

The Perils of a Monotone Asia

by Chung Min Lee

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As 2011 draws to a close, the rise of Asia is becoming an old story. The new Asian narrative is what happens after Asia rises, and in particular, key strategic choices that consequential powers have to make over a spectrum of issues without historical parallel. For the first time in history, three great Asian powers have assumed center stage at the same time – China, Japan, and more recently, India – together with key middle powers such as South Korea, Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

The consequences of Asia's economic success, the growing irreversibility of its linkages with the world system, and Asia's increasingly sophisticated power projection capabilities mean that Asian choices are going to reverberate far beyond Asian shores. If Asia has accrued unprecedented power over the past five decades, it has also resulted in unparalleled responsibilities. The United States will continue to play a crucial role in maintaining regional stability but the brunt of maintaining regional security must be borne by Asian states.

How Asia manages to use its power and the responsibilities it chooses to shoulder is arguably the most important task for the second decade of the 21st century. In this respect, the contours of Asia's "VIP" – the values, interests, and purposes it seeks to embody – are critical in the shaping of a new Asia and equally pertinent, the need for contending, democratic, and innovative Asian voices. Consonant with China's rise, it has become fashionable to equate China's voice with Asia's. While China has a significant stake and role in the formation of a new Asia, its voice is not representative of Asia's. Indeed, Asia and the world would be ill-served by a monotone Asia – one that is dominated by China's *weltanschauung*, the values it chooses to expound, such as increasingly nationalistic authoritarian politics, and a desire to expanding its military footprints from the Yellow Sea to the tip of the Indian Ocean.

Instead, the world needs to hear Asian voices that are synonymous with universal values such as abiding respect for human rights, freedom of information and navigation, and equal attention to social justice, good governance, and firmly embedded democratic institutions. In this regard, the role of America's Asian allies are crucial since they have shown the possibilities of an Asia that is prosperous, globalized, and democratic but also equally at home with rich cultures and heritages that were developed and honed several millennia before the advent of the West.

To be sure, outstanding bilateral issues exist between America's Asian allies, such as territorial disputes and unresolved and deeply rooted historical legacies. At the same time, Asia confronts a litany of political and security challenges, ranging from deeply uneven political development, outstanding geopolitical hotspots, i.e., the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan Strait, and the Indo-Pakistani dispute, and widely divergent demographic trends. But in the main, a postwar Asia exemplified by the spreading of market economies, democratic transitions, and increasing adherence to global norms by Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and more recently India and Indonesia, have shown that Asia can retain its rich identity while being wealthy and free. What Asia needs more than ever, however, is a globalized voice with matching national and regional strategies that will enable it to fulfill the last components of Asia's rise: applying power responsibly, providing solutions to core global problems, the spreading and deepening of democratic values, and ensuring that its citizens continue to be linked at the hip with the rest of the world.

For much of the post-World War II era, leadership in Asia was provided by two key players: the United States, owing to its preeminent global posture, and Japan, due to its economic development. Notwithstanding Japan's inability to fully come to terms with its pre-war history and attendant legacies, Japanese economic leadership since the 1960s helped shape the rise of the Four Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) and China's own vaunted development since the late 1970s. Japan remains the second largest financial contributor to the UN and its support for the US-Japan alliance remains indispensable in fostering stability in East Asia.

But coincident with China's rise, Japan's leadership in Asia is rapidly becoming ossified, and in certain respects marginalized. Indeed, if "Japan Rising" characterized the Japanese story until the early 1990s, "Japan Passing" has captured the post-Cold War story. If Tokyo doesn't wake up, "Japan Ignoring" may well epitomize the Japanese narrative of the early 21st century.

Four major reasons account for Japan's seeming immobility. First, having successfully copied developmental models in the aftermath of external shocks through the Meiji reforms of the 19th century and its economic rise after World War II, Japan has run out of models to copy in a world marked by constant endemic change. More importantly, ever since Japan emerged from centuries of isolation through the Meiji Restoration, the impetus for change came from the top down and not bottom up. This is crucial because Japan's modern transformations have been driven by a highly disciplined coterie of like-minded, mutually reinforcing, and self-selected guardians of the state: Meiji's political class, the founders of the *zaibatsu* (powerful conglomerates) until World War II, and the army leadership after the downfall of Taisho democracy. In the postwar era, the warrior class was displaced by

bureaucrats who were led, at least from the outside, by an equally inward breeding political elite. The net result was the entrenchment of a social contract led by political and policy elites who never faced competition, but crucially, who also didn't see the need for bottom up innovation and rejuvenation.

