The future of Asian political development

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Prediction, the late Yogi Berra may have said, is difficult, especially when it is about the future. “Asia” is an arbitrary designation of part of a huge land mass separated from what we call Europe only by a relatively unimpressive mountain range (the Urals) and a narrow oceanic channel (the Bosphorus) (and separated from what we call Africa by an even smaller, artificial channel: the Suez Canal). This land mass has neither ethnic, linguistic, cultural, nor economic unity; Asian societies arguably differ from one another as much as any one of them differs from any particular society elsewhere. Perhaps the concept, as it is used today, is most easily conceived in geopolitical terms: It was the home of several highly developed ancient civilizations that became subject, directly or indirectly, to the Western European “world conquest” from (roughly) 1750 to 1900. And certain Asians, or at least certain Asian elites, do identify themselves with the continent, more in distinction from and political solidarity against Europeans and Americans rather than from any common heritage.

Futures that never quite worked out

Let’s look at the period following the end of World War II, an era marked by the end of Western colonialism and the proliferation of new sovereign states. The early 1950s in Asia were marked on the one hand by the local movements against colonialism and on the other by the conflict between the socialist camp and the free world (to use the terms each side applied to itself). This was a cold war everywhere except Asia, which saw an extraordinarily violent clash in Korea and growing insurgencies elsewhere. There was a proliferation of communist movements, more or less closely attached to the ruling communist regimes in the Soviet Union and China. Official American policy defined, at least for public purposes, communism as a monolithic, disciplined political movement, directed from Moscow, bent on world domination.

Ripe for revolution

By the early 1960s, the major communist powers were in schism, although this was not universally perceived. The American commitment to the war in Vietnam was predicated (in one of its many, often contradictory predications) on the containment of communism, a policy easiest
to rationalize on the assumption that communism was a unified, disciplined movement. Some realists maintained that whatever the fate of Vietnam, it would not affect any vital American interest. Some also argued that no matter what America did, the communists would eventually win anyway. But proponents of the domino theory argued that should Vietnam “go communist,” so would, eventually, the rest of the continent. So, a stand had to be made. This opinion was not necessarily absurd, given the vitality in the early 1960s of communist movements elsewhere on the continent and the competition between Russia and China for influence over them.

The decisive American military commitment to the Vietnam conflict came in 1965 (although it could also be argued that this was the inevitable result of the American connivance in the overthrow of the friendly Vietnamese government in 1963 in the hopes of finding a more compliant client and the fiasco that followed that). By 1975, the critics had been proved generally correct: Vietnam and the rest of Indochina came under communist rule, and American policy had failed.

Land of miracles

But the consequences of the American defeat were not what anyone had expected. The only “dominos” to fall were the other states within the former French Indochina. Elsewhere, the communist movements were in disarray, reduced to terrorist bands. Maoist China, self-identified as the central inspiration of anti-imperialist revolution, was itself on the threshold of a major transformation, the most radical of the major communist regimes becoming almost overnight one of the most conservative. Even before this, as Vietnam fell, America and China had forged a quasi-alliance geared at containing what then seemed to be the ever-growing military strength and ambition of the Soviet Union.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many assumed that communism fed on poverty, and Asia (as a whole) was part of a “third world,” ripe for revolution. This view also was obsolete by 1970 or so. Japan had recovered from wartime devastation and was on its way to becoming the world’s second-largest economy. The four “little dragons” (Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore) followed in Japan’s wake, as did, farther behind, other noncommunist Asian states. In those parts free from civil war and socialist statism, Asia had become one of the world’s more prosperous regions.

The “Asian” or Japanese model of development challenged both the American free-enterprise paradigm and Soviet or Chinese-style socialism. It involved close collaboration between governments, especially professional bureaucracies, and business interests, with business taking direction from government. The form of government was generally authoritarian (Japan was a formal democracy, but the same crowd always won; it was the same deal with Singapore), with a strong, autonomous state able to resist private interests that might divert resources from overall economic development. The point is not that the Asian bureaucrats were some sort of Platonic guardians committed to a common good; rather, their institutional interests were served by a strong, autonomous state and by growing prosperity among the population at large. By the 1980s, China was also moving in the direction of the little dragons, rejecting autarchy in favor of engagement with the developed capitalist world and micromanagement of the economy by the political sector in favor of increased scope for market forces.

Clash of cultures

During the Cold War, America welcomed the growing prosperity of its Asian allies: Prosperity strengthened the anticommunist forces. Given America’s huge economic predominance, the United States also gave its Asian allies virtually unlimited access to its
market while tolerating their restrictions on its access. By the 1980s, however, America’s relative predominance was declining, the United States stuck in “stagflation” and classic areas of American strength, particularly heavy industry, under pressure from Asian, especially Japanese, competition. Those sectors in relative economic decline exercised great clout in the American political system, provoking irritation against these Asian allies—particularly by the late 1980s, as the threat from the Soviet Union and communism as a whole waned.

