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Fragile Rise: Grand Strategy and the Fate of Imperial Germany, 1871–1914

Dale C. Rielage

Xu Qiyu

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force that arise from electing unready presidents and using poor or flawed strategic judgment, and to ensure that sufficient knowledge and understanding of the reasons for using or rejecting military force are in place. He calls for a “brains based approach” to strategic thinking—a term that I, as army and defense chief, borrowed shamelessly. He proposes a “Bletchley Park–like capacity” for using open-source material available on social media and unclassified avenues such as Google Earth to enhance knowledge and understanding. Some of Ullman’s recommendations are unique to the United States, but in the main any and all leaders and students of national security will benefit greatly from this book. Indeed, to reinforce the recommendation of Messrs. Powell, Kerry, and Jones, read this book! And, as Lord Dobbs adds, this is a very good and intriguing read as well.

LORD RICHARDS OF HERSTMONCEUX



Fragile Rise: Grand Strategy and the Fate of Imperial Germany, 1871–1914, by Xu Qiyu, trans. Joshua Hill. Foreword by Graham Allison. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017. 368 pages. \$32.

Once in a great while, a book allows the familiar to be viewed through new eyes. *Fragile Rise* is such a volume. On its surface, it is an account of imperial Germany’s catastrophic grand strategy between the nation’s founding in 1871 and the onset of the First World War. While this is well-tilled ground, *Fragile Rise* provides a clear and convincing account of how Otto von Bismarck mitigated the tensions created by Germany’s newfound power within the European system, and how his successors failed at the same

task. But what makes *Fragile Rise* unique is less what it says than who is saying it. The author, Xu Qiyu, is an active-duty colonel in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) who serves as deputy director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in Beijing—the counterpart to the U.S. National Defense University.

USN readers who harbor cartoonish images of our PLA counterparts may be surprised at the depth of research and insight offered in this volume. Xu has been a visiting fellow and guest of a number of prestigious Western institutions, including the Naval War College, where he is respected as a subtle and engaging thinker. His research and writing reflect that experience, informed by international scholarship and primary-source material from across Europe.

Throughout the book, Xu draws no explicit parallels between the German and Chinese experiences, although the book’s translator points out that the cover of the Chinese edition features the words “When it is difficult to see clearly into the future, looking back into history, even the history of other peoples, might be the right choice.” In China there is a long tradition of using historical examples to offer implicit criticism of what may not be criticized officially, and how *Fragile Rise* can be viewed in this light is apparent upon reading.

Xu characterizes the newly unified Germany as following a “hide and bide” strategy, recalling Deng Xiaoping’s guidance that an emerging China should hide its capabilities and bide its time, avoiding international leadership and the complications that come from displays of power. By 1878, however, Germany found itself a factor and a source of concern in the international

arena, despite its preference for the low-key. Bismarck's active management mitigated the international friction that this shift in power engendered. If one seeks a hopeful message, Graham Allison observes in his foreword that Xu proposes that skilled leaders can "reshape unfavorable situations."

Nonetheless, Xu notes that Bismarck was managing a "fundamental" conflict, one woven into the fabric of a possible power transition. The environment was rife with suspicion, and the European system offered little tolerance for strategic error. Xu assesses that, following Bismarck's dismissal, Germany committed two significant blunders. First, it embarked on an expensive naval expansion that was tangential to its core interests. Its appetite for such an effort was fed by a consistent insensitivity to the value Great Britain placed on sea power. Dismissing arguments that German overseas trade and colonial possessions justified the risk of strategic confrontation, Xu notes that Tirpitz's "luxury fleet" cost Germany any chance of accommodation with Britain. By 1907, as Germany's primary strategic adversary—despite significant economic and cultural ties—Britain embraced what was effectively a containment policy.

Second, Xu is similarly critical of the German army's failure to subordinate its military planning to Germany's wider political ends. Given that Xu serves a military controlled by a single political party, there is perhaps no more pointed criticism in the PLA vernacular.

Fragile Rise devotes lengthy and thoughtful attention to the role of popular opinion in driving Germany to unwise strategic choices. Germany's rapid rise was a source of pride among

the German people, but it created pressures that German institutions were poorly prepared to mitigate. Indeed, Xu argues that the *Weltpolitik* policy of the late Wilhelmine period was primarily a product of domestic pressures. In a China in which the ruling Communist Party makes massive investments in managing, shaping, and controlling public opinion, such concern resonates.

At least one American reviewer has been critical of the tendency for U.S. readers to view *Fragile Rise* through the lens of United States–China power dynamics, arguing that it should be respected as a contribution to the historical literature in its own right. While this is true, naval professionals naturally—given the author's association with China's senior military college—will be less interested in issues of historical interpretation than of Chinese perceptions of historical corollary.

It is possible that an American reader will be left with the impression that a lively debate over the wisdom of China's present course is ongoing. In fact, *Fragile Rise* was completed in 2011 during the closing days of Hu Jintao's rule, when the environment in Beijing was more open and China's course less certain. Xi Jinping effectively has ended this debate. Recent pronouncements of the ruling Communist Party leave no doubt that China has embraced its expanding role in the world and the naval expansion that supports it. All that remains to see is whether China can produce a Bismarck who can navigate around the shoals along the way. In the meantime, *Fragile Rise* presents a small window into a debate that largely has passed into history already, as well as the thinking that accompanied the charting of that course.

DALE C. RIELAGE