

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following book review: Richards, J (2019), War or Peace: The Struggle for World Power by Deepak Lal. New Delhi: Oxford University Press (2018) which has been published in final form at doi.org/10.1111/ecaf.12337. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions."

War or Peace: The Struggle for World Power

Deepak Lal, New Delhi: Oxford University Press (2018). 495pp

ISBN (print edition): 978-0-19-948212-2; (e-book): 978-0-19-909531-5

At the beginning of the third chapter of this book, Lal makes reference to the political historian, Francis Fukuyama, and his highly influential "End of History", published in the heady days following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. This is apt, as, in many ways, Lal's "War or Peace" is reminiscent of that earlier analysis of the state of the world at a major geopolitical turning point. In Lal's words, Fukuyama presented a thesis of "the global victory of the market over the plan" (p.111). While things have not quite turned out the way Fukuyama expected, in the sense that authoritarian powers such as China and Russia have not only survived the fin de siècle but arguably flexed their muscles on the international stage with renewed confidence, Lal advocates a similar formula for the way ahead in no uncertain terms.

War or Peace is an unashamedly strong advocate of the power and righteousness of Anglo-Saxon small-state capitalism to reassert its dominance over the global economy and polity. Lal shares with Fukuyama an impressive grasp of the historical unfolding of the world's great empires, from China to Rome and the US. Lal adds an extra dimension of considering India within the geopolitical melting-pot, reminding us that it is a regional and – potentially – global counterbalance to China's rise. He is also, through his experience in the 1980s of research administrator at the World Bank and consultant to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, able to offer an extremely detailed economic understanding of world markets, and to frame geopolitical developments in these terms.

In this way, Lal is able to depict dirigiste powers such as Russia and China as paper tigers, whose apparent strength and reach are belied by structural frailties in their economies that will eventually spell their demise. The US, meanwhile, remains the undisputed hegemon in terms of its economic and military power, despite the hand-wringing of "declinists", in whose camp former President Obama is repeatedly included. Consider, for example, the fact that the tonnage of the US navy remains more than that of the next 13 navies combined (p.338). Or that, of the top 20 universities in the world, all but one are in either the US or the UK; with the one other in Japan (p.342). In Lal's view, far from declining, the US is likely to resurge as the globe's unchallenged superpower.

War or Peace was written just after Trump rose to power in the US, and, like many observers, Lal expresses uncertainty over what will happen. Insofar as Trumpism can be defined, however, there are clear elements of it in Lal's analysis. Using a selective set of data, for example, anthropomorphic climate change is dismissed (pp.212-3). The unfettered exploitation of shale gas is championed both as a tremendous economic opportunity for Western powers, and a geopolitical opportunity, in the sense that it will ensure that the US does not have to be dependent on Gulf supplies of oil or on their manipulation of the world oil price. All of this is presented without any mention of environmental concerns, and a quick dismissal of the long-term ills of relying on carbon fossil fuels. Indeed, environmentalists are dismissed as "rabid" on one occasion (p.226), and sustainable sources such as wind and solar as an unreliable waste of time.

Any discomfort experienced by more liberal readers of War or Peace might be heightened by Lal's prescription for the problem of Islamist terrorism in the Middle East. Here, a separationist argument is put forward, whereby the Middle East can be surrounded by a cordon sanitaire and allowed to stew in its own juices, until it eventually has a Peace of Westphalia moment. Such ideas have previously been the reserve of more extreme and isolationist American thinkers on 21st century world problems, and could be argued to remain flawed in terms of the logic of applying nineteenth century containment ideas to an interconnected and globalised world.

Those in favour of Brexit will be cheered by Lal's suggestion that the UK should escape with haste from an increasingly "sclerotic" EU, that is locked in a "slow dance of death" (p.165).

Indeed, if one takes Lal's wholly market-centric and anti-dirigiste approach to world affairs, without any complications arising from ideology or cultural history, many of his prescriptions have some logic and at least offer an alternative view to normative, Western-declinist views. There is much to be said, for example, in reading behind the shorter-term alarmism of Russia and China's emergence on the world stage, and considering underpinning structural factors. These do indeed reveal that such authoritarian powers still have a long way to go and could easily falter on the way. Similarly, the US could certainly be Great Again if it makes the right choices.

At the same time, one wonders if the critiques that were levelled at Fukuyama's earlier thesis, and indeed at the contemporaneous thesis of a "clash of civilisations" put forward by Samuel Huntington in the 1990s, could not also be directed at Lal's analysis. In particular, can cordons sanitaires really be considered in the highly interconnected global polity and economy? And is it sensible to talk-up the inevitability of armed conflict with China, as Lal seems to do here, when more careful diplomatic approaches could be considered? Surely China's reliance on a healthy global economy might give it cause to pause from catastrophic confrontation? Lal might dismiss such ideas as "limp" (a charge levelled at Obama) and reminiscent of Chamberlain's attempted

appeasement of Hitler. But perhaps the 21st century world is more complicated than that of previous centuries.

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