The Asian economic model, including its Chinese version, was predicated on limited political participation by the public at large. These undemocratic tendencies were also tolerated by the United States during the Cold War. But as the Soviet threat receded, the United States increasingly pressured its allies to democratize, demands reinforcing those for economic liberalization. With the collapse of communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, liberal capitalist democracy seemed to be the unquestioned wave of the future (Fukuyama, 1992). The counterexample should have been China, with the brutal repression of the student-led democracy movement of 1989. But the Tiananmen massacre was followed in short order by the collapse of the East European communist regimes and not long after by the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself. The Chinese case seemed an anomaly, and it was widely assumed that China, too, eventually would get with the program.3

From the perspective of some in Asia, there was a downside to democratization inasmuch as it weakened the control of the state over society and so modified the premises on which the Asian model was based. The loss of control went hand in hand with the economic liberalization. Both conservative and (relatively) radical elites in Asia found common ground in decrying the American influence, basing their complaints on a purported incompatibility of American ways with “Asian” culture. One major theme of the time was the end of history—history resolving itself into an undifferentiated liberal democratic mush. A seemingly contradictory theme was that the Cold War’s ideological conflict was to be replaced by a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996), a theory with perhaps a longer shelf life. Some Chinese commentators found a sort of dialectical unity of the two themes: The end of history was an ideological claim by a hegemonic America used to discredit any alternative vision of the world, justifying an American assault on other “civilizations” to bring them to heel.

American pressures led to a pushback from the more conservative of the prosperous Asian states and from certain intellectuals in China, asserting a particular set of “Asian values.” This idea, articulated first by Singapore Singapore’s senior statesman Lee Kwan Yew, referred in principle to a synthesis of various (not necessarily mutually compatible) Asian traditions—Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, and others—that were in practice usually reduced to a watered-down, modernized Confucianism. The philosophical argument was that the human rights asserted by Western elites did not, contrary to the claims made, enjoy universal validity but were contingent outlooks developed in particular historical and cultural circumstances. They served now as a weapon wielded by powerful interests in a self-serving manner to impose their will on others. “Asia” had its own set of values, rejecting the alleged extreme individualism of the West for a more collective or communal orientation, stressing not the isolated, autonomous individual but the human person enmeshed in a network of other persons, with reciprocal expectations and responsibilities, focused on the family, the community, and the state as an agent of the community.4 Proponents were pleased to point to alleged defects in Western (mainly American) society: a grotesque sense of entitlement, frayed family structures, personal irresponsibility, drug addiction, crime, libertine social indulgences, on and on and on. This explained the economic stagnation of the West in contrast to the dynamism of Asia.
The global capitalist system

The Asian “miracle” came to an abrupt halt in 1997 (the Japanese miracle had already stalled out several years earlier), the economic crisis pretty much ending talk of Asian values. Responding to outside pressure, Asian states had liberalized controls over capital movements, encouraging an inflow of foreign money into the then-booming economies. By the mid-1990s, Asian manufacturing firms were under intense pressure from Chinese competition and were accumulating debts that clearly were not going to be repaid. Fearful of losing their money, foreign capitalists began withdrawing their funds from Asian banks, a process that reached critical mass in the summer of 1997. Asian banks, stripped of reserves, were left with bad loans as their main asset. The response was a round of competitive devaluation by the economies most affected (Thailand’s, Malaysia’s, Indonesia’s, Hong Kong’s, and South Korea’s). This panic came at the same time as other developments not entirely to the taste of global liberal opinion: Hong Kong had just been returned to official Chinese jurisdiction, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, up to that time a highly successful conservative international bloc, had expanded its membership to include several unashamed dictatorships, the most disreputable being Burma (or Myanmar). Many in Asia traced the collapse to the machinations of foreign capitalists who feared the waning of their influence over Asian societies, the most prominent of these being the sinister George Soros: Western big money would show Asia just who was boss.

Foreigners, for their part, found domestic roots for Asia’s problems, roots that previously had been thought to nourish the Asian miracle. As the economies liberalized and the political system democratized, the close relationship between business and the state remained, but the balance of influence had shifted. The bureaucracy was in a position less able to dictate to business interests, and politicians needed funds that business could provide to finance their elections. Rather than directing economic activity into channels serving the power of the state, bureaucrats protected their business cronies from the consequences of bad decisions. The 1997 crisis does not necessarily show that the Asian model was incorrect, but it does indicate that its successful functioning was contingent upon particular background conditions.

The distressed Asian states were “bailed out” by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a transnational organization over which the United States and American financial interests wield great influence. The IMF imposed restrictions on how the money could be used and what kind of policies the states could adopt, reinforcing the sense among many Asians that globalization was indeed simply another version of imperialism, “the highest stage of capitalism.” Asian states were already under American pressure to democratize and liberalize. American policy became more aggressively militant after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. One rationale for the new policy seemed to be that the United States would be safe only if all sources of threat were removed, by military force if necessary, and other cultures and political systems reshaped to reflect American values. This policy was directed primarily against Islamic states, but there were clearly those in East Asia, including some American allies, who might have cause to fear that their ways of doing things were not entirely to American taste.

Peaceful rise

China’s economy, in the meantime, continued to flourish, and a certain fear of the United States led some of China’s neighbors to desire a closer relationship with that country, a buffer against American unpredictability. The growing strength of China reinforced the trend in Japan to redefine itself as a “normal” country, that is, one able and willing to defend its
interests by military means if necessary. Japan’s military reforms were ostensibly within the context of the American alliance (with North Korean behavior providing a convenient rationale), but it could also be construed as directed against China in anticipation of a time when an overextended and distracted United States could no longer provide help.

Around the turn of the century, China’s declaratory policy stressed “peaceful rise,” later amended to “peaceful development.” China supposedly would not challenge American international predominance and would fit itself into the American-led global system. This policy had earlier been set by Deng Xiaoping, who had declared that in order to grow economically, China required a generation of international peace.

