Americans have been present in the Pacific since the dawn of the Republic. At the time of George Washington’s inauguration in 1789, the country consisted of just 13 states huddled along the Atlantic seaboard, but in the geography of sail navigation Boston and New York were just as close to China as were London, Liverpool, and other European ports. More importantly, the United States was by far the largest whaling country in the world, and with the Atlantic increasingly “fished” out, the whales were in the Pacific. The “Canton trade” with China and the whaling grounds of the northern Pacific made the nascent United States the second most important trading country in Asia (after England).

As the US expanded across the North American continent, it was perhaps inevitable that it would eventually leap the great Pacific Ocean itself. As early as 1842, US President John Tyler extended the “Monroe Doctrine” to cover Hawaii. This American policy, warning Europeans off interference in the Western Hemisphere, had previously only been applied to Latin America. Throughout the 1850s, there were serious prospects that the US might occupy Okinawa or Taiwan as a kind of “American Hong Kong,” and in 1869 the US actually did purchase Alaska (including the Aleutian Islands of the North Pacific) from Russia. In 1898, the US Asiatic Squadron steamed into Manila Bay, establishing the United States not just as a Pacific trading country but as an Asian military and colonial power, too.

The question of how far west to go—where to “draw the line” of American power in the Pacific—is the central question of Michael J Green’s magisterial history of American diplomacy in the Pacific, By More Than Providence: Grand strategy and American power in the Asia Pacific since 1783. Much to Green’s credit, he takes America’s first Pacific century seriously, even if he does give it just 100 pages of a 550 page book (endnotes and the index bring the full text to more than 700 pages). Another 100 pages bring the story up to the surrender of Japan, with the
balance of the book focused on the postwar era. Green takes his analysis right up to the prospects for American Asia-Pacific policy post-Obama, though at the time of writing he was unaware that the next president would be Donald Trump.

Green’s deep historical context is instructive, because the fundamental strategic questions of America’s third Pacific century are strikingly similar to those of the first two. To what extent should the US get involved in the internal affairs of China? Should the US give highest priority to its relations with China or those with Japan? Is the Korean peninsula strategically relevant to the United States? Is Southeast Asia? And perhaps most importantly, what should American diplomats do when immediate national interests conflict with cherished national values? By More Than Providence doesn’t always answer these questions, but it does provide historical precedents for those who will have to answer such questions in the future. It is an indispensable guide to American Pacific diplomacy.

West to the East

By More than Providence portrays Asia from a New World perspective. The great geographical error of Eurocentric world historiography has been the almost ineradicable linguistic tendency of people to think of China as the “Far East”. Viewed on a map, China is indeed to the east of Europe. But in military, economic, and social reality, China is more closely connected to its Pacific neighbors than to arid, mountainous Eurasia. Russia is the only European country that has a substantial history of direct overland contact with China, and that contact remains tenuous. California looms much larger in the Chinese imagination than Siberia or Russia’s maritime Primorsky Krai.

When outsiders eventually came to threaten China in the middle of the 19th century, it was primarily from the sea, not from the land. In two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) the United Kingdom invaded China from the Pacific, not overland from India. By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan was also threatening China from the east, going to war with China over Korea and Taiwan in 1894–1895. And far off in China’s far, far east the nascent United States attempted to play the role of honest broker, offering its “good offices” as a mediator to help China negotiate with the European and Asian colonial powers that would carve it up.
Until the end of the 19th century, both China and the United States had poorly-defined Pacific frontiers. The American doctrine of “manifest destiny” is of course well-known: the idea that the United States had some kind of divine right to spread from “sea to shining sea”—and perhaps beyond. Less well-known (among native English speakers) is the Chinese concept of tianxia (“all under heaven”): the idea that China is the central state (“middle kingdom”) of a civilizational space that extended as far as the light of Chinese culture could be seen. Long before Lewis and Clark first glimpsed the Pacific Ocean, Chinese explorers, merchants, teachers, and settlers had spread throughout Southeast Asia and the “first island chain” off China’s coast in the western Pacific Ocean.

Just as the United States began the 19th century with no fixed western frontier on the North American continent, imperial China had no fixed eastern frontier in the Pacific. And just like the early United States, its frontier neighbors were weak, disorganized, and non-industrialized. But by the middle of the 19th century, China was faced with European (primarily British but also French and German) incursions from the sea. Later in the century a rapidly industrializing Japan began to pose an even greater threat. China’s porous Pacific frontier became its most vulnerable border as a series of humiliating “unequal treaties” forced China to relinquish much of its territorial sovereignty.

