entific languages from about 1870 to the present. With the demise of Latin as a “vehicular” language of science in the nineteenth century, the “triumvirate” of French, English, and German came to dominate scientific publishing. German gained on, and then outstripped, both French and English around 1920, due largely to the huge German enterprise in chemistry before and after World War I. By the end of the interwar period German was in decline and English had begun its inexorable rise—until Russian-language science exploded in the 1950s and 1960s. Only massive translation projects saved English-speaking scientists from the need to learn Russian during the Cold War.

This book’s most fascinating chapters concern the quest for a universal “auxiliary” language in the decades before and after 1900, when the mania for universal standards touched everything from weather observation to weights, measures, and time. Constructed languages led the contenders. Unlike artificial languages such as mathematics, constructed languages are complete. (Did you know that about a thousand people speak Esperanto as their native tongue [110]?) Evangelists for Volapük (meaning “worldspeak”), invented in 1880, soon claimed some 210,000 students (115), and by 1889, Volapük speakers conducted an international congress, their third, entirely in that language (117). In the following decade Esperanto displaced Volapük, gaining a huge and fervent following. The first issue of Internacia Scienca Revuo, a scientific journal written entirely in Esperanto, appeared in 1904 (124). But when scientists tried to revise Esperanto’s Fundamento (basic principles) to meet their needs for precision and innovation, fundamentalists rebelled. Instead, yet another constructed language, Ido, mysteriously appeared one morning on the desks of representatives to the 1907 Delegation for the Adoption of an International Auxiliary Language. Gordin’s almost cloak-and-dagger tale of Ido’s proponents and their battles with Esperantists and other detractors makes for an academic page-turner (chap. 5).

Gordin’s chapters on the Cold War era also intrigue. Maintaining a lead in the putative scientific “race with the Reds” demanded that Americans stay abreast of burgeoning Russian science. As a result, in the 1950s expensive projects in machine translation (MT) using computers found favor with the military and the Central Intelligence Agency. MT failed rather spectacularly; even today its quality is mediocre. Instead, armies of translators produced cover-to-cover English versions of over ninety Russian-language journals—including their obligatory paeans to Stalin, published without comment (chaps. 8–9).

Gordin deploys his own considerable linguistic skills, as well as their limits, to great advantage here. Recounting his difficulties in researching the book, using sources in most of the languages he discusses, becomes a way of communicating viscerally the similar struggles of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientists. Lacking Chinese and Japanese, Gordin tells a Eurocentric story, but he acknowledges this limit and notes in the final chapter that if history is any guide, science will likely be as multilingual in the future as it was in the past.

Gordin writes superbly, with humor and personality, and he clearly had a blast with this project. I have rarely enjoyed an academic book so much. It focuses on examples from chemistry, but readers will not need much background in that subject to find the book valuable. Great stories abound, but Gordin also offers analysis of such questions as why English now dominates and whether that is good for science. Because he systematically connects linguistic change in science with larger political history, Gordin’s book should have broad appeal to American and European historians of all stripes. Many chapters could serve as stand-alone course material, perhaps in combination with the introduction. Scientific Babel is history of science at its very best.

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Bruce A. Elleman’s Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the Role of the U.S. Navy is a timely volume in a series called Global Flashpoints, which aims to “trace the origins, structural character, and policy responses to international challenges” (ii). In a lucid and richly researched fashion, the book narrates and analyzes the origins of the two-China conundrum; the impact of the Korean and Vietnam Wars on the Taiwan Strait; the four Taiwan Crises of 1955, 1958, 1962, and 1996, and how the U.S., China, the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Nationalist government in Taiwan dealt with those crises; and the post-1996 cross-Strait tensions and America’s responses to them. The most significant contribution of this volume is undoubtedly the in-depth descriptions of the military, especially naval, actions in each of these highly dangerous episodes. Since most political discussions on the Taiwan Strait affairs are obscured by abstract jargon and abbreviations of key documents, it is also helpful that the book includes an appendix of these communiqués, agreements, laws, and resolutions (173–218).

This concise book also exposes in detail the origins of the spectacular security fop of our time: America’s failure to prevent the Chinese communist government from becoming the most destabilizing sovereign threat in the Asia-Pacific region, a threat whose rise to power was much aided by the U.S. government, guided by a faulty U.S. strategic vision instituted under President Richard Nixon. Partly due to America’s longstanding romanticism about China in general, and to America’s hopeless ignorance about China’s strategic culture in particular, as well as the Eurocentric strategic tilt within America’s national security establishment, U.S. global policy had a major strategic weakness throughout the Cold War: being overly obsessed with the USSR as the primary and only source of instability, and demanding that the USSR’s defeat and humiliation be total and unconditional. Elleman’s book successfully and convincingly places key U.S. Taiwan Strait military policies and their up-and-down
swings in the context of this American crusade against the Soviet Union.

Despite its enormous success between 1950 and 1969, America’s Taiwan policy—the most crucial component of which was the U.S. Seventh Fleet’s Taiwan Patrol Force, established in 1950—was abruptly changed by President Nixon in 1969 when the White House terminated constant patrols by U.S. destroyers in the Taiwan Strait. The new policy favored intermittent patrols by lesser vessels so that Mr. Nixon could give the People’s Republic of China (PRC) leaders in Beijing some “face” for engaging in a direct dialogue about an anti-USSR united front (113). From that point, playing the China card—reserving the option of a stronger alliance with Beijing than with Taipei—in order to destroy the Soviet Union has dominated America’s strategic thinking with regards to the Taiwan Strait, including the June 1971 lifting of America’s strategic embargo against the PRC. Nixon’s trip to China in 1972, and the subsequent steady downgrading of Taiwan and elevation of the PRC in political and diplomatic recognition, climaxing in the transfer of official U.S. recognition from Taipei to Beijing on January 1, 1979, under President Jimmy Carter.

The author credits Nixon’s 1969 termination of the U.S. Seventh Fleet’s regular patrols in the Taiwan Strait as the most pivotal point, with “China’s gradual political reorientation from a member of the Soviet bloc to cooperation with the U.S. against the USSR” being only partly the result of political pressure (158). The author states, “To a larger degree, it was the Taiwan Patrol Force that was America’s tip of the spear in this larger effort” to bring China closer to the West, further away from the Soviet Union. Elleman goes on to assert, “Thus, a relatively obscure naval operation helped produce enormous political consequences far beyond the scope of its daily activities” (158).

This conclusion needs careful scrutiny, however. Because by 1969, the USSR and the PRC had already been on a path of mutual loathing for many years and China had a stronger need for playing the “U.S. Card” than the U.S. of playing the “China Card,” although they did not necessarily want to “become closer to the West,” as Mr. Nixon and his national security aide Henry Kissinger, and many who have followed in their footsteps, had hoped. After having brilliantly played the “U.S. Card” in the past several decades, today’s China is in no fundamental way closer to the West. Instead, with the disintegration of the USSR, and the stupefying infusion of American technology and economic benefits, today’s China wants to dominate, not integrate with, the West, especially the U.S. This is amply demonstrated in China’s rapid drive to reach a military parity with America, and with China’s menacing military postures in the East and South China Seas challenging U.S. military preponderance and collective defense arrangements. The U.S. helped create a powerful adversary in a crusade against a bigger adversary in the Cold War. In the end, the U.S. is haunted by its own creation.

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