
by Parag Khanna

In the 21st century the empires strike back. The United States, the European Union and China dare not call themselves imperial powers, Parag Khanna argues in “The Second World,” his sweeping, often audacious survey of contemporary geopolitics, but they are busy reshaping the globe to suit their interests. The game is afoot, with the natural resources and potential wealth of countries like Ukraine, Turkey and Brazil as the prize.

Mr. Khanna is the director of the Global Governance Initiative at the New America Foundation, a public policy institute. He strides the world in seven-league boots, armed with a powerful thesis: in the postcolonial, post-cold-war era, three superpowers have emerged with a ravenous appetite for energy and natural resources. Restlessly, they look to the second-tier economies of Latin America, the former Soviet bloc, the Middle East and Asia for partners or patsies. This argument was laid out recently in The New York Times Magazine in an excerpt it published from the book.

No shots will be fired. Instead the three imperial rivals will woo and coerce, relying on distinct styles. The United States offers military protection, along with the promise of democracy and human rights. The European Union dangles the prospect of membership in, or affiliation with, the world’s most successful economic club, provided that applicants undertake specific reforms. China talks trade, investment and infrastructure projects, with no annoying demands for political reform in its would-be client states.

“To a large extent, the future of the second world hinges on how it relates to the three superpowers,” Mr. Khanna writes, “and the future of the superpowers depends on how they manage the second world.”

Like a geopolitical tour guide, he moves at lightning speed across the scattered countries of the second world to assess the prospects of, say, Russia or Malaysia, and to see how the superpowers are faring in their courtship rituals.

Russia will be much smaller, its dwindling population “spread so thinly across a territory so vast that it no longer even makes demographic sense as a country.” The allure of European Union membership has already drawn Eastern Europe into the union’s orbit, while China controls vast swaths of Central Asia, almost by default.

Malaysia’s future looks bright. Playing a shrewd second-world game, it cultivates good relations with both the United States and China (just as elusive Kazakhstan has made sure that its oil pipelines run north, south, east and west), while channeling oil revenues into diversifying its economy and building its infrastructure.

Malaysia makes a stark contrast to Indonesia, “a sprawling, waterborne golf course in which a mix of foreign companies and countries claim ownership of different holes,” Mr. Khanna writes. He has a knack for reducing a country to a phrase. Taiwan is “a stateless economic node,” with a relationship to China he describes as “mutual colonization.”

“The Second World” is rewarding simply as a primer on contemporary geopolitics. Anyone curious about the lay of the land in Algeria or Tajikistan can get answers, and a dash of local color, in Mr. Khanna’s succinct chapters, which envelop the reader in a whirlwind of facts and figures, some eye-opening, others merely perplexing.

“Elderly couples learn to tango at night by the illuminated Ming-era city walls,” Mr. Khanna observes of Beijing.

This is fascinating, or perhaps not. Like Arthur Frommer with an economics degree, Mr. Khanna loves to set a scene in 10 words or fewer, getting a few carts carrying bales of mint into the picture frame as he strolls through a Moroccan medina. He seasons the narrative with brief quotations from anonymous taxi
drivers, journalists and government officials, each allowed one culturally relevant action, like the engineering student who comments on Egypt’s leadership crisis “while devouring a plate of kebabs.”

Mr. Khanna is not averse to the bland “time will tell” summation either, and on occasion the crystal ball becomes cloudy. “It is hard to overestimate the fluidity of the early-21st-century landscape,” Mr. Khanna writes sagely.

Mr. Khanna, who was born in India but raised in the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Germany, takes a dim view of India’s future, bets on Chile as the South American country most likely to advance to first-world status and predicts, quite calmly, the dissolution of Iraq.

“Iraq has been terminated before, and history will do so again,” he writes. “In the long term, the region could be the better for it.”

Among the superpowers, the big loser could be the United States, which Mr. Khanna describes in contemptuous terms. His admiration for the European Union, which has skillfully concentrated on the long-term transformation and stabilization of prospective partners, knows no bounds. China also wins his admiration, despite its human-rights record. In general, Mr. Khanna, who argues that democracy is a luxury that wealthy nations can afford, more than tolerates the enlightened despotism of countries like Singapore and Malaysia.

The United States, by contrast, is described as naïve and arrogant, a musclebound superpower searching for a brain. The State Department, he writes, is run like “the world’s largest travel agency.” With its special envoys and troubleshooters rushing around the planet to put out brush fires, the United States practices a “diplomacy by dilettantism” unworthy of a great power.

In his polemical conclusion Mr. Khanna becomes a little unhinged in his analysis of the ills afflicting the United States, which, by his description, should collapse sometime in the middle of next month. He works himself into a lather over the popularity of police car chases on television, football and “wasteful motor sports.”

“American socioeconomic attitudes would be laughable if they were not so scary,” he writes.

A prime example of imperial overstretch, the United States faces a highly uncertain future, Mr. Khanna argues, somewhat more coherently, with economic decline and waning international influence distinct possibilities. From a position of world dominance, it must readjust to a fluid international order in which it is “merely one of several competing vendors or brands on the catwalk of credibility.” You sense that Mr. Khanna will enjoy the show.