

2001

## Fire in the East: The Rise of Asian Military Power and the Second Nuclear Age,

Philip L. Ritcheson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Ritcheson, Philip L. (2001) "Fire in the East: The Rise of Asian Military Power and the Second Nuclear Age," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 54 : No. 1 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol54/iss1/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

which nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction will continue to cast a shadow over international relations, even if no single superpower confronts the United States as a possible enemy.

Gray certainly claims to be in step with rapidly changing events, while cautioning us against the missteps of others. Even while he asserts that the role of nuclear weapons will be substantially different in light of all that has happened in the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Gray, by stressing a *second* nuclear age, emphasizes that such weapons will still be very important.

However, one suspects that most of the advice offered here, now that the Cold War is over, is not really so different from the advice the author was offering during the Cold War, advice that did not have much influence on policy. Gray states that anti-missile defense is necessary, not merely desirable. Yet was not his message earlier that such defenses were desirable, almost to the point of being necessary?

Gray says that deterrence is not always reliable—the same message he often advanced with regard to the Soviet Union. He notes that the American advantage in conventional weapons, in conjunction with the enthusiasm over a “revolution in military affairs,” may be transitory and illusory; however, during the Cold War he believed that the advantage in conventional warfare rested with Moscow.

Gray scoffs at the analyses that emphasize preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, suggesting instead that such proliferation may be inevitable—a condition rather than a problem. But in the old days of the Cold War, Gray was ready to argue that one should not make too much of the Soviet-American cooperation

in pushing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; such a joint interest was not nearly so important as the issues that divided Washington and Moscow—and they were dire.

In short, Colin Gray’s book may be right on many of the points it raises, but it is misleading to advertise it as heralding something so new as a “second” nuclear age.

As always, Gray displays a broad awareness of the contemporary literature, set against a deep familiarity with history. But notwithstanding Gray’s critical analysis of the foibles of those who prematurely think that any “nuclear age” has come to an end, his own prose at times comes across as wordy and convoluted, and his message has not changed.

In sum, the book might amount to what could have been said as well in one of the author’s journal articles.

GEORGE H. QUESTER  
*University of Maryland*



Bracken, Paul. *Fire in the East: The Rise of Asian Military Power and the Second Nuclear Age*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. 186pp. \$25

The incorporation of Asia into the Western-dominated international system is critical for the United States. At present, the United States is reacting to events in Asia instead of shaping them. This is the fundamental message of *Fire in the East*, an important book by Paul Bracken of Yale University.

Asia, extending from Israel to North Korea, has become increasingly visible since the end of the (primarily Eurocentric) Cold War. Discussions of Asian strength, however, have been flawed. Japan has struggled economically for ten years, and

it still lacks political and military power. The intent of Chinese modernization and its impact on the world community remain subjects of controversy. The 1998 "Asian Flu" wracked the economies of the infamous "Little Tigers," thereby diminishing their statures.

Because globalization and nationalism provide the means and desire to develop nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, and the ballistic missiles to deliver them, rising Asian power is increasingly important. As Bracken contends, globalization is about economics, not politics, yet it increases national military potential by providing multiple, inexpensive sources of weapons and military technologies. Consequently, proliferation in a globalized economy is a long-term process linked to rising global scientific and technological prowess. Add to this existing national security motivations for the development of these capabilities, and it is evident how and why Asian military power will grow.

These trends are particularly important because they constitute a second nuclear age. Recent evidence abounds; for instance, in the wake of the Gulf War it was discovered just how close Iraq had been to completing a deliverable nuclear weapon. Iranian missile and nuclear ambitions are clear, punctuated by a medium-range ballistic missile test in 1998. The governments of Pakistan and India conducted flight tests of similar missiles in April 1998 and May 1999, respectively, and each country detonated nuclear weapons in May 1998. China is actively modernizing both its nuclear capabilities and ballistic missiles, manifested by an August 1999 flight test of a mobile intercontinental ballistic missile. Much has been written about the nuclear potential of North Korea, which continues to

develop and test ballistic missiles, most notably in August 1998.

