



## **Post-Crisis Asian Views of the West: Mounting Apprehensions** by Mohamed Jawhar Hassan

### **Introduction**

Asian views of the West have always been mixed. In virtually every Asian country there is love and hate for the West... trust and suspicion... feelings of friendship as well as enmity... the urge to engage and cooperate, and to beware... respect and condemnation.

These mixed feelings and perceptions are a complex product of the interplay of historical experiences, culture, strategic interests, power disparities, intra-regional rivalries, perceived designs of other powers, and the attitudes and interests of the particular constituencies involved in each country. What the actual mix is depends on the issues and the relations prevailing at any particular moment. In times of peace and cooperation, positive sentiments and perspectives predominate; in times of hostility, the opposite holds.

Asia's views of the West remain, as ever, mixed and often ambivalent. A confluence of events since the onset of the economic crisis in East Asia, however, has led to a general heightening of Asian antipathies towards the West, and in particular towards the United States.

### **America the Indispensable**

I will begin with elements in the Asian view which are positive toward the U.S. When Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described her country as the indispensable nation, some outsiders and even Americans read arrogance in her statement. Perhaps there was some. But in East Asia many cool heads will agree, sometimes with some resentment, that so long as the present strategic situation prevails, the U.S. is indeed the indispensable power in many ways. For many, if not all, countries, U.S. military alliances and presence both near and not-so-near provide the region with security and stability.

America's relevance to the region's economic well-being is even clearer. U.S. market and investments are of major importance to virtually all economies, though the traffic is certainly not all one-way. The U.S. is also attractive in terms of what Joseph Nye calls "soft power" – the appeal exerted by culture and ideology. No other nation in the world, perhaps, is as attractive to so many others as is America.

### **America the Hegemon**

The fall and disintegration of the Soviet empire has left the U.S. as the lone superpower, one without a credible rival. Many in the region would rather have the U.S. as the hegemon than any other major power if a hegemonic order is unavoidable. It is considered more benign and generally less exploitative.

This sentiment, however, masks considerable dissatisfaction, resentment and, in some quarters, hostility. More and more, the U.S. is seen as arrogant; as seeking to

shape the rest of the world in its own image, notwithstanding whether this self-image is shared and desired by others; as being intrusive and prone to ever more coercive and unilateral behavior in both the political and economic spheres; as having heavily militarized its foreign policy; as practicing double standards and not practicing what it preaches; and as being ignorant of, or worse, ignoring the sensitivities and peculiarities of other countries.

### **Defining Events and Issues**

The most significant events and issues that have contributed to these perceptions of many East Asians are:

- The currency crisis in Asia and American/Western responses;
- NATO armed intervention in Kosovo led by the U.S.;
- The contest for the post of the World Trade Organization (WTO) director general involving Supachai Panitchpakdi of Thailand and Michael Moore of New Zealand.

Besides the above, other events and actions or inactions have led to an upsurge of anti-American sentiment in specific regional states, though not necessarily on a region-wide basis:

- In the case of China, the bombing of its embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, allegations of espionage of American nuclear and military technologies by China, continuing American "pressures" on human rights and Tibet, obstacles to China's entry into the WTO (now resolved), U.S. support for Taiwan, and the Theatre Missile Defence initiative;
- In the case of Japan, perceived Japan-bashing over its economic reforms, allegations of Tokyo not doing enough to stimulate economic revival in the region, and American and European opposition to an Asian Monetary Fund;
- In the case of Malaysia, U.S. opposition to selective capital controls and support for the reformasi movement of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim;
- In the case of Indonesia, U.S. and Western emphasis during the economic crisis on self-determination in East Timor;
- In the case of Myanmar, U.S. and European support for Aung San Suu Kyi and greater democracy in the country.

### **The Currency Crisis and U.S./Western Response**

"...A few little glitches in the road." This was the U.S. President's remarks on the economic turbulence that swept the East Asian region when he met Asian leaders at the APEC Summit in November 1997. This American callousness and indifference during the early months did much to damage Asian perceptions of the U.S. Washington also alienated Thailand when it spurned early requests for financial support to save Bangkok from going to the IMF, and when it later did not participate in the IMF package for Thailand. In contrast, Asia noted only too well the alacrity and generosity with which the U.S. and the IMF responded when the crisis hit Russia.

America also used, or was perceived to be using, the IMF to enforce political change and further liberalize financial sectors to its advantage in recipient economies. U.S. and IMF action was crudest and most disruptive in Indonesia. U.S. support for the early IMF strategy of high interest rates and a credit squeeze, which proved disastrous, was extremely unpopular. The U.S. was perceived as being impervious to the massive social and economic damage that was being inflicted. U.S. objection to the Asian Monetary Fund did not endear America either.