A generation goes by quickly, however, and toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, China was showing greater assertiveness. The United States and the older postindustrial countries had their own economic crisis in 2008. China continued to prosper, leading some commentators to postulate a “Beijing model” superseding the “Washington consensus” (Ramo, 2004) said to underpin American primacy. This Beijing model turns out to be much like the old Asian model—a state-led economic program based upon generating capital from exports—although it lacked the egalitarian thrust of the earlier Asian versions.6

Return to power politics?

As China’s economy grew, so did the availability of funds for military development, and during the 2000s, the Chinese defense budget increased more rapidly than government spending as a whole. The money was channeled into the more high-tech areas—the air force, the ballistic missile force, and especially the navy (with also much attention to cyber warfare, although the capital investment there is probably not as demanding as in the other sectors). In part, the increases reflected simple growing prosperity and also, no doubt, a reward for the army for saving the Party’s hide in 1989 and an incentive to the soldiers to obey a Party leadership now with very limited experience in military affairs. Also, though, China’s growth depended upon outside resources, and some of the military assertiveness seemed geared toward protecting that access. Thus, China’s (reactivated) claims to all solid land (and then some) in the South China Sea and inside the “first island chain” in the East China Sea were at least in motivated by a desire to protect sea-lanes of communication and to prevent the United States from being able to act completely at will within those areas.

China’s claims came at the expense of claims made by others, and if the smaller Asian states had been gravitating toward China in the 2000s as a hedge against American arrogance, in the subsequent decade, there was a turn to America as a possible balance against China (Holslag, 2015). The United States established or strengthened military relations with Japan, India, and Vietnam. Around 2010, the United States began contemplating a “pivot to Asia,” in part in reaction to the frustrations and disillusionments of its Middle Eastern adventures. The military aspect of this contemplated a “land-sea-air” battle designed to maintain American dominance west of the first island chain. Economically, the Obama administration tried to negotiate a “Trans-Pacific Partnership,” a trade deal bypassing China, but this lacked strong domestic support in the United States itself. At any rate, the pivot failed to show much vitality during the Obama administration (Hendrick, 2014).

The United States had to act carefully. In the South China Sea, for example, the United States was the only power with the ability to effectively resist Chinese claims, but it had no territorial claims there itself nor did it have an opinion on the substantive merit of the various local territorial quarrels (except that they should be settled peacefully). The United States did try to assert the principle of freedom of navigation. Too strong a stand, however,
risked provoking a confrontation with China desired by no one, and too weak a stand would undermine confidence in American staying power in the other Asian states, tempting them, for lack of a better choice, once more to bandwagon with China.

In China itself, there was, or had been, something of a strategic debate on how to guarantee access to resources. One faction actually questioned the wisdom of the new naval assertiveness: It would be a long time before China would be able to match the naval strength of the United States. Rather, China’s focus should be westward toward Central Asia (historically the source of most of the foreign threats to China anyway). There, China’s strongest rival would be Turkey, strong on “soft power” (much of the indigenous populations of Central Asia are Turkic in ethnicity), and at least until the 2010s, it exercised great cultural influence as a model modern Islamic democracy. Turkey, however, could not rival China’s financial and military strength; should China clean up some of its own politics and adopt more enlightened policies toward its Islamic minorities, it could also have a modicum of soft power in the region (Liu, 2010). The Xi Jinping regime’s policy of “one belt and one road” seemed designed to give equal attention both to the South Seas and to Central Asia—risking, perhaps, a lack of focus.

Fraying China model

Just as China was becoming more assertive internationally, its rate of growth slowed down (as it was bound to do sooner or later). The sea of young unskilled workers began to dry up, leading to a need to increase wages and so cutting into China’s comparative advantage. China’s population was aging rapidly, and there were few kids to support their elders. Social issues that could perhaps be overlooked in the years of exuberant growth—pervasive corruption, out of control pollution, and grotesque disparities of income and wealth—became harder to ignore. The authorities’ response was a variation of the policy adopted by the discredited former boss of Chongqing, Bo Xilai: Hit the black, sing the red. Bo’s main rival, Xi Jinping, now the leader of the Communist party, undertook a hard-hitting campaign against corrupt officials (perhaps targeting mainly his potential political challengers, although there is no reason to think that they were not guilty of what they were accused of), while giving greater stress to ideological orthodoxy and cracking down on “Western” ideas. Some speculated that the new foreign policy militancy was a ploy to divert attention from domestic problems, although there was no real evidence this was so.

Global jihad

In the meantime, radical Islam became a matter of urgent world concern. The issue is complicated, as much of it resolves around non-state actors, multiplying the difficulty of reaching deals and working out accommodations. And it also overlaps into traditional international politics when Islamist movements (notably the Taliban in Afghanistan prior to 2002 and, in a different way, Iran since 1978) attain state power. Otherwise, Islamist movements generate tensions for states. Pakistan, for example, has had a special need not to antagonize and, indeed, to cooperate with the United States after the September 11 events; but at least segments of the Pakistani political-bureaucratic establishment also find radical Islamists, especially the Taliban, useful to them in their conflict with India over control of Kashmir.