Bracken maintains that these trends portend the decline of Western military dominance, in part because Asia and the West are moving in different directions. For example, nationalism, considered by the United States to be an anachronism, remains a powerful force in Asia. In another case of strategic divergence, Bracken highlights different approaches to warfare. The U.S. prefers long-range, stealthy, and precise conventional attacks that allow conflict that is quick and bloodless (with respect to Americans), with less collateral harm to noncombatants and civilian resources. In the East, indiscriminate weapons and ballistic missiles encourage more destructive and decisive options.

American policy may encourage the growth of Asian political-military power. By preferring an antiseptic form of future war and by not preparing for casualties, the United States leaves itself vulnerable to, and provides incentive for, a nation that has a greater will to visit destruction upon its adversaries. This has the further result of straining the foundations of deterrence. In the first nuclear age, the United States sought to deter one opponent, the Western-oriented and largely risk-averse Soviet Union. Now, the United States must deter multiple powers whose values, belief systems, and strategic-cultural orientations differ greatly from those of the United States.

This is not merely an academic point. Although deterrence during the Cold War was dangerous, the Cold War never turned hot. The perils of the second nuclear age, however, have already been evinced: the Iraqi obstinacy in 1990 that led to war; the crisis-filled nuclear negotiations with North Korea between 1992 and 1994; the 1996 Taiwan Straits crisis

with China; and the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests. These events illustrate a dynamic that pits increased Asian assertiveness against U.S. desire for the status quo.

Bracken argues these points persuasively. Historically, these kinds of systemic transformations have been the most dangerous. In the fifth century B.C., Thucydides asserted that the Peloponnesian War had begun due to Spartan fear of rising Athenian power. Thus, a greater discussion of how to integrate such diverse, assertive, and armed Asian nations would have been interesting.

It could be objected that Bracken incorrectly treats many dissimilar nations, governments, and cultures as if they were the same. Simply stated, it makes a difference what kind of government is in power. In addition, other variables are not accounted for, such as the disintegration of the Iranian theocracy (less than twenty-five years ago Iran was our staunchest ally in the Middle East). In North Korea, whether a “soft landing” or a more violent collapse occurs could fundamentally influence regional transformation. Last, the effect of potentially severe ethnic problems in China is not addressed.

Despite these shortcomings, Bracken deals convincingly with important topics. Footnotes are not to be found, and his bibliography is limited given the breadth of the subject, but he has integrated information from a variety of fields. Defense and foreign policy students and practitioners alike should read *Fire in the East*.

PHILIP L. RITCHESON  
Falls Church, Virginia



Lilley, James R., and David Shambaugh, eds. *China's Military Faces the Future*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 356pp. \$29.95

This collection of high-quality essays by some of the leading experts on the Chinese military is the product of the 1997 Seventh Annual Conference on the People's Liberation Army (PLA), sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute. The authors, although inspired by different security and threat perceptions, present sober, straightforward, and reasonable assessments of PLA efforts to modernize itself in the 1990s and of its prospects for the immediate future. Evidence drawn from the essays shows that the PLA is increasingly modern, confident, and assertive but that it has not yet developed sophisticated theories and technologies comparable to those of the United States or relevant to fighting an American-style, high-tech limited war, or any war beyond its borders. The provocative variations on this theme, shaped by starkly different—seemingly contradictory, yet ultimately reinforcing—dynamics of Chinese and East Asian politics, are instrumental in defining the evolution and nature of the PLA.

This perceptive, informative, and well written book is divided into four sections: on the “New High Command,” “Doctrine, Strategy, and Weapons,” the “Support Base,” and “China's Northeast Asian Security Environment.” Each section has its strengths. After a careful but critical examination of biographical materials on new military leaders, the first provides unusual insight into the PLA's inner circle of decision making by identifying two fundamental changes in civil-military relations in the post-Deng era. First, none of the top party leaders has any military background or connections, whereas none