

Preface: Who Leads Asia?

“Has Asia been doing enough in leading the world opinion on how to manage, and in particular not to mismanage, the global challenges we face today, including that of terrorism, violence and global injustice?”¹ This was a question posed by Asian nobel laureate Amartya Sen to the 60th anniversary commemoration of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in April 2007.

This book argues that Asia’s ability to lead the world depends not just on the impressive growth rates of its leading nations like China, Japan and India. Nor does it depend on the immense cultural capital, natural resources and human talent the region undoubtedly possesses. Rather, it depends on the region’s ability to overcome its internal rivalries and respond to new transnational challenges through mutual empathy, understanding and cooperation. Hence conflict and cooperation are the two principal themes of this book.

These essays were written as opinion pieces in various regional and international newspapers at the very dawn of the 21st century between 2002 and 2006, as an effort to make

¹Eastern Influence Badly Needed (April 1, 2007). *The Bangkok Post*, p. 3.

sense of the myriad possibilities of rivalry and cooperation in and around Southeast Asia.² The original and still the most important catalyst of these changes, of course, was the rise of China.

The answer to the question whether Asia will lead the world depends much on who will lead Asia. China is an obvious candidate for such leadership. Pessimists have raised the spectre of a Chinese sphere of influence (a la Monroe Doctrine) in Asia, especially Southeast Asia. This is not a likely prospect, now or in the future, even for the small states on China's immediate periphery, such as Burma and Cambodia. Equally absurd is the scenario raised by some analysts of a return of the region to the Sino-centric regional order (a benign system of hierarchy with China as the top nation) that characterised the old tributary system.

How, outside the realm of possibility of either a Sino-centric regional order — coercive or benign — China's neighbours, not just Southeast Asians, but also India to the west and Japan and the United States to the east, are adjusting and responding to its rise is a principal theme of this book. But the broader purpose is to understand whether the geopolitical repercussions of a multipolar Asia brought about by the simultaneous rise of China, India and Japan is leading the region to unmitigated rivalry and collapse, or creating new understandings and pathways towards a common destiny?

There are plenty of signs of a search for accommodation in today's Asia. While the relationship between China and the two other rising Asian powers, India and Japan, is marked by misgivings and suspicions over historical legacies and strategic

²Some of the titles of the articles have been changed to better reflect the theme of this book.

concerns, there is probably enough geopolitical and economic space in the region to accommodate the interests of all of them plus that of the US. Despite signs of persisting and new rivalries in the emerging Asia, there has also been considerable degree of cooperation. While it may be too idealistic to hope for an overarching and vibrant regional community, states in the region have played the game of cooperation with a view to avoid confrontation and improve the prospects for peaceful change.

One reason for this shared interest in avoiding confrontation is the rise of a new breed of common challenges. These, such as the Asian financial crisis of 1997, the terrorist attacks on Bali in 2002, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic of 2003 and the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, have created a common sense of vulnerability to transnational dangers that are rooted in the forces of economic globalisation, which come at little or no notice, which respect no national or sub-regional boundaries and which defy remedies on the basis of national or unilateral action. Unlike domestic conflicts where cooperative international action is still taboo in a region with a deep attachment to Westphalian sovereignty, and interstate conflicts which are too sensitive for ASEAN's (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) weak and unused conflict management mechanisms, these transnational dangers both require and inspire cooperative addressing.

Twenty-first century Asia has seen the emergence of new frameworks of cooperation. Prominent among them is the East Asian Summit, inaugurated in December 2005 in Kuala Lumpur, which is part of the long-term vision of an East Asian community. It may be a sheer coincidence that 2005 was also the 50th anniversary of the historic Asia-Africa conference in Bandung, Indonesia. What is often missed to the casual observer is the extent to which the East Asian community

idea reflects the forgotten historical legacy of the Bandung Conference.

Bandung was an exercise in Asia's leadership in world affairs, especially giving a sense of purpose and direction to the newly independent nations of Asia, Middle East and Africa. Much of Asia's leadership then was Indian (and particularly Jawaharlal Nehru's) leadership. It was a time when Asia was one, at least psychologically. India and Arab Middle East (West Asia) was an integral part of Asian cooperation. Indeed, the official sponsor of the Bandung Conference was a group called "the Colombo Powers", whose official name was "Conference of Southeast Asian Prime Ministers". It included the leaders of India, Ceylon, Pakistan, Burma and Indonesia. After being isolated from Asia (because of its pro-Soviet stance and the distraction caused by the conflict with Pakistan) almost from the immediate aftermath of Bandung, India is once again a part of Asian regional cooperation. Its "Look East" policy may be more appropriately called a "Return to the East" policy.

