

The Asian Century Crumbles

Written by Devin Stewart

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DEVIN STEWART, DEC 22 2012

A few years ago, New York University appointed me to teach a course on East Asian politics. At the time, experts were sounding the alarm that America was in decline, Asia was on the rise, and China was “eating our lunch.”[1] Works reflecting this anxiety included Charles Kupchan’s *The End of the American Era* (2003), Parag Khanna’s “Waving Goodbye to Hegemony” (2008), and Fareed Zakaria’s *The Post-American World* (2008). As I pointed out in 2007,[2] however, predictions of American decline go back decades[3] and have been consistently proven wrong.

But beyond the flaws in the narrative of American decline, the anticipation that an Asian Century would replace the American Century was also misguided. I used the semesters at NYU to deconstruct the notion of a rising Asia and reconstruct an appropriate U.S. foreign policy. Back then, such skepticism was counterintuitive. But just a few years later, several factors turned those doubts about the dawn of an Asian Century into common wisdom.

First, East Asia has witnessed the recent ascent of conservative leadership amid territorial tensions – signaling not a futuristic vision for international harmony but a return to past rivalries. China’s new leader Xi Jinping has already vowed to strengthen its military, creating what U.S. Admiral Michael McDevitt identifies as a “security dilemma” in Asia[4]. While China understandably wants to increase its combat readiness and project its naval power outward, doing so increases the insecurity of its neighbors.

Meanwhile, South Korea recently elected conservative Park Guen-hye, the daughter of Korea’s powerful former dictator who has promised to be a strong leader in the style of Margaret Thatcher. Japan’s December election gave a landslide victory to the Liberal Democratic Party and conservative Shinzo Abe – partly based on the expectation that the party would deliver a more muscular and less conciliatory foreign policy in response to friction with China and other neighbors over disputed territories.

Hot and cold disputes of this nature are abundant in Asia. Active disputes are much rarer in Europe or North America, while in Asia they may get worse. A senior Japanese diplomat recently told me that in the face of an assertive China, he is most worried about a “growing populist and nationalist sentiment in Japan.”

China’s rising influence has shifted the regional balance of power without a stabilizing alignment of Japan and South Korea. Despite a shared strategic interest in balancing China’s power and shaping the future of Asian politics, South Korea and Japan have unwisely let their relationship be defined instead by their difficult history and territorial disputes, as Stephen Walt[5] and Joseph Nye[6] have recently noted. While Park and Abe are both pro-U.S. figures and their governments increasingly see China’s assertiveness as a threat, the two countries are not expected to mend bilateral tensions easily.[7]

The United States is the most stabilizing force in Asia as underscored by the welcome given to the U.S. “pivot” or rebalancing its forces toward Asia. In terms of institutions, Asia is lacking as well. The latest ASEAN summit in Cambodia was declared a failure, thanks to ongoing territorial disputes across the region. The most newsworthy regional initiative today, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, favored by Abe and Park, may only further divide the region.

Second, there is a problem with the very concept of an *Asian Century*. Asia is not a civilization – it is a diverse region. Previous eras of far-reaching influence were characterized by the influence of a dominating culture such as the

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American Century, the British Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Tang Dynasty, the Roman Empire, and Classical Greece.

To be sure, culture is a tricky concept. But what is “Asia” and can its culture dominate like previous cultures did? The odds are unlikely as “Asia” is a Western concept with thin resonance in the region and no cultural coherence. In Japan, for example, Asian denotes things foreign. The notion of Asia was manufactured by the ancient Greeks to refer to people living to the east of their civilization – the Persians and the Turks[8]. The continent of Eurasia thus became arbitrarily divided between Europe and non-Europe. Even the idea of an Asian Century had its origins in 1985 in Washington, D.C.[9]

Third, and most importantly, Asia lacks a singular vision for the role of the state. The European Union, with all of its problems, is built on the shared values of “human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.” The model in Europe is clear: free-market, liberal democracies. No such consensus exists in Asia. Its governments span the spectrum, from kingdom (Brunei) to hereditary dictatorship (North Korea) to constitutional democracy (South Korea).

The idea of a unique set of “Asian values” that argued for compliance and conformity was briefly popular in the 1990s. But that was only a ruse to legitimize authoritarian regimes. The vague “Beijing consensus,” invented by an American journalist in 2004, belied the disagreements in a region of billions of people and vast diversity. A coherent alternative to the West has failed to surface in Asia’s sub-regions too, such as south east Asia, meaning there is no Benelux analogue that could act as a benign, regional core.

Nor does Asia have an existing model state. In interviews I have conducted in Asia over the past decade, China, Japan, and Singapore are often cited as possible models for emulation, but each presents its own problems. China has enjoyed rapid growth over the past decades but it is uncertain whether its state capitalist system can survive rampant corruption, popular protests, and environmental degradation. Japan is a leading Asian democracy but its recent elections have re-instated something closer to a one-party state than a pluralistic democracy. Singapore offers one of the best business environments in the world but to present a tiny city-state as a model for an Asian country like China is analogous to saying New York City could be a model for Brazil.

Burma’s democratic reforms have given a boost to the cause of democracy in Asia and show that other closed places, like North Korea, can open up. But Burma, too, has unique assets – including a once-in-a-lifetime iconic leader – as well as challenges including ethnic violence and displacement particularly in western Rakhine State. Speaking to that uniqueness, a Chinese dissident recently told me, “China feels far from god compared with Burma, which benefits from having Aung San Suu Kyi. China has no such charismatic leader.”

During a recent trip to Asia, a Singaporean diplomat told me that if there is an emerging Asian consensus it is the belief that only countries that adopt Western wisdom will enjoy prosperity, a strong middle class, and the shared aspirations of the West, as is argued in Kishore Mahbubani’s forthcoming book, *The Great Emergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World* (2013). If an Asian Century means one in which Asian culture and politics dominate the globe, it won’t be coming any time soon. Instead, for many decades to come, Asians will likely seek to increase their freedom and equality to accompany their growing prosperity – the universal values that define the American Century.

Mahbubani once said, “If you want to see the past, go to Europe. If you want to see the future, come to Asia.” That future has not arrived. Until a rival idea emerges, the present belongs to America and its universal values.

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