

BOOK REVIEWS

Lorenz M. Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 756 pp. \$34.99.

Reviewed by Melvyn P. Leffler, University of Virginia (emeritus)

This book should command the attention of all Cold War historians. It is a book of prodigious research and immense erudition. Lorenz Lüthi has visited archives in the United States, England, Russia, China, Australia, India, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Austria, among other places. His aim is noteworthy: to “de-center” the Cold War. He argues that, for the most part, developments in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe had roots not in the global Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union but in “structural” changes in each of these regions that presaged the Cold War’s end. He rejects the triumphalist narrative of some U.S. writers, minimizes the role of President Ronald Reagan, and claims that Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union, did not want to end the Cold War and instead yearned to win that conflict. Overall, Lüthi stresses the agency of local actors and regional dynamics and claims that the capacity of Moscow and Washington to shape events was circumscribed by “decolonization, Asian-African Internationalism, pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, Arab-Israeli hostility, and European economic developments” (p. 1).

Despite the ambition and learning that inform every page of this tome, the book is beset with interpretive ambiguities and conceptual problems. Lüthi argues that the Cold War was not predetermined but was the collective result of “ideological clashes, unilateral decisions, political disagreements, and misperceptions” (p. 13). Its origins rest in the desires of the USSR to “overthrow the imperialist-capitalist world system and the establishment of a stateless and classless society across the globe” (p. 3). In contrast to Odd Arne Westad’s *The Cold War: A World History* (New York; Basic Books, 2017), Lüthi pays scant attention to the economic contradictions within global capitalism in the late nineteenth century, the cyclical fluctuations of business cycles in the early twentieth century, the rise of the Left, the yearnings for structural change within capitalism, and the disillusionment spawned by two world wars and the Great Depression. Rather, Lüthi’s focus is on imperial aspirations and ideological conflict. He elides geostrategic motivations, the underlying dynamics of global capitalism, and the legacy of World War II. He does not explain that controlling German power in Europe and harnessing Japanese power in Asia were key components of the global Cold War as well as the regional Cold Wars in Europe and Asia. He does not show how the perceived structural dynamics of global capitalism impelled policymakers in North America, Europe, and Japan to focus on integrating the core industrial areas

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of global capitalism with markets and raw materials in the “periphery”; that is, in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa. He does not illustrate how socioeconomic unrest and political turmoil stemming from the Great Depression and World War II created perceptions of threat and opportunity in Moscow and Washington that set the conditions for the Cold War.

The great attribute of this volume is Lüthi’s detailed description of developments in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. Cold War historians will be surprised by his decision to place developments in the Middle East at the forefront of the volume (chapter two), even while he argues that the Cold War did not come to the Middle East until the Suez crisis (chapters 8–10). The Middle East commands initial attention because Lüthi focuses on the legacy of British imperialism and the desires of officials in London to remake their empire in the aftermath of World War II with the help of the Arab League. In this context, Lüthi luminously describes inter-Arab dynamics, Arab-Israeli hostilities, and the rise of pan-Islamism. He stresses Anwar el-Sadat’s desire to expel Soviet influence from Egypt, the complex dynamics spawned by the Palestinian quest for statehood, and the repercussions of the Iranian revolution. By the early 1980s, he writes, “the Cold War ceased to be the critical structure that shaped the regional system in the Middle East” (p. 518). But it is not clear what he means by the “regional system,” or whether the Cold War had ever shaped it. It is also not clear what constituted the regional Cold War in the Middle East when so many of the wars were hot, not cold. The role of oil in shaping the local, regional, and international dynamics of the different versions of Cold War in the region goes totally unexamined.

Lüthi’s discussion of Asia is central to the overall thesis of his book. “Three countries,” he writes, “played major roles in Asia’s Cold War. China, Vietnam, and India all were dynamic agents in the shaping of their own fates and not just passive battlegrounds in the global competition between the United States and the Soviet Union” (p. 115). Lüthi shows how the Sino-Soviet split, the Chinese rapprochement with the United States, the unification of revolutionary Vietnam, and “the collapse of communism as a unifying program for national liberation” (p. 537) reshaped the Asian Cold War during the 1970s. But here again it is not clear precisely what the Asian Cold War was, and why Japan is totally omitted from its discussion. Perhaps Lüthi would argue that Japan lacked agency, but even if that was the case the country was crucial to the trajectory of the Vietnam War and the U.S. role in it. Numerous historians—Howard Schonberger, Michael Schaller, Andrew Rotter, William Borden, and Robert Blum, among others—have shown in great detail how the goal of reconstructing and stabilizing Japan impelled U.S. officials to thwart Communist gains in Southeast Asia, create an independent South Vietnam, establish the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, and support the rightwing military coup, crackdown, and massacres in Indonesia. While ignoring these dimensions of the Asian Cold War, Lüthi presents fascinating chapters on China, Vietnam, and India, on Asian-African internationalism, and on nonalignment. He shows that the Asian Cold War had many manifestations and permutations. At different times, in different ways, these trajectories affected the U.S.-Soviet global conflict and were influenced by that conflict. But Lüthi also acknowledges that

“the end of the global Cold War primarily required a strategic rethinking in Moscow which would only come in March 1985 with Mikhail S. Gorbachev’s ascent to power” (p. 537).

Strategic rethinking was necessitated by developments in Europe. Lüthi incisively describes the successful integrationist initiatives in Western Europe and the concomitant failures in the Soviet-imposed Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. He emphasizes the ability of Western economies to recalibrate, innovate, and adjust to changing economic and monetary conditions, and he highlights the failures of centrally managed systems to do so. He minimizes the role of the United States in the reconstruction of Western Europe, mentioning that it “provided a stable and supportive framework” (p. 380). Ultimately, the failure of Communist economies to compete and modernize contributed to the flagging popular support for Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War. But Lüthi does not make much of an effort to analyze the basic shortcomings in Communist systems, nor does he examine why and how liberal capitalist and social-democratic market economies were able to adapt successfully. For example, he describes the impact of declining oil prices in the 1980s and the constraints that imposed on Moscow’s ability to subsidize the economies of its East European satellites, but he rarely makes an attempt to analyze the dysfunctionality of Soviet agricultural policies or the flawed operations of central planning. He stresses the resilience of West European economies but barely mentions the creation of social welfare states and the role of governments in providing minimal social provision and expanding educational opportunity, access to medical care, and support for basic research.

This volume is a monumental attempt to de-center the Cold War and restore agency to middle-level powers and local actors. What it does is de-center international politics. It illuminates that much was going on in the latter half of the twentieth century that was not the product of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War but at times intersected with it and contributed to its denouement. Small powers had their own agendas, and regional dynamics had their own logic. In complicated ways, developments in one region influenced those in another. Thanks to the prodigious research of an author with staggering linguistic skills and breathtaking knowledge of multiple literatures, one comes away much better informed about the complexities of international politics but not equally enlightened about the Cold War itself.



Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos: China’s Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. 320 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by June Teufel Dreyer, University of Miami (Florida)

Sulmaan Khan’s study examines China’s grand strategy, defined as the way the country’s leaders marshal different forms of power to pursue national objectives. Mao