
Reviewed by Doris MIRONESCU*

Parag Khanna is a young American scholar, trained in strategic thinking and political mapping at an impressive number of think-tanks in the U.S.A. and Europe. At the same time, for writing his international best-seller *The Second World*, he confesses to have travelled in almost all the countries onto which he applied his political expertise, acquiring firsthand knowledge of the realities in place. All these „letters of accreditation” may reassure the reader of Parag Khanna’s recent bestseller that the worldview deployed in his book is not only informed and bold, but also highly qualified.

*The Second World. Empires and Influence in the New Global Order* was published in 2008 by Random House; when its second edition appeared, the following year, eleven translations (including one in Romanian) had already appeared or were under way. The book presents itself as a thorough analysis of the geopolitical scene at the beginning of the 21st century, and at the same time it maintains the profile of an intellectual travelogue. It is not a description of lands and scenery, but of cultures with distinctive values that draw upon their economical and political evolution – although not in the overwhelming manner ascribed to them by the school of thought of Samuel Huntington. Its confessed model is Arnold Toynbee’s, *East to West: A Journey Around the World* (1958), but, while Toynbee wrote his memoirs of a travelling historian at the end of his career, as a summation of a lifetime experience, Parag Khanna chose to make his editorial debut with the fresh insights of an avid observer en route around the world.

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One of the immediately recognizable merits of Khanna’s enterprise is that he never gets lost in the contemplation of picturesque scenery or custom. His attention is focused on the relevant details, and the particular references that he makes to a place or other he may have seen always serve to emphasize a certain point that his political analysis is making. Of course, the description of the shabby taxi-cabs in Egypt, of the poverty-stricken shackles in Georgia or of the bazaar atmosphere in the cities of Ferghana Valley do carry an emotional value, bringing the reader closer to the, otherwise, abstract political realities of these lands. But Khanna does not intend to compete with the literary qualities of a memoir such as Andrzej Stasiuk’s *Travelling to Babadag*. He tries, instead, to capture some of the feeling of cultural specificity that is so characteristic of many of the countries situated in the second world.

“The second world” used to be, until twenty years ago, a general denomination of the countries in the Communist block, to distinguish them both from the „first world” in Western Europe and the USA, and from the „third world” of the poorer countries in Africa or South Asia, for the good favours of which competed the two aforesaid „worlds”. In fact, only the „third world” concept stuck, designating the countries fighting with poverty, and it forced a redefinition of the other two based solely on the criterium of wealth. But, since the „first world” remaining to express the image of prosperity that the West has always seen as befitting for itself, it remained unclear which country one might today characterize as „second world”. Indeed, the area ascribed to the second world is not easy to pinpoint, since the economical good fortune of a country is only conjunctural and has a tendency to dissipate, once the policies of the government go wrong. The second world has a fluid geography, as these countries can always ascend into the first world (as, one might say, has happened with the Eastern European countries that received EU membership in the years 2000) or crumble in the chaos of the third world (as it happens each time another country in, say, Central Asia is taken over by a dictator). The second world is a purgatory, but its importance is far greater, in Parag Khanna’s opinion, than to serve as a gateway for the first world.

The idea Khanna starts his investigation with is that the conditions of existence of politics have changed in the last few decades. He sees the world as currently undergoing the effects of two combined, but not identical forces: globalization and geopolitics, often concurring, but always keeping in tension. Globalization brings, of course, peoples together and encourages dialogue between
spces that used to be perceived as remote. But, on the other hand, it is a process no
one can escape and, therefore, it changes the face of the world. Globalization can
be used as a means of cultural communication, but it may also turn into a weapon.
In short, globalization is the main reason why the world tomorrow may not
resemble much the world today.