Islam, of course, is itself highly diverse. In Central Asia, Islamic movements are often compounded with ethnic nationalist movements. The cliché about Southeast Asian Muslims (mainly Malays, in Malaysia, Indonesia, and parts of the Philippines) used to be that theirs
was an exceptionally easygoing version of Islam, of a moderate, tolerant sort. More recently, however, the influence of more orthodox and conservative, if not necessarily more militant, forms of Islam have been growing in the region.

During the Cold War, America and the various Islamic movements had a common cause in resisting the expansion of communism. America, China, and Pakistan all cooperated in support of the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan in the 1980s, providing arms, money, and training to militants from other parts of the Islamic world eager to fight the Russians, with some of these Arab “Afghans” coming to form the core of Al-Qaeda. The contemporary Iranian revolution, however, signaled a turning point. The radical Islamicists there were as anti-Soviet as they were anti-American, but since the United States had been the main foreign support of the overthrown regime, America bore the brunt of their hostility. And this became increasingly true for Muslims everywhere as communist and Soviet influence faded.

China’s position is at least as complicated as America’s. China, together in a common hostility to India, has long been a close ally to Pakistan, in Cold War days also an American ally. China opposed the more activist American moves in the War on Terror. But China’s Muslim ethnicities in the northeast have become more vociferous in making demands and also more active in pursuing their goals. These movements seem to be primarily nationalist but are not always averse to making common cause with the global Islamic jihadist movement.

The compound of religious and ethnic tensions is especially volatile in Central Asia, a region of central Chinese interest. In 2001, China and Russia joined with all but one of the former Soviet Central Asia “-stans,” countries with great reputations for corruption and repressiveness, to form the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The ostensible targets of the SCO are terrorism, “separatism” (ethnic nationalism), and “extremism” (Islamic radicalism). Cynics have described the organization as an alliance of tyrants against their own peoples, but it may provide a modicum of regional stability.

Islamic terrorism seems likely to remain an enduring issue (although one point of this exercise is that things are not always what they seem), even for states with nugatory Muslim populations (such as Japan and Korea, which depend on access to Middle Eastern oil). The American approach to the problem as a “war” obviously has problems, but it is not strictly a law enforcement issue either.

This is not to say that Islamic radicalism will be the central issue in Asian affairs in future years. Rather, there seems to be no reliable way to project what will be central at any particular time. Events and developments are not chaotic or random. In retrospect, one can make sense of how a situation arose and how one situation led to another. But attempts to extrapolate from any particular point in time on how things will be in a decade or so are apt to be in vain.

**Hardy perennials?**

However vain extrapolation may be, policy formulation always involves some sort of contingent prediction: If this happens, or we do this, something else will follow, and the policies chosen affect what follows. The most conservative speculation is that over the long run, things will remain more or less the same; and following the conservative line, and barring radical changes in human nature and the human condition (on which, see the following), we can assume that an inveterate clannishness (me and my brother against my cousin; me and my cousin against the world) will lead to tensions along familiar cleavages: Chinese versus Japanese, Koreans against Japanese (and against each other, as long as there remain two states), Vietnamese against Chinese, Pakistanis against Indians (a relatively new cleavage), ethnic majorities against ethnic minorities, Muslims against infidels, Sunnis against Shi’ites,
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on and on and on. These tensions can generally be managed and need not lead to violence. And the various groups are as capable of mutual cooperation as of conflict. But the cooperation is based in utility and expediency, while the conflict is visceral.

Cold War residues

Asia is the locus of most of what remains of the tensions that helped define the Cold War. Korea remains a divided nation, as does China, at least in the opinion of the authorities in Beijing. The Korean issue, I think, is the more volatile, although I would judge (at this point) that it is unlikely to devolve into open violence. But should war actually break out in Korea or in the Taiwan Strait, the consequences would be disastrous.

Korea

The division of the Korean peninsula was a product of the Cold War, originally a matter of convenience in demarcating American and Russian zones of occupation. The division is artificial, and all Koreans (in principle) desire reunification. Prior to around 1989, the northern regime seemed more actively eager for reunification than the south (the southern regimes, perhaps sensing that reunification in practice would amount to a northern conquest).

By the end of the 1980s, North Korea was an economic and humanitarian disaster. South Korea, already one of the world’s most prosperous countries, was in rapid transition to democracy. At that point, with the lesson perhaps rubbed in by the reunification of Germany, the northern rulers perhaps concluded that reunification would mean the absorption of the north into the southern system, and their concern shifted to regime survival. This, I think, explains the northern nuclear weapons program: should the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) be for whatever reason on the verge of extinction, it could take South Korea with it, along with a substantial portion of American forces stationed in East Asia. This should give South Korea and the United States an incentive to see that the North Korean regime survived.

As it became clear that the DPRK was actively embarked on a program to build nuclear weapons, the American attitude toward the north shifted. The ostensive reason for the American presence in the south was to deter a renewed attack from the north—that is, to defend the security and integrity of South Korea. In principle, there should be no quarrel with the north were the north no longer to threaten the south. By the 1990s, however, generational change and the expansion of the scope of political debate in the south led to the general sense that the danger from the north was minimal. The weapons program shifted American attention away from the goal of defending the south, to a focus on forcing denuclearization. In the early 1990s, America and the DPRK seemed close to war, a war no one in the south thought desirable and in which the south was apt to suffer as much as the north. War was averted (possibly) by a poorly thought-out deal between America and North Korea, with America supporting a program to build a “peaceful” nuclear capacity in the north, the United States committing South Korea and Japan to foot the bill.

