

Too Much History:

American Policy and East Asia
in the Shadow of the Past



Hon. James B. Steinberg, JD

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East Asian countries have a tendency to recall their historical grievances with rival nations, thus increasing the risk of eventual conflict. American policy toward East Asia, on the other hand, tends to have too short of a memory.

The great genius but also the Achilles' heel of American diplomacy is an irrepressible "can do" optimism — a conviction that every problem has a solution, that no conflict is too wicked or too intractable to defy resolution. De Tocqueville observed that Americans "have all a lively faith in the perfectibility of man. ... They all consider society as a body in a state of improvement."¹ That view has propelled America to great achievement in forging an era of peace and prosperity for nearly three-quarters of a century after World War II, ending wars and brokering peace among apparently implacable foes, and building institutions to tame economic cycles and interstate rivalries. Much of that optimism stems from our "eyes forward" approach to contemporary challenges, a conviction that the past is not prologue and that past performance is not indicative of future results. This optimism is rooted in our earliest experiences as a nation, a belief that the New World could and should forge a fresh approach to foreign policy, one not snared in the ancient quarrels of the Old World, but springing from an enlightened vision of harmonious relations among free peoples. It was an approach fitting for a nation whose very founding was an attempt to escape from the past. As Thomas Paine noted, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again."² The founders were not ignorant of history — they simply were determined not to be shackled by it.

That inclination to put history behind us, to focus on present interests rather than past slights, has been and remains evident in the U.S. approach to East Asia. It was reflected in our willingness to enter into an alliance with Japan only a decade after

it launched a surprise attack on our homeland; it could be seen in the decision to normalize relations with a Communist China which had fought us in Korea, because contemporary security and economic interests were more important than past grievances; and in the decision to reconcile with Vietnam, two decades after a bloody war came to a bitter end for the United States.

But to our friends and interlocutors in East Asia, as T. S. Eliot observed,

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future.
And time future contained in time past.³

Their national narratives as well as their perspectives on self and others are deeply rooted in their historical experience. It is a history that in most cases — from China, Japan, and Korea to Thailand (Siam) and Cambodia (Khmer Empire) — is measured in centuries and even millennia. These images are powerful forces both constraining the choices available to policymakers and providing tools that policymakers can use to justify their actions and mobilize their publics.

Scholars have long debated whether history influences policymakers' perceptions and choices,⁴ including whether and to what extent a historically based "strategic culture" shapes contemporary policy.⁵ As Robert Jervis has written, "Previous international events provide the statesman with a range of imaginable situations and allow him to detect patterns and causal links that can help him understand his world."⁶ Some go beyond the impact of history on individual decision-makers to

1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1835).

2 Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, Appendix to the Third Edition (Philadelphia: W. and T. Bradford, 1776).

3 T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936).

4 See, for example, Robert Jervis, "How Decisionmakers Learn From History" in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

5 In a seminal piece, Jack Snyder defined strategic culture as "the sum total of ideas, conditioned responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or initiation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy." Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (Santa Monica CA: RAND 1977). The concept has since evolved to embrace approaches to national security more broadly. See Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013).

6 Robert Jervis, "How Decisionmakers Learn From History" in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

suggest that a “historically based strategic culture” can shape national choices.⁷ Although there are skeptics (A.J.P. Taylor observed “men use the past to prop up their own prejudices”⁸), there seems to be little doubt that images of self and others drawn from the past heavily infuse the contemporary debate about the future of East Asian security.

Nowhere is this more evident than in modern China. President Xi Jinping’s first evocation of the “China Dream” came in a speech pithily entitled “To Inherit From the Past and Use It for the Future, and Continuing What Has Passed in Beginning the Future: Continue to Forge Ahead Dauntlessly Towards the Goal of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese People.”⁹ Xi’s speeches frequently draw on historical images and experiences, contrasting the period of China’s greatness with the “Century of Humiliation” from the Opium War to the Nanjing massacre. Lessons are to be learned from both. What made China great — its military and economic strength and its distinctive culture — is to be put at the center of policy, while what made China vulnerable — weakness and the inability to resist foreign pressure — is to be avoided.