Parag Khanna’s historical view might be called pragmatic, in that it rejects
the diplomatic lingo of both the East and West and proposes instead concepts
inspired by the 19th century Realpolitik. He chooses to regard the contemporary
political world scene as a competition between empires: two of them already in
place, and one emerging from the second world’s grey area. The word „empire”
appears as a metaphor for unified and centralized political power, so it probably
should not always be taken at face value, for there is much difference between the
actions of one great power and another. In Khanna’s view, the empires struggle for
domination of the areas around them. But, in the situation of a globalizing society,
it is unclear what is near and what is remote. Therefore, the spheres of influence
interfere, there appear overlapping areas, and competition ensues.

The only traditional empire of our world is the United States, maintaining,
albeit with difficulty, a hegemonic position in several regions across the globe.
Khanna considers, probably a little harshly, the „American way” of doing things as
obsolete and ill-fated. The interventionism on American policy abroad, its
commitement to democratization and its occasional use of armed force in conflict
zones is considered by the author of The Second World as a method reminiscent of
the Cold War era – and an efficient method, since it won that war. But, he insists,
the powers in play have changed, and their political style does not allow room for
the American traditional methods any more. It is possible that the author endorses a
change in American politics, since his book was written in the last year of George
W. Bush’s Republican administration. And, indeed, the call for a new American
way has been widely heard in this past two years in Washington.

America’s direct method is firstly opposed by Europe’s amiable and
inclusive method. If the USA are working more or less directly towards their goal
when it comes to unraveling a dictatorship or dismantling an enemy regime,
Europe prefers to induce in its preferred targets the desire to belong to the EU.
Europe is, in Parag Khanna’s opinion, a „likable” empire, which presents itself as
highly desirable to its neighbours in order to stimulate their pace towards
democracy and the market economy, and then include them in its own
multinational financial and economical system. America takes the leaders of
countries as interlocutors, but the European Union collaborates with the entire
system. Europe does not wage wars. Its main concern is to make itself attractive
through a perfectly functioning welfare state, so that the unruly regimes at its
borders may „tame” and assort themselves to the superpower construction that is
the EU. In several situations in recent history, the EU has made clear that it refuses
to engage in battlefields and it prefers mutually profitable trade. The problem with
Europe is that, at some points, it seems reluctant to embark on its imperial mission
and prefers to stay at home in areas which, in the future, might appear crucial for
its well-being. Consequently, Europe risks to remain, as Khanna puts it, just a
„Christian club” in a world in which countries that confess other religions are
playing more and more important roles.

The third and youngest empire of today is China. But its presence can be felt
everywhere, as the „textile tsunami” and several other such Chinese tsunamis have
reached, with devastating impact, the economies in Africa, South America, and
South Asia. The Far Eastern superpower’s methods of political action are different
from the other two empires’. China profits the most from today’s globalization,
economically conquering whole areas with its formidable workpower and its
abundance of low-cost (hence profitable) products of any kind. It matches this
economic imperialism with a doctrine of political non-interventionism. Having
been subjected for decades to all kinds of reproaches regarding its internal policies
and its numerous breeches of the Human Rights, China can now follow its
economic interests in areas where the Americans and Europeans do not venture.
China cooperates economically with some of the most harsh dictatorships in the
world, claiming that it will not „get involved” in their internal affairs. Thus, it can
always present itself as an alternative to NATO or to the IMF, trading political
acceptancy for new markets for its products. This way, China can be regarded as
the opposite of the USA in terms of political interventionism, borrowing something
from European international politics, but acting in a completely different fashion.

Parag Khanna’s book is a survey of the countries situated in between the
American interests, the European will for expansion and the Chinese need to grow
in order not to collapse. Taking the pulse of cities like Bishkek, Cairo or Singapore,
the author is trying to identify the game of influence that takes place here and to
guess its probable outcome. Of course, Khanna doesn’t practice futurology. He is
not concerned with getting the answer right and being confirmed by the years to
come. Faithful to Toynbee’s convictions, he seeks a truthful image of the state of facts, i.e. of the major empires competing over influence in a certain area of the world, and from there he tries to deduct the possible outcome. His conclusions are always ambivalent, as they should be, since the future cannot be foretold. It is not a book of prognoses, but of analyses.