So, South Korean and American interests have diverged. The old fear in the south was that the United States might be tempted to strike some sort of separate deal with the north. Since the 1990s, the greater fear has been that American belligerence would provoke a fight. With democratization, control over the Republic of Korea government has shifted between a “progressive” and a “conservative” tendency. The progressives indulge in an often graceless anti-Americanism, although (since they can’t be totally convinced of the north’s
harmlessness) not to the point of alienating American support entirely. They also favor a soft line toward the north, providing the north with financial assistance and muting any objections to its misbehavior. This partly reflects a hard-to-understand sympathy for their fellow countrymen but is also based upon a kind of expediency: Assuming that a regime such as that of the DPRK cannot last forever, Korean interests and regional stability are served if it grows into a prosperous country with much to lose should there be conflict or in which, should the country collapse, the fall will be a soft one or in which the economy will grow sufficiently that it can be absorbed into the south without throwing that part of the peninsula into beggary. The conservative tendency is less patient with the north and more inclined to active cooperation with the Americans but also unhappy that they do not have more independent leverage over American actions.

If any political system should have collapsed in 1989, the DPRK should have been it. But against all reason, it continues to survive. At this point, it is probable that as long as it survives, it will remain a nuclear power, albeit a minor one, and maybe the best one can hope is that it doesn’t start selling weapons to terrorists or the like. Everyone fears the proliferation of nuclear proliferation, but it also seems that when nuclear arms control conflicts with any other goal or interest, that interest will take precedence over arms control. It should also be evident by now that it is hopeless to bribe North Korea into disarmament. The authorities there are happy to take whatever they are offered, and continue on their merry way.

In the early post-Cold War era, a kind of “Concert of Northeast Asia” might have made sense as way of defusing the issue: Continuous consultations among the two Koreas, Russia, China, Japan, and America addressed to issues of common concern, reassuring the DPRK against external attack and so depriving it of its rationale or excuse for the nuclear program. Things have probably gone too far and too long for this. At this point, since no one has any intention of initiating aggression against the DPRK (barring social and political collapse, which might provoke a Chinese occupation), the only alternative seems to be to hold firm and wait for that regime’s surely inevitable, however long-postponed, transformation or collapse.

**Taiwan**

Taiwan as a political issue was originally defined as another “divided nations” problem, similar in Asia to Korea and Vietnam. In the early Cold War, the authorities both in Beijing and in Taipei considered Taiwan to be a province of China, differing only on which side actually constituted the legitimate government of the entire country. Since democratization in the late 1980s and 1990s, the Taiwan authorities no longer assert any legal authority over the Chinese mainland, but their counterparts in Beijing continue to define Taiwan as “part” of China. They claim that once reunification takes place, nothing on Taiwan will need to change—supposedly the Taiwan side could even keep its own army—but this offer does not attract much support on the island. The island still defines the state as the Republic of China, the constitutional system that preceded the People’s Republic of China on the mainland. Beijing desires a peaceful reunification, but it also says that any overt move toward formal independence (say, proclaiming a “Republic of Taiwan”) will mean war.

Taiwan was a Japanese colony from 1895 to 1945, and so did not share in the momentous revolutionary experience that roiled China during the first half of the twentieth century. According to agreement among the allies, Taiwan was to revert to China (the Republic of China) after Japan’s defeat, and Chinese Nationalist forces occupied the island in late 1945. The turmoil surrounding the occupation eventually led to open conflict and massive bloodshed especially among the educated portion of the island’s population.
In the meantime, the Nationalists were losing the civil war against the Communists and were gradually moving men and treasure to Taiwan, either to make a last stand or as a base to recover the mainland. There was also a large-scale movement of people from the mainland to Taiwan at this time. The Nationalist government placed Taiwan under emergency rule, in effect a police state. The violence brought on by the initial restoration to Chinese rule and the particular manner of government reinforced an enduring gap between the immigrants from the mainland and the local population (and the descendants of each). The hand of the dictatorship weighed upon everyone alike. But the mainlanders continued to hold the key positions of state authority, and the mainlander population in general was perhaps willing to put up with the autocracy because that was a means, they hoped, of eventually returning home. The local population, of course, was already home. The government justified its repressive measures as required by the threat of communist espionage and subversion, but it was at least as fierce against those who might want to make Taiwan an independent country in its own right.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the island gradually evolved a genuinely democratic form of government, with control of the state determined through the votes of the population as a whole. In logic, this would be tantamount to independence, but the authorities in Beijing credibly threaten to go to war should this be stated explicitly. And on the island itself, there are still some, perhaps a diminishing number, with a sentimental vision of a united China of which Taiwan is a part. Since the 1980s, the Beijing authorities have proposed reunification under the formula of “one country, two systems”: Taiwan would come under the sovereignty of China but otherwise would retain its own economic, social, and political institutions. This has little if any appeal to anyone on the island—small wonder, seeing what has happened to Hong Kong, restored to Chinese control under the same formula.¹²

The situation has been festering for seven decades, and one wonders whether the Beijing authorities themselves wish they had some graceful way out: Well, if Taiwan rejects reunification, let them go—their loss. But it would be political suicide for anyone proposing such a course: Beijing has been too vehemently for too long been insisting that Taiwan is an integral part of an indivisible China. Perhaps one function, paradoxically, of the Taiwan Anti-Session Law, passed by China’s National People’s Congress in 2005, was to shelve the issue. Ostensibly, the act gives a legal basis for a military attack on the island should it declare independence—something for which no law was needed in any case. But the law also asserts that Taiwan already is a part of China, so there is really no question of unification. Trouble will come only if Taiwan decides explicitly to secede. At the time the law was passed, there were also hints by various political figures that while the situation could not go on forever, in 20 years or so things might have worked out—equivalent of punting the issue to the next generation. But the 20 years are moving by quickly.

