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Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE AFFAIRS OF THE AMERICAS

Reid, Michael. *Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2007. 384pp. \$30

Anyone taking up duties related to Latin America or otherwise wishing to understand current realities in the region should read Michael Reid's assessment of contemporary Latin America. Editor of the Americas section of *The Economist*, Reid has lived or traveled in Latin America since 1982 and credits his Peruvian wife for important insights in this volume. Writing with the clarity and color of an accomplished journalist, Reid has produced a book that is sophisticated enough to satisfy a specialist on Latin America but accessible and comprehensible to a neophyte in the subject.

The subtitle refers to the tension between populist politicians with statist agendas, like Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, and the liberal democracies that have undertaken market-oriented reforms in the past two decades. Not bound by this dichotomy, Reid engagingly presents the full complexity of Latin America, where politics, economics, ethnicity, and history create a mixture in which simple explanations and facile prescriptions fall short. While not a policy manual per se, the book reinforces the view

of policy makers who favor a multi-disciplinary approach.

Reid notes that "the region has been relatively free of the interstate conflicts that have dogged so many other parts of the world" and suggests that as one reason why "for much of Latin America's history, regional integration was not a priority," unlike Europe during the Cold War. Perceived security threats also help explain U.S. attitudes toward the region. Reid observes that "while in the past they had condemned *Yanqui* interventionism, many Latin American politicians came to lament what they saw as a lack of U.S. engagement with the region"—thus the title *Forgotten Continent*. In fact, U.S. attention to the region usually has peaked when Americans have felt a security threat, whether it was the European involvement that prompted the United States to adopt the Monroe Doctrine or more recent fears of the spread of the Cuban revolution or Sandinista insurgency. The war on drugs has also driven U.S. interest and policy in Latin America, to the annoyance of those who live there. The current paucity of serious state-to-state

military threats does give Latin American countries the advantage of not having to devote hefty resources to external defense, unlike much of the rest of the world.

Why then has Latin America not done better economically? Reid provides good answers. Latin American countries have prospered recently by meeting rapidly rising global demand for foodstuffs and raw materials, and a tenfold increase in the price of petroleum enabled Hugo Chávez to expand his influence abroad and fuel his authoritarian tendencies at home. However, now that contractions in global demand have reduced the price of oil by two-thirds from its high, Chávez may find his wings trimmed.

Whatever the economic future, Latin Americans will continue to debate how best to organize their affairs, and Michael Reid's expert analysis will help outsiders understand the issues.

PAUL TAYLOR
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Percival, Bronson. *The Dragon Looks South: China and Southeast Asia in the New Century*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007. 200pp. \$31.25

Bronson Percival has written a compelling book that is a must-read for any student or practitioner of national security in Southeast Asia. His work, unlike that of many others on the same subject, strives to understand the China–Southeast Asia relationship from an Asian perspective. As a career diplomat with extensive experience in Southeast Asia, he explains the key nuances that characterize the complex and iterative nature of China's security relationships with its southern

neighbors. Unlike the United States, which considers the ten countries that constitute Southeast Asia as a homogeneous group, China has shown a deeper understanding of the “extremely complex” nature of the region, reflected by its varied approaches to each country in Southeast Asia. As a consequence, China appears to be steadily achieving its security goals, while the United States has been less successful in realizing its own objectives.

Percival approaches his subject starting with a historical overview of Chinese strategic goals in Southeast Asia and the policies they have used to achieve them. He argues convincingly that, in pursuit of its strategic aims, China has demonstrated a better appreciation of those that comprise the maritime countries of Southeast Asia.

In one of the most important chapters of his work, “How to Think about China and Southeast Asia,” the author dispels some of the more disingenuous analytical approaches that have been used to explain the security dynamics in East Asia. Key among them has been the realist perspective founded on power relationships that assumes the countries in Southeast Asia at some future point will need to choose between China and the United States. He argues that this perception is wholly unsuited given the “asymmetry” of power and influence each country brings to the table. In his view, traditional notions about what constitutes power and influence in Southeast Asia are much more nuanced than many U.S. security analysts have appreciated. His comprehensive analyses of “soft power” and its role in Chinese relations with Southeast Asia are especially compelling. Significantly, the author contends that China's power