America’s porous Pacific frontier, by contrast, posed no realistic threats to the security and sovereignty of the United States. When Japan did eventually attack the US in 1941, the US was able to inflict total devastation on Japan in less than four years—while at the same time fighting a discretionary (from the US point of view) war in Europe that consumed the majority of American resources. Green endorses US President Franklin Roosevelt’s reasoning that a “Europe first” strategy for the war was necessary because a German victory over Russia and/or Britain would have made it impossible for the US to retake Europe, but this begs the question by assuming that German domination of Europe would have threatened key American interests. “Europe first” may have turned into a moral imperative, but in terms of “grand strategy”, there are good reasons to think it was a mistake.

The last island chain
In light of the horrors of the Holocaust, it has become politically incorrect bordering on dangerous to argue that the US shouldn’t have prioritized the war in Europe, but the purpose of grand strategy (strangely left undefined by Green) is surely to generate insights about national interests that have the potential to inform national policy. A relatively weak country may have no use for grand strategy at all (no one blames Bolivia for not preventing the Holocaust) and a strong country may be expected to put aside strategic considerations in the pursuit of higher ends (for example, it was morally inexcusable for the Soviet Union to delay the liberation of Poland while the Nazis exterminated the Warsaw uprising).

Green, a clear-eyed realist when it comes to the 19th century, can be an inconsistent guide to the 20th. For example, he brilliantly draws the strategic parallels displayed by the communist challenges to American interests in China, Korea, and Vietnam. Over a sustained stretch of three chapters he substantiates the conjecture that “the United States committed hundreds of thousands of troops to Korea and Vietnam ... because it was unwilling to commit a few thousand advisors” to Chiang Kai-shek’s China in 1947. Yet he passes over the fact that the fall of China to Japan a few years earlier would have been far worse for US interests—and a much more serious threat to the US itself than the potential fall of the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany.

The problem is that even though “grand strategy” is right in the title of Green’s book, Green himself writes more like an historian (for the earlier chapters) or a policy insider (for the later ones) than like a strategic analyst. As an historian, he is absolutely correct to identify the determination of the optimal western border of American expansion as the key problem in US grand strategy in the Pacific. As far back as the 1850s, American diplomats and naval strategists were debating whether the US should establish a presence on the Asian mainland, engage with mainland Asia from the “first island chain”, or operate from oceanic bases in Hawaii and Samoa. These three basic strategic options still drive American policy today.

But as a strategist (“grand” or otherwise), Green misses the larger historical narrative told piecemeal by his contemporary sources. Unlike any other area of the world (except perhaps the Caribbean), the Pacific has historically developed as an extension of the United States itself. Wilhelm and Hitler attacked American allies in Europe. Tojo attacked America in the
Pacific. That’s why the long-term historical continuity of American strategy in the Pacific contrasts so strongly with the changeability of American strategy toward Europe and the Middle East. Green himself repeatedly points out how the continuity of America’s strategy in the Asia-Pacific has repeatedly reasserted itself despite the often short-termist thinking of American officials, but he does not explore the underlying reasons why this is so.

This disconnect seems to stem from Green’s understanding of strategy itself. Early on he explicitly summarizes American grand strategy in the region as the principle that “the United States will not tolerate any other power establishing exclusive hegemonic control over Asia or the Pacific.” But the same might be said of US strategy toward any region of the world. Green fails to identify what is distinctive about US strategy toward the Asia-Pacific, though he does come frustratingly close. He quotes the American Edwin Reischauer as writing in 1968 that the US has “a great stake in the future of Asia—a far greater stake than the Asia of today,” and rightly points out that the “same might have been said a century earlier by [Lincoln’s Secretary of State] William Henry Seward.” He might have looked to Seward as a source for American grand strategy.

In fact, Reischauer was echoing Seward, but Seward was even more visionary. In an 1852 speech on the Pacific commerce, Seward predicted that “the Pacific Ocean, its shores, its islands, and the vast regions beyond, will become the chief theater of events in the World’s great Hereafter.” Seventeen years later, he negotiated the purchase of Alaska (ridiculed as “Seward’s Folly”). He also advocated the annexation of Hawaii and other Pacific islands, and the opening of Korea to American trade. Many of the most evocative characters in Green’s epic story, from Matthew “opening of Japan” Perry to Douglas “I shall return” MacArthur to Richard “China card” Nixon, treated the Pacific as an extension of America, not so much an important theater of international relations as a new frontier for continued westward expansion.