The world survey in The Second World begins with the regions in the vicinity of the European Union, where Parag Khanna detects a constant pressure towards rentability and the reign of law from the EU, but he also discovers an interesting game played by one of the key second-world countries, Turkey. The Turks accept, with reluctance, EU regulations, but at the same time let themselves be encouraged by the American example to try and formulate their own „Turkish way”. The country has to keep pace with its westernized diaspora, while resisting the temptation of Islamic fundamentalism, and facing the opposition of the Kurd minority that feels encouraged by the existence of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan in the North-West of crumbling Irak. The economic power of Turkey is felt at the Black Sea, where it may play an important part in turning this 19th century „Russian lake” into an „European lake”, by enabling the Caucasus energetic resources to get through to the West via a pipeline beyond the reach of Gazprom. Very insightful comments are made about the disponibility of Bulgarian tourism towards their prosperous Turkish neighbours (a clever pun is employed here: „Istangbilia”), or about the chances of the poor former-Soviet republics in the Caucasus to salvage themselves from ruin thanks to Europe’s need for natural gas.

Parag Khanna may be excessively optimist when he entitles one of his chapters „the Russia that was”. Even if Russian hegemony has withered in a large part of its earlier „sphere of influence”, it nevertheless still retains an undisputed authority even in some places that, in the last decade, went through an American-inspired „colour revolution”. But Russia’s power is seriously questioned in Asia, especially in the Far East, where China moves in with its huge working population; Chinese guest workers are physically occupying the deserted spaces in the Eastern steppe that hold vast forests and large deposits of gold, copper or diamonds.

Another one of the nodal points in the second world is the Asian „heartland” (a term coined by Halford John Mackinder in 1904), situated more or less in the same place where Tamerlane’s „Great Silk Road” (Ferdinand von Richthofen, 1877) used to lie. It is here, in the republics of Uzbekistan, Turmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and others, that the main routes for
communication still function for internet optic-cable and petrol pipelines, drugs and weapons traffic. It is in these areas, in the multicultural Ferghana Valley and on the peaks of the Himalaya, on the dried-up shores of the Caspian and the Aral Sea, that the contemporary “Great Game” (Arthur Conolly, 1829) is being conducted, which was once played by the two foremost empires of the 19th century, British and Russian. The reader may enjoy, unsuspectingly, Parag Khanna’s preference for old political metaphors. But the author is not merely playing on words. He is actually making clear that Central Asia is a turning point for nowadays politics, because it is easily escaping the Russian space and drifting into another one, where American and European hegemony hesitates to tread. To put it in other words, it is China’s playground now, and nothing spells this better than the fact that the former main boulevard in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, once called „Vladimir Ilyich Lenin”, was converted in 1997 into „Deng Xiaoping”, in honor of the great neighbour from the East. Few of the countries from the former Soviet Union can check the Chinese overwhelming influence; one of them is Kazakhstan, which uses ist oil and natural gas resources to make itself attractive for more actors than just one: Russia, the EU, and China. For the others, it appears that a future with China is more attractive than anything else, and Chinese projects are already designing Central Asian infrastructure with a boldness matched only by the EU, at the other end of the „world-island”. It is a five-chapter strategy that China unfolds here: a „Transcontinental Eurasiat Bridge”, rivaling the Russian Transsiberian; a railroad and a pipeline through Kazakhstan to the Caspian Sea; modernized roads through the mountain passes of Kirghizstan, Tashkent and Uzbekistan; and an extension of the Karakoram highway, through Pakistan, to the port of Gwadar at the Arabian Sea. All these projects can help the regions’s crumbling economies, at the same time helping China expand in the former Russian sphere of influence and connect with the petrol-filled countries in the Persian Gulf. But the majority of these countries are corrupt and totalitarian, and the Chinese, who are not very fond of democracy themselves, refuse to address this issue.