Initially, when it was unclear whether the IMF strategy would prove wrong and orthodoxy prevailed, the odd skirmish involving the U.S. was with the isolated voices of “heretics” such as Mahathir of Malaysia. As more and more in East Asia and outside the U.S. government joined the chorus of criticism, strains grew until the IMF began to reform its policies.

The role of hedge funds and short-term capital flows in the financial crisis also developed into a major controversy. The most vocal voice in the region was Mahathir’s, but soon he was joined by others such as Japan’s former Finance Vice Minister Eisuke Sakakibara. The Asian economies conceded that domestic reform was relevant and necessary, but saw the volatility and huge size of speculative portfolio capital as the main culprit.

Calls for reform of the international financial architecture also gained momentum, but were initially stoutly resisted by the U.S. establishment, which continued to flay Asian economies for bad practices, bad values, and poor institutions. When the U.S. joined the gathering consensus for international reform it was welcomed, but dissatisfaction continues to simmer over what is perceived as foot-dragging by the developed economies and the U.S. in particular. The prospects for international financial reform continue to be dim, with nothing of consequence yet accomplished aside from statements of intent.

### **NATO Armed Intervention in Kosovo**

When the bombs began to rain down on Yugoslavia on 24 March 1999, the tremors were felt throughout the world. As the bombing spread and the destruction increased, country after country in Asia expressed reservation or condemned the NATO attacks altogether. Malaysia stood virtually alone in supporting the NATO mission, a position which was attributed to her sympathies for the Muslim ethnic Kosovars.

The bypassing of the United Nations was a cause for great concern, and added to the perception in some quarters that the U.S. was little more than a rogue state itself. For many, it was the first time the enormity of unchecked American hegemonic power was driven home.

When the U.S. later sought to rationalize American and NATO policy further by enunciating the Clinton doctrine of humanitarian intervention in a June 11 interview by the President, it caused further criticism and apprehension. The gist of this doctrine was that America will intervene if there is a clear moral justification for using force (the judgment presumably to be made by the U.S.), if the trouble spot is strategically important, and if the military costs would not be prohibitive.

### **The Contest for the WTO Top Post**

The contest for the post of director general between Thailand’s Supachai and New Zealand’s Moore has also left deep scars in Asian perceptions of the U.S. and the West. Asia was solidly behind Supachai, while the U.S. opposed him. U.S. opposition was prompted by consideration for the labor vote in the coming elections, and the AFL-CIO is a powerful lobby. U.S. opposition was also motivated by concerns that Supachai will promote developing country interests to the detriment of the U.S. and the developed country agenda. Conflicting strategic interests between Asia and the West were therefore very much a part of the struggle for the top WTO post.

The ill-will that the contest has left in its wake is expected to adversely affect the workings and effectiveness of the WTO, with battle lines over issues more pronounced now between the developing and developed country camps. For the developing world, however, there is a growing hope that the WTO, at least during Supachai’s 3-year tenure, will become a more equitable organization that is less skewed to fulfilling the agenda of the developed world.

### **China**

Some additional points are in order with regard to China in view of the fundamental importance of Sino-American relations to the region. China’s apprehensions of and antipathy toward the U.S. have grown considerably following the events and issues outlined above. China is more apprehensive than ever of what it perceives as the increasingly coercive character of American hegemony, and will re-double its efforts to tend to its interests as best it can. Even greater attention to enhancing its military capabilities will be certain, and a less tolerant and congenial China may well emerge. Anti-Chinese sentiment and rhetoric, recently on the rise in America, may also be re-kindled. The consequences for bilateral cooperation, multilateral collusion, and regional stability can be quite disturbing. The U.S. bears greater responsibility for this negative turn of events.

### **Conclusion**

Quite obviously, much has to be done on all sides to arrest the deteriorating trend in Asian perceptions towards the West. Asia must recognize that it needs further and more purposeful reform in the political and economic spheres. In a rapidly globalizing world, there is no other option to remain viable. Asia must also tend to its rifts. Suspicions, conflicts and unhealthy contests among neighbors further undermine regional resilience and provide added opportunities for exacerbation of relations with the West. Asia must also guard against an irrational and emotional backlash against the West, which would be mutually disastrous.

The onus for improving the strategic climate, however, lies more with the West, in particular with the United States. It has to do more because it is both more responsible for the present state of affairs and is better equipped to deal with the situation. After all, it is a superpower.

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