The illogical, unsatisfactory status quo is likely to persist with no logical way to work itself out. China has no desire to attack Taiwan but may feel that there is no choice, should Taiwan it proclaim its independence. For all practical purposes, Taiwan is an independent state but cannot claim the dignity that goes with that status. Freedom of political action, domestic and international, remains constricted. There is no reason to expect violence, but misjudgment, a lapse from an undignified prudence by the Taiwan authorities, demagogic grandstanding by a mainland authority under domestic political challenge all could lead to catastrophe.
Rebalancing power?

Ever since the Vietnam War era, some commentators have argued that the power of the United States was overextended, that American influence was stretched too thin, that there was need of a retrenchment. So far, the United States has certainly maintained its military supremacy, but it no longer as hegemonic as it once was. A generation ago, it was believed that Japan (Number One!—Vogel, 1979) might replace America as the leading world (or at least economic) power, but this has not yet worked out. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, China seemed a more credible challenger, although China is likely to remain a regional or “great” power rather than a global power.

America was often criticized for fancying itself a “global policeman.” Whatever resentment it caused, though, the role also had several general advantages. The hegemony gave a certain structure and stability to world affairs. Those allied with the United States were protected from non-allies but also from each other, and were able to divert much of their potential defense burdens to the United States, while remaining able to complain about the way America went about carrying them.

But the role of global policeman also burdened the American people generally, with grossly disproportionate spending on a military, itself of grossly disproportionate size and amplitude, and the loss of lives and health of soldiers in what developed into an endless chain of pointless wars. The populist reaction against globalization spread to the United States, with the loss of secure, high-paying employment for skilled and semiskilled labor. This was blamed, rightly or wrongly, on competition with countries with a lower standard of living and favored access to the American market.

China, however, is not likely to become a similar global hegemon, nor does it seem to want the job. Since the turn of the century, however, China has been developing greater military power and is attempting to extend its influence beyond its borders. The result is that those in China’s path (for example, Japan, India, and Vietnam) will tend, insofar as they are able, to balance against it. On the one hand, foreseeing the decline of American influence, they will strive to increase their own military strength. On the other hand, in the shorter term, they will seek to strengthen ties with the United States to get whatever security these afford. The United States’ own position is a delicate one. In the matter of the South China Sea, for example, America has no territorial claims of its own and is officially indifferent to what solution there is to the competing claims, desiring only that it be arrived at peacefully and the freedom of the seas maintained. If America is too strong in asserting freedom of navigation, it risks violent conflict with China, something no one wants. If it is too wishy-washy, the other countries may lose confidence and feel the only choice is to bandwagon with China.

A new multipolar balance system is likely to see an increased number of nuclear-armed states (if North Korea can have such weapons, what country, in reason should not?). This may not be the disaster that it seems: Conceivably, a multipolar system could induce greater prudence, each state exercising caution for fear of the reaction of the others. But the potential for disaster remains obvious.

Islamism

The militant Islamic upsurge is a transnational populist movement, sometimes piggybacking on ethnic grievances. In its own way, it is a revolutionary ideology (in Islamic orthodoxy, this aspect of it embraced by the militants, there is no distinction of the political and religious spheres), and in that very limited way, it is analogous to the communist movement. This is
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an analogy, though, that should definitely not be pushed too far. The Cold War was mainly an ideological confrontation between sovereign states, and the appeal of communism was in principle more cross-cultural than Islamism is likely to be. Radical Islamism is likely to have its greatest influence within the traditionally Islamic cultures, and its lack of intrinsic appeal beyond that may account for some of the militancy.

Islam can serve as a state ideology, as in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and elsewhere. These states can on occasion coordinate with and provide support for radical and revolutionary non-state movements (in this respect, following the Cold War pattern). But states are able to make pragmatic accommodations: So, China and Pakistan have enjoyed what amounts to a political alliance, based on common hostility to India, despite the huge disparity in the legitimizing principles of each regime; and China and Iran also have a generally good relationship: Their state interests generally coincide, and the geographical distance between them means that they do not often grate up against each other. But it is difficult to reach accommodations with non-state interests: They either triumph, are defeated, or fizzle out.

Modernization theory held that the influence of religion weakens as standards of living rise and lines of communication proliferate. This was not totally borne out by the facts, at least in the short run. Religion can also be a salutary corrective to the corrosive effects of modernization and the moral chaos that typically accompanies rapid social change. Islamism is another rallying point for those left behind or debased by globalized modernization. While there is no reason to think that Muslim populations as a whole are highly radicalized, the more conservative (and sometimes militant) manifestations of the religion are growing in mass appeal, even in what used to be the relatively easygoing Southeast Asian communities.

Ethnicity is another force that modernization and globalization would supposedly wash away. But ethnic nationalism remains an even stronger force than religion, and in Central and Southern Asia, ethnic grievances and religious fervor reinforce one another. This will likely make for continuing instability at the heart of the Eurasian landmass.

