



Missing out in Asia by Brad Glosserman

The world is changing. The structure of global power is shifting, and Asia is finally emerging as a pillar of the international system. We have heard this talk before – over a decade ago the “Asian century” was the storyline – but it is finally happening. The rise of China is part of this story, but it is only a part. More significantly, the obsession with China obscures equally important changes occurring throughout the region.

China is a big deal: Its stunning growth – averaging some 9 percent since the early 1990s – is the most visible sign of and is in many ways the moving force behind “Asia’s emergence.” It is a complex process, the continuation of which is by no means certain, but China has become the “peg” on which Asia’s future seems to hang, the most important factor in any assessment of the region. But there is far more happening in Asia than Chinese growth.

For one perspective, take the countries of the region one by one.

- In Korea, a political transformation is under way as President Roh Moo-hyun tries to reshape domestic politics. By necessity, this attempt to recalibrate the balance of power in South Korea has profound implications for foreign relations as politicians in Seoul seek new allies and sources of legitimacy. A key part of this process is the creation of a new inter-Korean relationship. Its impact on the U.S.-ROK alliance remains unclear.
- In Japan, the “lost decade” of the 1990s has shaken the country’s modern identity. As a result, the nation is grappling with new security and economic policies and the social changes that will follow from reform. Japan’s political system – which is both instigating this process and being influenced by it – is in evolution as well.
- In Southeast Asia, governments struggle with insurgencies (Thailand, Indonesia, and Philippines), Islamic fundamentalism (Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia), and modernization (virtually all). Each of these issues concerns regional governments in varying degrees, but all need to be considered in their own national context: there is no “one size fits all” solution. Myanmar continues to challenge international norms and Cambodia’s grip on democracy appears increasingly frail.
- Often overlooked, India too is “rising” and emerging as a new factor in strategic calculations and extending its reach beyond the subcontinent.
- Finally, in Taiwan, “identity” politics are equally powerful and redefining its relations with China and the world.

Alternatively, look at forces at work throughout the region.

- A demographic transition is occurring, most markedly in Northeast Asia but elsewhere, too. This new generation has different memories and perceptions, which will reshape relations among states. For example, the formative experience of many of today’s South Korean leaders was the Kwangju incident; for their parents it was the Korean War. The U.S. played a vastly different role in the two events. And while a new generation is taking power throughout East Asia, their societies are “graying” and an aging population will have profoundly different priorities.
- Nationalism is on the rise as this younger generation tries to find their countries’ place in the world. Nationalism is complex, but is often defined in “distinction” to other countries, usually neighbors. This has contributed to rising tensions in Northeast Asia.
- Democratization is an ongoing process throughout Asia, and it has been quite fitful. This magnifies other issues identified here and makes the creation of national consensus to cope with change more difficult.
- New threats are emerging and “national security” itself is becoming more elastic. Pandemics and national disasters are the most visible expression of this phenomenon. Responding to them requires new thinking about crisis management, the strategies to respond, the forces involved, etc. They also require new levels of confidence and transparency among governments.
- Energy security is now at the forefront of regional concerns. Governments fret over access to supplies and the inevitable competition, the environmental impact of growth strategies, and security (for nations that embrace nuclear energy or import oil through pirate-infested waters).
- Most important has been the integration of Asia and the beginning of the region’s emergence as a distinct and coherent entity on the international stage. This process is well under way economically, and is proceeding fitfully in the realm of politics. This process magnifies the concerns identified here as national borders become increasingly porous, “problems” transit national boundaries and like-minded constituencies form links. The region’s emergence also contributes to its redefinition: as “Asia” becomes more of a force to be reckoned with, other countries, such as India, Australia, and New Zealand, are clamoring to become part of it.

These issues are not being completely ignored. There is a tendency to see them through a Chinese lens, however. Perceptions of China influence perceptions of developments in Taiwan (their influence on cross-Strait relations); in Japan (the

rivalry for regional leadership); and South Korea (who will dominate the Korean Peninsula). China's size means that the forces identified here are most visible there, but they exist throughout the region.

Even the North Korean nuclear crisis is seen through a Chinese prism: the debate over North Korea tends to turn on how much leverage Beijing has in dealing with Pyongyang. Alternatively, the crisis is seen solely as a nonproliferation or terrorism issue, not a distinctly Asian problem, even though a solution – a peace treaty and permanent forum to deal with security issues – could transform relations throughout the region.

Meanwhile, many Asian security specialists complain that U.S. engagement in Asia, beyond its fluctuating relationship with China, is too narrowly defined by the war on terrorism and needs to be more multi-dimensional.

As a first step to remedy these problems, the U.S. should issue an East Asian Strategic Report, which would provide an official assessment of regional developments. That would focus attention on the variety of concerns and issues that need to be addressed by policy makers and the analytical community. It would start debate on interests and priorities in the region.

The U.S. must also find a credible and powerful individual to handle full-time the Six-Party Talks over North Korea's nuclear program. Ambassador Christopher Hill, the current negotiator, has done an excellent job, but he is also assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and the focus required for those talks has effectively rendered him assistant secretary of state for North Korea.

Finally, and most difficult, the U.S. has to adjust its mindset and appreciate that Asia is finally becoming a force in international affairs and needs to be dealt with on its own terms. There are plenty of specialists who understand the region but the prevailing tendency is still to see the world through an Atlantic lens. This distorts our understanding of regional developments and prevents the U.S. from successfully engaging Asia.

The failure to appreciate the forces at work in the region means that the U.S. will miss a chance to harness Asia's dynamism and energy to U.S. interests. This is one of the greatest challenges for U.S. foreign policy. The decision to shift hundreds of diplomats to trouble spots in Asia and the Middle East – announced by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in a Jan. 17 speech – is a smart move, but it won't do the trick if they don't bring the right mindset to the job.

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