on Manhattan and focused instead on Borneo.

Britain fought the Boer War in South Africa as an extension of the struggle to command old stopover

points along the pre-Suez Canal ocean route to Asia. European powers intervened repeatedly in Qing Dynasty politics, wars, and state finances. Britain's "Great Game" with the Russian Empire was over control of Asia. Colonel Francis Younghusband went to Tibet because Britain feared Russian inroads into India and central and southeast Asia. In World War I, Europe was a sideshow to the momentous changes taking place in the territory once occupied by the defunct Qing. Eastern Europe remains a cauldron of instability, as events in Ukraine now testify. The Qing, by contrast, re-emerged from its early twentieth-century shambles and is now set to become the biggest economic and military power on earth. Asia always rises again.

Japan participated in World War I desultorily on the side of the Allies—it was an option, hardly a necessity. Asia was where the action was. Japan had already gone to war twice in Asia, once with the Russian Empire and once with the Qing, over control of the Korean Peninsula and Port Arthur. After Japan had secured a vast new territory in continental Asia, she restored the scion of the Qing house to his throne, this time in the Qing heartland of Manchuria. This set in motion the events which would bog Japan, and the United States, down in an Asian war. Japan had been in Asia for decades by that point, and was fighting mightily to control the warlord-wracked eastern quarter of Eurasia. [Richard Sorge](#) was dispatched to Tokyo to spy on the Nazis and also to foment war between Japan and the United States, thereby relieving Stalin of the necessity to concentrate troops along his eastern front. Japan attacked Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok, Luzon, Guam, and elsewhere in Asia and the Western Pacific almost simultaneously with her attack on Oahu. The Americans got drawn into the new war first in Asia. Hitler declared war against Washington after Japan did. It was always an Asian fight.

For more than five hundred years, world history, in the Hegelian sense, has been hovering over Asia, taking Asia as its GHQ. All other conflicts and historical processes have been peripheral to Asia.

For Hitler and Stalin both, the war in Europe was about the East. It is certainly true that Hitler's, and his National Socialists', grotesqueries pushed the German theater of World War II into the spotlight. But remember that Hitler and his National Socialists had a distinct hatred for what they called "the West." The bourgeoisie mentalities that the National Socialists loathed were thought, by them, to represent a tragic departure of the German spirit from the hard, martial, romantic ideals of the East. Deeper into Eurasia the German National Socialists wanted to go. Into Prussia, into the places not ruined by reason and philosophy, namely "the West." Hitler drew attention to himself by his mad theatrics, but his focus was on the East. The casualties on Hitler's eastern front stagger the imagination—D-Day was truly a minor event compared with the carnage in Eastern Europe and Russia. The West Hitler saw fit only for

burning.

This explains the difference between Hitler and Stalin, and also indicates why it was Eurasia, the Asian megacontinent, which was the main battleground of World War II. Hitler was both a sociopath and a psychopath. He had no compassion, but he also had no powers of calculation rooted in reality. He was the last Romantic; and his only desire was to destroy. As Canadian academic Jordan Peterson [has pointed out](#), Hitler probably wanted to lose World War II. Yes, I think so too. This is why he did, in fact, lose it.

Hitler took steps that were irrational, and he took them because they were irrational. Hitler lost the war in Eurasia, not in the West. Hitler sent his armies to overwinter in Russia, in the midst of which he provoked a showdown with Stalin in the Russian snow, deep within Russian territory. Hitler gave Stalin every advantage, and Stalin took whatever he was given. Stalin used his slave labor much more efficiently than Hitler did, too. Stalin killed indiscriminately, as did Hitler. He was also a sociopath, like Hitler. But he wasn't a psychopath. Stalin knew what reality was, probably much better than anyone with a normally functioning conscience and emotions. Stalin put his slave labor to use building up his empire. Hitler committed resources to murdering his slave labor, an action which contributed precisely nothing to the German war effort. The Holocaust makes no sense, tactically or strategically—unless one admits that Hitler was out to destroy Europe, not rule it.

Hitler's "Thousand-Year Reich" should therefore be read, I think, along the grain that Hannah Arendt sets forth in [The Origins of Totalitarianism](#).

Hitler's vision was apocalyptic, infernal. He was saying, as I read him, that it would take a thousand years of hell on earth before the West could be drawn out of the bourgeoisie daydream and reset as a great Eurasian power. Hitler spoke of blood and iron, not sail and seawater. World War II was always a land war at heart, and a land war for Asia. In this way, it was part of the long Asian century.

Let me close by saying that the United States is going the way of all European empires before her. The United States is being absorbed by the geopolitics of Asia. The American navy has lost the advantage in the Western Pacific, and its defeat in the first major naval showdown since the Battle of Leyte Gulf—this time with the Chinese Communist Party's proprietary fleet, the People's Liberation Army Navy, and not with the Imperial Japanese Navy—appears now inevitable.

The United States was defeated on the ground in Southeast Asia fifty years ago. The United States was brought to a standstill—from which it still has not been able to extricate itself—in a land war on the Korean Peninsula seventy years ago. The United States was defeated less than a year ago by a comically inferior militia (if the Taliban even warrant that probably too-generous description) in central Asia. As I write this, the United States is offering itself up to a land war in Ukraine, with the very power which now claims the territorial dominion once swayed by none other than Josef Stalin. For nearly three quarters of a century, the Americans have done the Russians a favor, as I see it, by occupying Europe, via NATO, and thereby keeping Russia's only credible rival, Germany, from rampaging again. As the Soviet empire collapsed, the [Americans broke their promises](#) and expanded NATO—into Eurasia, not into the Atlantic or Africa, but deeper into Asia.

The United States, like Japan, is a natural maritime power that has no business getting involved in foreign wars of any kind, especially not in foreign land wars, and especially not in Asia. In that sense, the current adventure in Ukraine is also part of Stalin's war. The "American Century" began, was squandered, and will die, in Asia. Today, as yesterday, it is the Russians—the masters of Eurasia, now joined by the Han Chinese—who are calling the shots.

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Featured image: "The reception of the diplomatique & his suite, at the court of Peking," published by Hannah Humphrey, 1792.