A study of American grand strategy should start from an analysis of such larger aims and motivations. Green regularly writes of “ways and means” but rarely of ultimate “ends”. He usually prefers the policy analyst’s narrower term, “objectives”. But to read the history of American policy in the Asia-Pacific as a story of repeated struggles to meet limited objectives (fresh water for whalers, coaling stations for steamers, the defense of the
Philippines, the prevention of communist takeovers, the maintenance of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea) is to completely miss the “grand” in American grand strategy.

Seen a part of the “grand” narrative of America’s westward expansion, the “first island chain” consisting of Japan, the Ryukyus, Taiwan, and the Philippines are not a line of defense against attacks from the Asian mainland. They are the “last island chain” in America’s Pacific expansion. Similarly, South Korea and South Vietnam were not exposed outposts of the American defensive perimeter. They were bridgeheads for bringing American power onto the Asian continent itself. The conventional narrative of nuclear-armed, economically-ascendant, undamaged post-war America as a beleaguered country beset on all sides by enemies defies common sense. The fact that America’s postwar ambitions were even greater than its postwar reality only underscores the extraordinary expansiveness of America’s Pacific ambitions.

Whose grand strategy is it?

By More Than Providence is packaged as a book on strategy (grand or otherwise), but in the end it is most effective as a comprehensive history of American Pacific diplomacy. Nearly all criticisms of the book fall away if the author is not held to the demanding standard of analyzing the continuous development of America’s “grand” strategy over a period of more than 200 years. Green himself never even defines the term, saying only that grand strategy involves “the measured application of ways and means to achieve national objectives.” Green even goes so far to question whether or not the US is “capable of grand strategy.” He answers in the affirmative, concluding that “American grand strategy has been episodic and inefficient, but in the aggregate it has been effective.” But he never says exactly what the strategy was, that was so robust.

Evaluated at the micro level of detailed policy analysis, By More Than Providence is superb. Green uses historical material from before World War Two to set the intellectual stage for a year-by-year guide to post-war American foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region. The first 200 pages—a book in themselves—demonstrate the continuity of American strategic thinking from the earliest days of the republic through the surrender of Japan. Green traces the “one China” policy to European attempts to dismember China during the Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s and the
“nonrecognition” of territorial aggrandizement in violation of international law to the Japanese expansionism of the 1930s. Both principles are still operative in US policy responses to the South China Sea dispute today.

The final 300 pages of the book evaluate the foreign policy records of each post-war administration at the deliberate pace of one chapter per president. Green displays a real insider’s feel for the personalities, even those he can only have known through documents and memoirs. A Republican, Green is perhaps a bit partisan in evaluating Carter, Clinton, and Obama, but not so much as to raise questions about his judgment. Green’s criticisms of these Democratic presidents are reasonable and well-documented; their missteps in Asia were real, not manufactured by the historian. All the same, Green is noticeably more charitable in his characterization of George W Bush.

All in all, By More Than Providence is a first-rate history of American foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region. It is distinctive for its historical depth, and its coverage of the post-war period is especially strong on Vietnam. Even a long review like this one can only scratch the surface of this encyclopedic but highly readable book. If it falls short as a work of theory, it excels as a guide to practice; every new employee of the Asia desks of the State Department and National Security Council should be issued a copy and told to read it. If the Chinese are smart, they will assign it to their diplomats, too. And for armchair strategists and everyday readers, it’s just a lot of fun to learn the history of America’s Pacific story from such an engaging and well-informed guide.

Green is unequivocal that the “central argument of this book has been that American grand strategy toward Asia has deep historical roots and did not simply appear out of whole cloth with the Second World War.” He’s certainly right about the historical roots. Perhaps it’s for others to decide what the grand strategy itself is, or should be.

Salvatore Babones

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By More than Providence is a gold mine of richly documented historical detail, informed by international relations theory, and enlivened by the hands-on policymaker's nose for bureaucratic turf battles, clashing personalities, and Washington intrigue. Nothing makes Green's case about the importance of foresight more convincingly than the failure of those in strategy-shaping positions to recognize and blunt the mushrooming military advance of Japan in the early twentieth century. The Asia-Pacific has long loomed large in American strategic thinking and today its centrality is unparalleled. By More than Providence provides a sweep, power, and coherence that anchors that centrality historically. Michael Green's latest contribution to the field of strategic studies is, first and foremost, a history. By More Than Providence (Columbia University Press, 2017), the first comprehensive history of U.S. statecraft in the Asia-Pacific since Tyler Dennett's Americans in Eastern Asia (1922), is a much-needed attempt to answer the question: can the U.S. have a grand strategy in the Asia-Pacific? Green does this by asking whether the U.S. has ever had a grand strategy in this region. Green concludes that U.S. grand strategy may have been episodic and inefficient, but not only does it exist, it also...