At the center of this historic narrative is the danger posed by Japan. The “history issue” is not merely a scholarly debate but also informs China’s views of Japanese behavior today. China opposes Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s effort to make Japan a “normal” nation with the usual right to pursue individual and collective self-defense, because “history” shows that an unshackled Japan is inherently a threat to its neighbors and it thus is not entitled to the same rights of sovereignty enjoyed by China and others. China refused to accept the Noda administration’s 2012 decision to

“nationalize” the Senkaku Islands as an effort to insulate the islands from provocative actions of the far right, led by former Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara. Instead, China insisted it was proof of a more aggressive policy.¹⁰ Nor are China’s leaders willing to let the historic lesson fade from the public mind; just three years ago, Xi led the first “national day of remembrance” for the Nanjing massacre — 77 years after the event.¹¹ At the speech, President Xi cautioned that “forgetting history is a betrayal.”¹²

By contrast, from China’s perspective, its own breathtaking military modernization is not a threat to its neighbors (unlike Japan’s comparatively modest defense increases and operations) because “history” shows that when China was powerful in the past it did not threaten others but used its power to establish an era of peace and prosperity. Chinese officials’ resurrection of the story of Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng He over the past decade coincided with their effort to make the case that China’s growth would be a “peaceful rise.” Chinese officials regularly insist:

During the overall course of six voyages to the Western Ocean, Zheng He did not occupy a single piece of land, establish any fortress or seize any wealth from other countries.¹³

Former President Wen Jiabao cited this example to show that “Hegemonism is at odds with our cultural tradition.”¹⁴

Of course, for Japan, history offers quite a different story. To Japan, the story of the “divine winds” — the typhoons that thwarted China’s attempt to subjugate Japan in 1274 and 1281 — is not simply a tale of Japanese heroic resistance but,

7 For a discussion of strategic culture and its applicability to China’s grand strategy, see Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). On the impact of strategic culture on U.S.-China relations, see James Steinberg and Michael O’Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 38-40.

8 Jervis, “How Decisionmakers Learn From History,” 217.

9 It is noteworthy that Xi’s initial articulation of the China Dream was a speech at an exhibition called “The Road to Revival,” dedicated to the history of China’s victimization from the Opium Wars through World War II by the West. See Camilla T.N. Sorensen, “The Significance of Xi Jinping’s ‘Chinese Dream’ for Chinese Foreign Policy: From ‘Tao Guang Yang Hui’ to Fen Fa You Wei,” *Journal of China and International Relations* 3, no. 1 (2015), <https://journals.aau.dk/index.php/jcir/article/viewFile/1146/967>. See also Benjamin Carlson, “The World According to Xi Jinping,” *The Atlantic*, September 21, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/xi-jinping-china-book-chinese-dream/406387/>.

10 One writer has suggested that China’s anger over the decision was exacerbated by the fact that it came during a period when China typically commemorates the Japanese aggressions of the 1930s and 1940s. See Scott Cheney-Peters, “How Japan’s Nationalization Move in the East China Sea Shaped the U.S. Rebalance,” *The National Interest*, October 26, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-japans-nationalization-move-the-east-china-sea-shaped-11549>.

11 Agence France-Presse, “China Holds First Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day,” *The Telegraph*, December 13, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/11291820/China-holds-first-Nanjing-Massacre-memorial-day.html>.

12 Ben Blanchard, “Set Aside Hate, China’s Xi Says on Nanjing Massacre Anniversary,” *Reuters*, December 12, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-japan/set-aside-hate-chinas-xi-says-on-nanjing-massacre-anniversary-idUSKBN0JR03F20141213>.

13 See Steinberg and O’Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve*, 39-40. Many commentators have questioned the accuracy of the official Chinese version of Zhang He’s voyages. For the exposition of China’s peaceful rise, see Zheng Bijian, “China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great-Power Status,” *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2005, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2005-09-01/chinas-peaceful-rise-great-power-status>.

14 Denny Roy, *Return of the Dragon: Rising China and Regional Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 28-29.

perhaps more important, a caution about the risk to Japan of a powerful China.¹⁵

For the Republic of Korea, too, history powerfully shapes contemporary policies and choices. Despite South Korea's strong shared interest with Japan in addressing common threats, particularly those posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, cooperation is hamstrung by lingering Korean resentment of the Japanese colonial occupation and treatment of Korean "comfort women" during World War II. This grievance is apparent not only in popular sentiment but also in the actions of Korea's leaders. It can be seen in the decision of then-President Park Geun-hye to join China in dedicating a statue to Ahn Jeung Geun, the Korean who killed Japan's imperial governor in 1907,¹⁶ and her participation in the World War II commemoration parade in Beijing in 2015. Other historical disputes continue to dog cooperation between the two would-be allies: a territorial dispute over the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands¹⁷ and even the name of the body of water between the two countries ("The Sea of Japan is established internationally as the only name" Japan's chief cabinet secretary insisted when lodging a diplomatic protest against a South Korean video promoting the name "East Sea").¹⁸

