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Asia's rise, Western Anxiety:Leadership in aTripolar World, by Brad Glosserman

Brad Glosserman [brad@pacforum.org] *is Executive Director at the Pacific Forum CSIS.*

This is an age of anxiety for the West. Economic insecurity and an accelerating pace of change have contributed to mounting uncertainty and a sense of increasing instability. But these are manifestations of another, more deeply rooted unease among Westerners: a feeling – a fear -- that they are losing control. Westerners are accustomed to setting the global agenda and the rules of the game. Western leadership is no longer guaranteed, and the dislocation is head spinning and anxiety inducing.

Asia's rise is the clearest sign of this new reality. We are witnessing the emergence of a tripolar world order, with the shift of the center of economic activity from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. This transfer of economic power will trigger a shift of political power as well, and the prospect of losing their leadership role is alarming to old elites.

The governing mechanisms of this new order have yet to be established, but it is abundantly clear that old institutions must be renewed, renovated or abandoned, with new ones to take their place. That process is already underway: think of the calls for reform of the United Nations Security Council, the reapportioning of voting rights in the IMF and World Bank, the decline of the G7 and the emergence of the G20. Reluctance to make those changes would mean that international diplomacy would increasingly resemble the failed multilateral negotiations to create a climate control regime or a new global trade round.

This alone is anxiety inducing. A breakdown in international decision making tops Eurasia Group president Ian Bremmer's list of global risks for 2011. He worries about the advent of "G-Zero," "a world order in which no country or bloc of countries has the political and economic leverage to drive an international agenda. The US lacks the resources to continue as primary provider of public goods, and rising powers are too preoccupied with problems at home to welcome the burdens that come with international leadership. As a result, economic efficiency will be reduced and serious conflicts will arise."

It isn't just the prospect of greater inefficiency in decision making that troubles traditional elites; rather, it is the way that outcomes are likely to differ. Nations and governments that were once "rule takers" – essentially voiceless in important international councils – now want a chance to establish and vote on the standards and norms of international relations. They want to be "rule makers" and they want to give voice to their specific concerns. That goal animates the drive to create an East Asian Community. The East Asia Vision Group noted a decade ago that globalization demands "more deliberate regional cooperation and coordination as well as a united voice to advance [Asia's] common interests." The nations of Asia feel that they must speak with one voice if their views are to be heard. Without unity – community – they will lack political clout commensurate with their economic power and will continue to be treated as second-class citizens.

Some Asian intellectuals, such as Jusuf Wanandi, want power for another purpose. They argue that their governments should be at the table so that they can assume more responsibility for global affairs. This new authority constitutes a form of burden sharing and an end to the "free riding" (his words, not mine) that has characterized their behavior.

What isn't clear however, is what "their" rules will be. Uncertainty about how the newcomers will lead is what is most unsettling to the West. Will the rules be changed to the West's disadvantage? Logic suggests that they wouldn't change much. After all, Asia has done very well by the existing set up, even while "voiceless." Consistent with that, a recent CSIS survey of regional elites concludes that they tend to identify more with universal rather than Asian values.

But Asian nations have long insisted that they are different from the West, with a distinctive logic, and differing priorities and social organizing principles. A decade ago, the stalking horse for this notion was "Asian values," but we don't hear much about that concept these days. More recently, there is talk of a "Beijing consensus" that would counter the "Washington consensus" that governed the international system during the Cold War era and after. In truth, the meaning and content of the Beijing consensus are unclear; not surprisingly, support for it is weak (and some even question whether Beijing endorses the notion).

Still, there is a deeply ingrained belief, particularly among Asian elites, that they think and act differently from their Western counterparts. They maintain that an Asian-led international order would work differently from the one we have now.

The ASEAN way is one distinctly "Asian" approach. Its core principles are generally agreed to include noninterference, informality, minimal institutionalization, consultation and consensus, non-use of force, and nonconfrontation. The thought that it would become the default paradigm for international decision making sends a chill down the spine of many Westerners, but there is little likelihood that would happen. There is little support for it outside ASEAN itself. Other Asian governments profess frustration with it when they are not in a formal setting and increasingly even ASEAN governments acknowledge its limits and feel that it is time to move beyond it.

It is the uncertainty surrounding these issues – how the world will accommodate Asia's rise and the region's insistence on its own distinctiveness – that raises anxieties in the West.

Compounding concern is the inability – or is it reluctance? -- of Asian elites to explain how their new positions of authority will change global governance. Asian governments need to address this question squarely. How will the world work when they have a seat at the table? Will they change international trade rules? Will they change rules for international institutions that intervene in currency crises? Will they rebalance priorities among political and economic rights when discussing human rights? Will they change the protections afforded intellectual property rights? For that matter, who is "they"? Who speaks for Asia? China? ASEAN? An Asian consortium? (The list of questions is endless….)

Truthfully, it is hard to see the rise of Asia alone heralding a transformation of the rules and institutions of global governance. The region is too diverse for Asian nations to rally behind a single position on the many different issues that will be up for consideration. (That makes Bremmer's "G-Zero" more plausible, however.) Nevertheless, Asian governments need to speak out to address Western concerns – the anxieties are real. What do they believe in? What principles and norms will guide their thinking? How will Asian governments "govern" the global system? In other words, how will they lead?

Western governments have their own work to do. They should be reaching out to Asian counterparts, engaging them at every opportunity and stressing their responsibility for supporting the existing global order. They should be reminded of how they have benefited from current international regimes and why their continuance is in their interest. Regardless of whether they have a seat at the table, they should consider themselves stewards of the international system.

Westerners must also recognize that the world has changed. That doesn't mean that the values and principles that they have championed are no longer relevant or compelling; it does mean that they can no longer *assume* that is true. The case must be made for using those norms to guide international governance. The West must engage on a fundamental level and "sell" its organizing and operating principles to the rest of the world. We can no longer merely deliver them from on high and assume that is enough.

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