The Chinese position is particularly touchy. China has several recognized predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, and the Uighur minority in Xinjiang has become increasingly assertive in demanding greater autonomy or even independence. Uighur activists have received some support from Al-Qaeda (and also, it seems, some covert and moral support from the Turkish government). The Uighurs also seem to enjoy greater sympathy from Western public opinion than is typical of Muslim political movements, perhaps a reflection of a certain anti-Chinese animus. But the Uighur nationalists also seem increasingly inclined to resort to the tactics that have become too familiar elsewhe—random brutality toward soft targets.

While China needs to combat its own domestic terrorism, it cannot but have conflicted attitudes toward especially the American War on Terror, viewing it as in part a way of enhancing the scope of American power. Also, China requires stability in Central Asia, much of whose population is Sunni Muslim, and much of that population discontented. For the west Islamism, to the extent it remains connected with terror, will be an irritation—alogous to but more dangerous than organized crime. In Asia, it is a potential threat to core state interests and the physical integrity of the established powers. Should Islamists achieve state power—anywhere—they will likely moderate their radicalism although (as Iran perhaps shows) not necessarily by much, and only in the very long run. The frustrating thing is that Islamic attitudes are an articulation of legitimate grievances but grievances for which there is no legitimate means of redress.
Demographics

Future developments are subject to forces beyond politics, although these forces are themselves affected by policy. The force receiving the greatest contemporary attention is climate change, whether human-generated or not. How extensive this is and how consequential remain matters of controversy, although various governments have staked out positions on it, whether in fact or for show. And, of course, the reciprocal effects of climate on human development and human development on climate are nothing new (Elvin, 2004). It seems likely that China will be beset by chronic water shortages and encroaching desertification in the north. Other parts of the continent will have too much water: Some of Bangladesh may soon be inundated by rising seas. Dam building along the upper Mekong adds to the already plentiful tensions between China and Vietnam.

The potential for the most profound change in human relationships lies in demographics. Asian societies tend to be family-centered, patriarchal, and prone to high birth rates. Family strength persisted, in spite of economic pressures and state policies designed to weaken family cohesion, through the revolutionary upheavals of the twentieth century. In China, not even radical Maoism did much to disrupt the structure of the typical rural family, certainly much less than the changes brought by the subsequent liberalization (Meng, 2008). Western visitors as late as the 1980s could not but be in awe of the reverence held even by urban teenagers for the authority of their parents.

First world elites used to worry about a population explosion, especially in poor countries. The population growth, it might be remarked, was not caused by surging birth rates but by declining death rates: an indication that things actually were getting better. There may be lingering concerns about this “problem,” but the most effective solution seems to be economic development. Generally speaking, the birth rate falls as the society as a whole grows more prosperous. For those prosperous societies, the more chronic problem may be the “birth dearth.”

Lower rates of population growth have some short-term benefits. Partly as a result of the one-child policy, partly a response to general demographic trends, by the 2010s China was finally running out of young unskilled workers available at low pay to man the firms producing for export. The increased value of labor may lead to a more general and more equitably distributed standard of living, and declining competitiveness in the global market may give impetus to the long-discussed but not quite implemented move to change the economic focus from exports to domestic consumption (Table 40.1).

The most distressing trend is the unbalanced sex ratio at birth (the number of boys born compared to the number of girls) in the countries with low birth rates. “Normally” about 105 boys are born for every 100 girls; the ratio evens out as the children age, boys being more delicate and susceptible to the misfortunes of infancy. The poorer states in this list fall pretty much into this pattern (with the exception especially of Vietnam). Japan, despite its abysmal birthrate, is a somewhat surprising exception to the general trend. The chart shows a 1.12 ratio in China, but this is probably understated. A ready explanation is the single-child policy, with families eager, if there is only one child, for it to be a boy. The problem is that the same disparity appears in other areas where there has been no such policy—South Korea, Vietnam, India, Singapore, and Taiwan. The impact of the single-child policy (modified in 2016, after the damage had been done) may have been marginal, with younger couples, especially in urban areas, restricting themselves to one child by choice.

The pragmatic consequences of low birth rates and skewed sex ratios are on balance not promising. There may be some benefit to educated young women who, to be crass, find themselves at a premium in a sellers’ market. Given the weakening of social structures that
reinforced traditional morality, they are less prone to focus their ambitions on being wives and mothers, so exacerbating the declining birth rate. The other side is a surplus of men, the poorer among them with little prospect of establishing their own families. These “bare sticks” (to use the traditional Chinese terminology) risk having little to do besides hanging around causing trouble, and will be an obvious source of social unrest.

Assuming some constructive way be found to deal with this reserve army of oafs, the future could be comfortable, if somewhat sterile, as the society begins to consume its capital rather than building on it (as may already be happening in Japan). Migration could be a source for renewing the young and productive, although certain of these societies have not been welcoming to immigration. Should there be large-scale immigration (presumably from the poorer areas of Asia), the character and culture of the various societies would change, making extrapolation of trends even more vain than it already is.

Other possibilities really go beyond the limits of extrapolation. Work in artificial intelligence and genetic engineering may compensate for declining productivity and an aging population (one thinks here of the Japanese fascination with robotics). But here we are moving into the realm of science fiction. But some Asian societies may be pioneering the way to our post-human future.