Both Koreas in turn are cautious about too great a dependence on China — despite the strong economic pull exerted by Beijing — informed by a history of tensions between the two empires. The seemingly arcane dispute over whether the Goguryeo Empire was Korean or Chinese still inflames passions on both sides of the Yalu.¹⁹

The contrast between American and East Asia worldviews was evident during the meeting between Xi and President Donald Trump at Mar-

a-Lago in April 2017. In recounting the meeting, President Trump told *The Wall Street Journal*

[Xi] then went into the history of China and Korea. Not North Korea, Korea. And you know, you're talking about thousands of years ... and many wars. And Korea actually used to be a part of China. And after listening for 10 minutes I realized that not — it's not so easy.²⁰

It could be seen in President Trump's suggestion during the U.S. presidential campaign that it might be a good thing for Japan to acquire nuclear weapons instead of relying on U.S. extended deterrence — a suggestion that sent shock waves through East Asia.²¹

Ironically, the contemporary political identity of each of the key countries of North East Asia was forged through a dramatic leap to "escape history." For China, the strategy of leaders as diverse as Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong was not to find solutions for China's problems in its past but, rather, to denigrate the past and to look to other models to achieve security and prosperity. Sun looked to the West, while Mao found inspiration in the Soviet Union during the early years of the People's Republic.²²

Similarly, Meiji Japan reacted to growing pressure from the West in the mid-19th century not by trying to strengthen the traditional approaches of the shogunate that had successfully resisted foreign invasion in the past but by dramatically embracing modernity and key aspects of Western institutions and strategy, borrowing heavily from Germany, which — under Bismarck — had thrown off its own feudal past to achieve independence, unification, and prosperity. This move to "escape

15 During the Mongol dynasty, Emperor Kublai Khan mounted two attempts to conquer Japan. On both occasions the effort was thwarted by typhoons ("kamikaze" or "divine wind") that severely damaged the Mongol fleet and saved Japan from invasion.

16 Emily Rauhala, "Why a Korean-Chinese Statue Is Upsetting Japan," *Time*, November 25, 2013, <http://world.time.com/2013/11/25/why-a-korean-chinese-statue-is-upsetting-japan/>; Steven Denney and Christopher Green, "National Identity and Historical Legacy: Ahn Jung-geun in the Grand Narrative," *SinoNK*, June 2014, <http://sinonk.com/2014/06/06/national-identity-and-historical-legacy-ahn-jung-geun-in-the-grand-narrative/>

17 Japan claims that it established sovereignty over the islands in the 17th century. See "Japanese Territory: Takeshima," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed September 2017, mofa.go.jp. Korea argues that Japan has long acknowledged Korea's sovereignty; "Not only has the East Sea designation been in continuous use for over 2,000 years, it is also inappropriate to name a sea after a single country." "Dokdo and the East Sea," Korea.net, accessed September 2017, <http://www.korea.net/Government/Current-Affairs/National-Affairs?affairId=83>.

18 See "South Korea Video Renaming Sea of Japan Fuels Tension," *Japan Times*, Feb. 22, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/02/22/national/politics-diplomacy/south-korea-video-renaming-sea-japan-fuels-tension/>. Tellingly, the video was titled "East Sea: The Name From the Past, of the Present and for the Future," claiming that the body had been named the East Sea for 2,000 years.

19 Taylor Washburn, "How an Ancient Kingdom Explains Today's China-Korea Relations" *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/04/how-an-ancient-kingdom-explains-todays-china-korea-relations/274986/>.

20 "WSJ Trump Interview Excerpts: China, North Korea, Ex-Im Bank, Obamacare, Bannon, More," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2017/04/12/wsj-trump-interview-excerpts-china-north-korea-ex-im-bank-obamacare-bannon/>.

21 "Now wouldn't you rather in a certain sense have Japan have nuclear weapons when North Korea has nuclear weapons" Donald Trump, Town Hall, moderated by Anderson Cooper, *CNN*, March 29, 2016. See also "Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on his Foreign Policy Views," *The New York Times*, March 26, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html?_r=0; Austin Ramzy, "Comments by Donald Trump Draw Fears of an Arms Race in Asia," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/asia/donald-trump-arms-race.html>.

