



Asia's Lagging Leadership by Robert Sutter

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Predictions of the 21st century as an Asian century led by burgeoning Asian economic, political, and military powers appear on course with the impressive and growing wealth and power of such rising Asian states as China and India, backed by the already well developed economies of Japan, South Korea, and others that used to be called newly industrialized countries. There also is a great deal of discussion regarding Asian nations asserting leadership in managing regional affairs through regional and sub-regional groups and other means, and thereby challenging and marginalizing the leading roles played by the United States and other world powers and institutions in Asian and world affairs. But the accomplishments are much more limited.

In fact, the record of demonstrated leadership by Asian governments in regional and world affairs seems much weaker than many pundits and commentators would have us believe. And the leadership role played by the United States in Asia does not appear to have been seriously diminished, despite the unpopularity of Bush administration policies, the many foreign policy and domestic problems in the United States, and the rising power of China, India, and other Asian states.

Many factors account for this apparent "leadership deficit" in Asia but close examination of regional dynamics reveals two salient reasons.

First, governments matter in Asia and Asian government officials tend to make the key decisions on whether to assert leadership in regional and world affairs, and other foreign policy questions. The officials are influenced by many forces, including the sometimes lofty ambitions of elite or popular opinion that urge the breaking away from existing power arrangements in favor of new arrangements providing a higher profile for their country.

However, Asian officials generally remain focused on pragmatic quests for effective nation building and preserving the narrow national interests of their countries that provide the foundation for their administrations' legitimacy at home and abroad. These quests are complicated by forces of globalization and an uncertain security environment in Asia characterized by widespread wariness among Asian states. They also are complicated by internal problems that have led

to periodic political gridlock and governance crises among many of Asia's leading states.

Against this background, Asian government leaders have remained focused on fostering the development and national interests of their countries and generally have eschewed major commitments in managing Asian and world affairs that would involve significant costs and risks to their national development and interests. Even rising China, seen as Asia's leading power, continues to carefully avoid unwanted risks, costs, and commitments, notably through its "win-win" diplomacy. This foreign policy approach allows China to cooperate with others on existing common ground. With a few exceptions, China does not require others to do things they wouldn't ordinarily do, and China does not do things (that would involve significant risks, costs, and commitments) it wouldn't ordinarily do.

Second, Asian governments tend not to trust each other. The suspicion and wariness one sees today between China and Japan characterizes to various degrees relationships between and among most Asian governments. And yet Asian governments need stability in order to meet their nation-building priorities. As noted, economic development associated with effective nation building is seen as critically important to the legitimacy of most Asian governments. In this context, the United States looms very large in the calculations of Asian governments. Unlike many of their Asian neighbors, the United States does not want their territory and does not want to dominate them. It too wants stability and, in contrast with China's and other powers' inability or reluctance to undertake major risks and commitments, the United States is seen to continue the massive expenditure and major risk created by a U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. This U.S. role is broadly viewed by Asian government officials as essential in stabilizing the often uncertain security relationships among Asian governments.

Not only does the United States continue to occupy the top security position in what some view as Asia's "least distrusted power," the United States also plays an essential economic role in the development priorities of Asian governments. Most of these governments are focused on export-oriented growth. Many Asian nations now trade much more with one another than with the United States. However, Asian officials are generally aware that much of this trade is processing trade that depends on export out of the region. The United States continues to allow massive inflows of Asian imports (and massive trade deficits with Asian trading partners) essential to Asian economic development despite an overall U.S. trade deficit over \$700 billion annually. This is a cost and commitment that no other world power can and would undertake.

In sum, those predicting Asian leadership in the 21st century are advised to watch when and how Asian powers will undertake the risks, costs, and commitments that come with leadership. The reluctance of Asian governments to undertake these tasks, continuing wariness and suspicion among Asian powers, and general satisfaction with the U.S. role as security guarantor and economic partner suggest that a power transition from the prevailing order is unlikely soon.