In sum

Asia is a geographic concept without clear physical, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural boundaries. It designates a region that includes numerous ancient, literate, highly sophisticated civilizations, lumped together as a consequence of their subjugation, direct or indirect, to pressures from a modernizing Western Europe. This subjugation generated massive social change that may at long last be playing itself out. Asian societies are prepared to take a place as active participants in the action of the world, rather than as passive recipients of outside pressures.

A cursory review of recent history, though, shows it is risky to articulate just what this will mean. It is possible to make some sort of coherent narrative from the political and diplomatic experience of the continent but only in retrospect. An attempt to reason out the “logical” next step at any particular point in time is likely to be in error.
Prediction (contingent prediction, not prophecy19) rests explicitly or implicitly on some sort of theory of how the world works: If something is the case, then something else will follow. In principle, such contentions can be corroborated or refuted but only if (a meta-contingent proposition?) everything else relevant can somehow be allowed for, “controlled.” In the real world, things are rarely under control. We have in effect a multi-level, multi-handed, non-zero-sum game, with unidentified (or non-existent) rules, rules (if there are any) that shift in the course of play. Outcomes are not arbitrary, and many of them rest on human choice—but this will be the “vector choice” of many different humans desiring incompatible things, so results will rarely be close to what anyone in particular desires or expects.

The most nearly safe starting point is probably with culture, conceived as a set of expectations people have about how other people will act in particular circumstances. Generally, these expectations have been resilient. Even after revolutionary breaks older ways tend to reassert themselves, especially after a generation or so. Traditional structures take up old roles (clans in certain Chinese localities as a basis for political organization) or find new roles (caste in India also becoming a way to mobilize votes, as well as access to the benefits of affirmative action).

In this case, the proper bet (despite the very long odds) would be that things will be more or less what they are now, and ethnicity, personal habits, and beliefs (or “mindsets”) will continue to condition behavior. But given what has already happened, it is clear that radical change is compatible with this kind of continuity.

This is not helpful: Things will be much the same but different; and which is which is undetermined. This chapter has tried to show the frustrations inherent in projecting from current trends, while, contradictorily, sketching out some plausible developments by doing just that. It cannot be excluded that the world, Asia included, is on the verge of massive existential change. Even so, it is possible that this will make less difference than we might imagine. But it also implies that all bets are off.

Notes

1 Given the complexity of the continent, any discussion must be limited in scope. Because of my own limited competence, this discussion tends toward the Sinocentric, and it may give undue weight to the role of the United States (although America has been the main factor in world affairs generally since 1942).

2 A minority perceived the fragility of the Sino-Soviet alliance, predicting that Mao Zedong would prove to be an “Asian Tito”—that is, his brand of communism would be milder than the Moscow variety. But when the split did come, the Chinese, in words anyway, proved to be considerably more radical than the Soviets.

3 Indeed, some continue to expect this.

4 In fact, these Asian values are pretty similar to traditional (pre- and postmodern) Western values, and they may represent something of a spontaneous human consensus.

5 “Crony capitalism” prior to 1997 generally referred to the system in the Philippines under President Marcos but later came to be applied to the general prevalence in East Asia of close ties between business and government.

6 For the initial version, somewhat idealized, see Ramo (2004).

7 Official Chinese English-language sources regularly attack what they call the ETIM, East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which supposedly agitates among the Chinese Uighurs (Chinese-language sources seem not to use the term). The ETIM evidently stands for Islamic, although it equally could represent Independence; and the grievances of Uighur dissidents seem to be more consistently ethnic than religious—although, perhaps, this is a distinction compelling mainly to outsiders.

8 Even this generalization required qualification. A failed communist coup attempt in Indonesia in 1965 resulted in a months-long pogrom against communists, with an untold number of deaths; the Muslim religious establishment, hostile to godless communism, was one of the forces behind the slaughter.
In the Cold War era, America induced Pakistan into what the Americans thought was an anti-Chinese alliance. The Pakistanis joined because they thought they might get American support in their quarrel with India—something that was not and indeed did not happen.

One problem with the clash of civilizations thesis, I think, is that clashes within the so-called civilizations are often intense and enduring as clashes between the civilizations.

It must be said that American actions in the Balkans in the 1990s and later actions in the Middle East (and throw in as well the fate of Iraq, which probably would not have been invaded if it actually had nuclear weapons, and Libya, which gave up its program to please the United States) did nothing to convince the North Koreans of the wisdom of nuclear disarmament.

It should be acknowledged, though, that the situations are not quite analogous. Taiwan has (at least on occasion) been assured that no CPC cadres will be sent to the island, and the island will supposedly be allowed to retain its own armed forces.

Ironically, one of the most historically informed versions of this analysis appeared right on the eve of the collapse of the iron curtain and the at least temporary uncontested triumph of the United States (Kennedy, 1987).

The Philippines, under President Duterte, initially seemed inclined to bandwagon with China—perhaps a hangover resentment against the colonial power (by one from a non-elite background), perhaps a lack of confidence in American staying power.

Radical Islamists also come in different, mutually hostile varieties (Sunni versus Shi’ite, notably).

Compare the rapid spread of evangelical Protestantism in China today, or, for that matter, changing what needs to be changed, the revived appeal of Confucianism.

There are laws in China against infanticide and sex-selective abortion, but by their nature, these, especially the second, are impossible to enforce.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that sex-selective abortion is prevalent in Korea, and the 1.07 ratio given may be too low.

As Chairman Mao says somewhere, a Marxist-Leninist is not a fortune-teller.

**Bibliography**