22 Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

the past” was replicated again after World War II; under the tutelage of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Japan adopted Western institutions and strategies as varied as labor unions and women’s suffrage.²³ More recently, South Korea — the 19th-century “Hermit Kingdom” — propelled itself to the front ranks of the global stage by following in Japan’s footsteps to embrace democracy and integration in the global economy.

Why does history have such a hold on contemporary relations in East Asia? After all, in other regions and other times, historic enemies have reconciled in the face of compelling contemporary challenges. Think France and Germany in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization after World War II.

Some might argue that the talk of history is mere rhetoric — that international relations theory would predict tensions between Japan and China in terms of the inevitable conflicts between a rising power and an established one. Others might point to domestic politics and the mobilization effect of using historic images to rally support for the governing parties based on patriotism and the need to unite against a foreign threat.²⁴ For many leaders in the region, bitter historic memories provide a convenient anchor (“useful adversaries” in Tom Christensen’s evocative characterization) for nationalist policies.²⁵ Such policies in history textbooks can indoctrinate future generations into stereotypes of others.²⁶

Undoubtedly, all these forces are at work. But there is reason to believe the structural tensions are exacerbated by the historic context.²⁷ As one scholar has observed:

the rivalry context may play a causal role in determining which arms race, power transition, etc., escalate to war.... That past conflicts condition current ones and future

expectations, that leaders learn realpolitik lessons, and that peoples learn to hate each other all mean that theories of enduring rivalries are historical theories.²⁸

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest the propensity for the diversionary use of force is more likely in the context of historic rivalries. “[L]eaders can capitalize on a hostile interstate environment where the relevant target public may be persuaded to consider alleged threats plausible”²⁹ — and the historic experience appears to establish the plausibility of the threat.

Of course, the past is not necessarily prologue. At times, countries in the region have been able to overcome historic suspicions. Consider for example the decades of Sino-Japanese reconciliation that followed normalization in the 1970s, which featured little of the rhetoric of historic grievance. Similarly, Japan’s relations with Southeast Asia have improved dramatically despite the legacy of the East Asia Prosperity Sphere and the occupations of World War II. But during periods of change and uncertainty about the present and future intentions of key countries in the region, past behavior offers a convenient answer for political leaders and for publics to answer the inherent ambiguity of future actions. Thus, while one can argue about whether the perpetuation of historic grievances is cause or effect, their persistence contributes to the precarious situation in East Asia. And in the absence of concerted efforts by regional leaders to counteract this dynamic, the risk only grows of a vicious cycle leading to conflict.

Fortunately, there have been a few hopeful signs. Japanese Prime Minister Abe’s statements in connection with the 70th anniversary of World War II, along with the decision (at least up to now) not to repeat the 2013 visit to the Yasakuni shrine, have

23 Fukuzawa Yukichi, one of the most prominent essayists of the Meiji era, summed it up simply: “In Japan’s present condition, there is nothing in which we may take pride vis-à-vis the West. All that Japan has to be proud of is its scenery.” (quoted in James L. McLain, *Japan: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co. 2002)). On the influence of the Prussia experience on Meiji state building, see McLain, *Japan: A Modern History*, pp 191-197. For an account of the “McArthur constitution” which re-established Japan’s political institutions along U.S. and Western parliamentary lines, see McLain, *Japan: A Modern History*, pp 537-550.

24 There is extensive literature on the “diversionary” effect in international relations.

25 Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

26 The Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center conducted an intensive three-year project examining the role of history textbooks in the formation of historical memory about World War II in East Asia. The results were published in 2011. See Gi-wook Shin and Daniel C. Schneider, eds., *History Textbooks and the Wars in Asia: Divided Memories* (New York: Routledge, 2011). Interestingly, the study found that Japanese textbooks “do not highlight patriotism, revisionism or nationalism,” in contrast to the more “passionate” accounts in Korea and China, where nation building and national-identity formation are more central. See Yves Russel’s review of the book in *China Perspectives* 2 (2014), 79-81, <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/6494>.

27 Gary Goertz and Paul F. Diehl, “Enduring Rivalries: Theoretical Constructs and Empirical Patterns,” *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (June 1993): 14; Sara McLaughlin and Brandon Prins, “Rivalry and Diversionary Use of Force,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (December 2004): 937-61.