South and Central America used to be regarded as „America’s back yard”, not to be interfered with by anybody else. But, given the social turmoil in some of these countries, the rise of Brasil and Chile and the ascent of dictator Chavez in oil-rich Venezuela, American hegemony has become questionable, or at least Parag Khanna choses to see it this way in order to undeline the main challenges that American foreign policy has to face nowadays. Due to globalization of commerce
and the rapidity of water routes in the Pacific Ocean, China stepped in with its huge amount of cheap merchandise and annihilated the national industries of textiles, electronic components and so on. Faced with competition so close to home, it is hard to say how America will react, since it has some economic problems of its own.

North Africa is seen by Khanna as „Europe’s back yard”, a vision endorsed by Arnold Toynbee, who preferred to talk of an unique „Mediterranean civilisation” spreading on the northern, southern and eastern shores of the intercontinental sea. Indeed, when looking at things in historical perspective, considering the actions of the Roman Empires and the quest for colonies in the 19th century, such a vision is legitimate. Parag Khanna warns that Europe should be concerned in any way with the fate of this region, since it receives a large number of migrants every year and it is in its interest to turn them into qualified workers, instead of fanatic enemies. Given the chronic economic problems in Subsaharan Africa, the EU doesn’t venture this far, but the Chinese, always in search for markets and energy, are already making their presence felt.

The Arab world, both in Maghreb (north of Africa) and in Mashreq (the so-called „Middle East” – a label Khanna rejects, as it describes the 18th century European sailors’ perception about the ports where they could make a stop on their way to the Eastern Indies), is very tense at the moment, but Islamic fundamentalism is only part of the problem. From Egypt to Pakistan – which is a Muslim country, even though not an Arab one –, the population is confronted with what might be called a „demographic bomb”. Khanna paints a convincing picture when he evokes the many youths gathered in packs at street corners, from Cairo to Lahore, showing off their mobile phones, while simply waiting for anybody to come along and offer them a job. For these young people, an urgent solution is required. The situation of the Gulf countries, so rich in resources, yet lacking in infrastructure and uninterested in developing alternative national industries, for the time when the oil will be finished, is also dramatic. But energy resources are a magnet for all, therefore America and China are already present here; and, while the USA has the advantage of military power, China’s offer of political non-interventionism seems more appealing.

Finally, in South-East Asia the Chinese hegemony is at work at its most subtle: China is „seducing” the third-world countries around it, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore. It engages intense economic relations with each of these countries,
creating a system of international trade which, in time, comes to rely heavily on the Chinese workpower. Meanwhile, the second-world countries in the region try to deal with this situation through „a diplomacy of smiling in all directions”, as Khanna puts it when he discusses the foreign policy initiatives of Thailand. Keeping their options open, these countries are preparing for any possible outcome in the Great Game of the hyperpowers.

The countries of the second world are not little Davids fighting the Goliaths of today. Parag Khanna’s vision is much more relativist and less inclined to embrace a mythological way of thinking. On the other hand, in his travels, the authors may have seen enough oddities – like the character in the Romanian tale *The Human Stupidity* – to engage in designing a pattern that would fit all patterns. One thing is to see Turkmen dictator Saparmurat Niyazov’s gilded statue that revolves with the sun, another is to meet the Homo Balcanicus in former Yugoslavia, „with a thuggish aspect, pumping his convertible car or his motorcycle with a (probably stolen) European number”. One thing is to listen to the muezzin calling people to prayer in Jordan, while a bartender turns the TV louder for his customers, and another to witness Chinese soldiers’ martial arts training near the ancient stupas in Lhasa and to conclude, as Parag Khanna brilliantly does, that „a bamboo curtain has fallen over Tibet and Xinjiang”. All these images are, in a way, more important for the reader or *The Second World* than the political analyses themselves. They all describe the feeling of a very lively and sometimes dramatically instable world, trying to cope with the conditions of existence and struggling to find stability. Parag Khanna wrote an eminently readable, very insightful book, that helps one not only understand, but also see the world around oneself.