While Nehru was the leader of the Bandung community, China's premier Zhou Enlai was the real "hero" of the conference, impressing fellow participants with a "charm offensive" and dispelling the fears of even die-hard anti-communists like Carlos Romulo of the Philippines or John Kotelawala of Ceylon. How ironic then, that Asia today is rife with the talk of a Chinese charm offensive! Then as now, China is actively seeking to engage its neighbours. But an important lesson of Bandung is that unless action matches words, the diplomatic gains the Chinese charm offensive will be short-lived, just as Zhou's gains (apparently at Nehru's expense) disappeared when China continued its support for the communist movements in Southeast Asia.

Bandung was attended by Japan but not Australia. The exclusion of Australia, which was present at the Asian Relations Conference organised by Nehru in 1947, was almost self-inflicted. Its Liberal government of the day viewed Bandung as a plot by Asian neutrals to marginalise the West and strengthen communist influence. But Nehru extended a hand of friendship to Canberra and Wellington for future gatherings such as Bandung. Against this backdrop, the invitation to Australia, New Zealand and India to the first East Asian Summit in 2005, pushed by Japan and Indonesia, smacks of a legacy of Bandung which upholds the principle of inclusiveness that has marked contemporary trends in regional cooperation under ASEAN's leadership.

Another legacy of Bandung was that Asia would have no "natural" leaders based on either physical power or cultural influence. Neither India nor China emerged from Bandung as the anointed leader of Asia. Bandung was symbolic for Japan as well, as it was the first Asian regional meeting attended by the recently defeated nation, which had also put paid to its vision of Asian unity: the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. At Bandung, Japan would focus almost entirely on economic matters, leaving geopolitics of India and others. Bandung also undermined to any hopes for an expansion of the fledgling Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Henceforth, the only viable basis for Asian regionalism would be that organised around and led by Southeast Asian nations. The most concrete expression of this outcome was the formation of ASEAN in 1967. Regional cooperation in Asia is expanding, but it remains within the leadership role of ASEAN.

What role for ASEAN in the era of rising China, India and Japan? ASEAN's performance since the 1997 Asian financial

crisis has been subject to much criticism. But ASEAN is also undertaking bold attempts at reforming itself, partly due to concerns about rising power and leadership potential of China, as well as India. There is no substitute for ASEAN as the hub of Asian regional cooperation, it retains the driver's seat of even the East Asian Community-building process despite China's considerable interest in this framework. China realises, as do the region's other players, that any attempt by Beijing to dominate or set the agenda of Asian regional institutions would backfire, leading to suspicions over its intentions. China can lead, but it will also be led.

ASEAN has focused on reforming itself, including developing an ASEAN Security Community and an ASEAN Charter to strengthen its capacity to deal with conflicts and challenges facing the region. But it needs to develop concrete and credible mechanisms, which would function only if ASEAN members set aside their traditional sensitivities and concern for state sovereignty to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation. ASEAN is not a winning formula in all circumstances, but neither is the European Union, whose constitutional crisis is a case in point. However, ASEAN's experience in developing cooperation does have considerable relevance for other regions, including South Asia and the Gulf.

On a darker note, Asia's ability to lead the world is being undermined by its failure to uphold the values of freedom and democracy at the regional level. To some extent, this parallels the retreat of democracy in the age of terror. The reversals in Thailand and the continuing lack of progress towards a open polity in Burma cannot be glossed over in any credible assessment of the new Asian dynamism. The two leading Asian powers, China and India, have openly backed the military junta in Burma. Asian regional institutions have not made democracy promotion a goal. At a time when regional organisations in

Europe, the Americas and Africa have embraced the norms of humanitarian intervention and the “responsibility to protect”, Asia remains the last bastion of Westphalian sovereignty. And until Asia’s largest and most powerful nation, China, embraces some form of genuine democracy, the region’s flirtation with authoritarian rule will not disappear.

Asia enters the 21st century at a time of immense changes in the international system. But this does not mean that Asia’s destiny can be understood from the prism of ideas and debates that have transpired in the West about the future of world order, such as Huntington’s clash of civilisations thesis or Fukuyama’s end of history thesis. Asia will maintain its own distinctive course, combining aspects of Confucian communitarianism, Kautilyaan realism and Nehruvian liberalism. Its future will be shaped not just by global events and Western ideas, but also by its own historical rhythms, ideas, approaches and internal political/strategic configurations. The essays in this volume are a modest contribution to understanding and making sense of these forces.

Although Asian leadership and the leadership of Asia are the primary themes of this book, a common thread running through most of the essays is the author’s four main “biases”, which perhaps should be spelt out here for the benefit of my critics. These biases are: relaxed sovereignty, democracy, multilateralism and human security. My emphasis on these issues extends the scope of this book a little beyond the realm of analysis to that of advocacy. But I make no apologies for that, inspired by a belief that they constitute an indispensable requirement for the security and well-being of Asia in the 21st century.

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