Second, successful emulation of the West never translated into an abiding social or even national need for internationalization since whatever the Japanese adapted seemed to work much better at home than from the points of origin. Most pervasive was (and remains) an educational system that actively encouraged the superiority of *Japanese* knowledge in the sense that whatever lessons Japan could gain from the outside world gained traction only if it was thoroughly Japanized. So long as this system worked in producing world-leading products and nearly full and life-long employment, there wasn't any real need for "external awareness" or even "taking pulses" of the global village.

In sharp contrast, China, India, and South Korean students outdid each other to study abroad and in 2010, 80,000 South Korean students were studying in China while 73,000 were studying in the US. Japan ranked sixth among foreign students studying in the United States. Indeed, the only pulse that really seemed to matter was what Japan's political and bureaucratic guardians ordained to be of importance. All else was secondary to the maintenance of a "Unique Japan." The problem with this model was that while Japan congratulated itself for building an extremely successful modern state, the vast majority of its people were ill-prepared for three mega forces of the 21st century: globalization, the information revolution, and the power of civic society.

Third, the major source of Japanese influence in the postwar era was the growing power of the Yen which by the 1980s seemed on par with the US dollar. Best sellers such as *Japan as Number One* and *Theory Z* fueled the inevitability of Japan's economic prowess and corresponding international influence. But the power of the Yen was dependent on two big ifs: if the political system continued to perform and if real competition didn't appear above the horizon. On both counts, Japanese leaders were caught off guard when the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) began to lose its identity, purpose, and ability to provide solutions as the Cold War was drawing to a close and other Asian powers began to assume a much higher profile in international affairs.

The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which came into power in August 2009 breaking five decades of LDP monopoly, offered real hopes for institutional change but three consecutive prime ministers have been unable to break the iron grip of internecine factional strife and widening policy flip flops such as Tokyo's inability to move forward the Futenma base relocation issue. As Japan's body politic continued its downward spiral, China's "harmonious rise" was rapidly being transformed into assertive Chinese policies such as unprecedented opposition to US-ROK joint exercises following the March 2010 North Korean sinking of the South Korean navy's *Cheonan* and the November 2010 North Korean artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island, reassertion of its self-declared naval rights over the South China Seas, and acceleration of key asymmetrical military programs.

Fourth, middle powers such as South Korea which were neither able nor willing to assume broader international roles began a remarkable transformation from the early 2000s. Under the Lee Myung-bak administration, Seoul's "Global Korea" policies have produced dividends such as the passage of the KORUS FTA (that was first signed by the Roh Moo Hyun administration in 2007), the hosting of the G20 summit in 2010, and the venue for the 2011 UN Development Assistance conference as well as the 2012 Nuclear Security and Safety Summit. In 2011, its trade hit the \$1 trillion mark, becoming the ninth country to do so.

To be sure, there are limitations to Seoul's outreach given constraints posed by the South-North division and Pyongyang's WMD threats, not to mention volatile domestic politics that could again result in deep national divisions on Seoul's core strategic choices. But the Seoul-Washington alliance is the strongest it's ever been with more pragmatic security perspectives. In an Asan Policy Institute poll conducted in November 2011, 81 percent of South Koreans supported the US-ROK alliance even after unification (including 78 percent of those in their 20s and 30s) while 82 percent felt that China was most likely against a unified Korea. Situated in the middle of continental and maritime Asia, South Korea confronts a new paradox: growing security anxieties over China as its economic ties with China deepen.

The strategic choices that were either made by or imposed on Asian states at the beginning of the 20th century had repercussions that reverberate to this day. Correct choices in the post-World War II era have resulted in Asia's emergence as the world's third geopolitical and geoeconomic pillar. Sustaining this pillar requires Asian voices, visions, and matching policies that aren't driven by myopic nationalism but by democratic citizenship and bold political leadership that are committed to globalization. The contours of Asia after it rises are going to depend on forward-looking strategic choices by China, the United States, and Japan, but also key middle powers such as South Korea, Australia, and Indonesia. Only then will the world hear contrasting and even contending Asian voices, rather than a monotone Asia.

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