28 Gary Goertz, *Contexts of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 213.

29 Andrew J. Enterline and Kristian S. Gleditsch, “Threats, Opportunity, and Force: Repression and Diversion of Domestic Pressure, 1948-1982,” *International Interactions* 26, no. 1. 28 (2000).

helped bring about more measured Sino-Japanese relations.³⁰ Positive change can be seen in the joint ceremony in September 2017 to commemorate the 45th anniversary of Sino-Japanese relations — an event to mark the 40th anniversary in 2012 was cancelled after the Japanese purchase of the Senkakus³¹ — and Abe attended a similar event in Tokyo.³² With the election of a new president in South Korea, and the possibility of new mandates for Xi following the 19th Party Congress in October and for Abe in the upcoming Diet election, the key leaders will be well positioned to take steps to overcome the historical legacies (or, at a minimum, to avoid fanning the historical flames further). The challenges facing East Asia are severe enough without having to refight past wars. At the same time, the U.S. administration must recognize the ever-present shadow of the past as this country seeks to build a sustainable long-term policy toward the region. President Barack Obama's visit to Hiroshima in 2016 demonstrated that it is possible to be cognizant of the past without being trapped by it.

In recent years, calls have grown for a more systematic effort to overcome U.S. ahistoricism. The proposal by Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson for a White House Council of Historical Advisers reflects one such effort. But their suggestion focuses primarily on learning from historical analogy, proposing that

the charter for the future Council of Historical Advisers begin with Thucydides's observation that "the events of future history ... will be of the same nature — or nearly so — as the history of the past, so long as men are men."

But the problems of history in East Asia are of different kind. The tensions between China and Japan, or between Korea and Japan, are not "of the same nature" as rivalries in other contexts; rather, they are specific to the history of these nations and

these peoples. What is needed are policymakers who understand "deep" history, or "the ways in which policymakers underst[and] the historical context from which the current conflict arose."³³ In this respect, the current disdain for the value of long-serving career officers in the Foreign Service, with deep grounding in the languages, culture, and history of key countries and regions, poses a serious risk to the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Similarly, the Trump administration's proposal to eliminate U.S. government funding for the Fulbright Hays regional studies program under Title VI of the Higher Education Act is deeply shortsighted.³⁴ One dinner with Xi Jinping is not enough to compensate for the loss of generations' worth of insight if the United States is to navigate the perils of East Asia in the 21st century. 🇺🇸

James B. Steinberg is University Professor of Social Science, International Affairs, and Law at Syracuse University, where he was dean of the Maxwell School from July 2011 until June 2016. Prior to becoming dean, he served as deputy secretary of state (2009 to 2011). From 2005 to 2008, he was dean of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. From 2001 to 2005, Steinberg was vice president and director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution. Steinberg served in a number of senior positions under President Bill Clinton, including deputy national security advisor and director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff.

Steinberg's most recent books are *A Glass Half Full: Rebalance, Reassurance and Resolve in the US-China Relationship* and *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: US-China Relations in the 21st Century*, both with Michael O'Hanlon.

Steinberg has an A.B. from Harvard University (1973) and a J.D. from Yale Law School (1978).

30 Tomohiro Osaki, "Abe and His Cabinet Steer Clear of War-Linked Yasakuni Shrine on Anniversary of World War II Surrender," *Japan Times*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/08/15/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-cabinet-steer-clear-war-linked-yasukuni-shrine-anniversary-world-war-ii-surrender/>.

31 "Five Years After Nationalization of the Senkaku Islands," *Japan Times*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/09/11/editorials/five-years-nationalization-senkaku-islands/>.

32 Charlotte Gao, "Abe Makes a Surprise Appearance, Hails 45 Years of Japan-China Relations," *The Diplomat*, September 29, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/abe-makes-a-surprise-appearance-hails-45-years-of-japan-china-relations/>.

33 James B. Steinberg, "History, Policymaking and the Balkans: Lessons Imported and Lessons Learned," in Hal Brands and Jeremy Suri, eds. *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2016): 238. As I note in the chapter, this is similar to what Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May called "issue history"; Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

34 Thomas P. Pepinsky, "The Federal Budget's Threat to Foreign Policy," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 16, 2017, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Federal-Budget-s-Threat/239796>. See also Nathan J. Brown, "In Defense of Area Studies," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/30/in-defense-of-u-s-funding-for-area-studies/>.