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# Asia Needs ASEAN-Ization not Pakistanization of Its Continent: Why is Asia Unable to Capitalize (on) Its Successes

**Review.** The author attempts to determine why Asia (despite its economic success) is unable to capitalize on its successes. Author believes that no Asian century will emerge with deeply entrenched divisions on the continent, where the socio-political currents of the Korean peninsula are a powerful daily reminder that the creation of such a pan-Asian institution is an urgent must. Unsolved territorial issues, sporadic irredentism, conventional armament, nuclear ambitions, conflicts over exploitation of and access to the marine biota, other natural resources including fresh water access and supply are posing enormous stress on external security, safety and stability in Asia. Author affirms that what China needs in Asia is not a naval race of 1908, but the Helsinki process of 1975. In return, what Asia needs (from China and Japan) is an ASEAN-ization, not a Pakistanization of its continent. Author points out that ASEAN might be the gravity center of the consolidated diplomatic and socio-political action, and a place of attraction for many Asians in the decades to come.

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**S**peculations over the alleged bipolar world of tomorrow (the so-called G-2, China vs. the US), should not be an Asian dilemma. It is primarily a concern of the West that, after all, overheated China in the first place with its (outsourced business) investments. Hence, despite a distortive noise about the possible future G-2 world, the central security problem of Asia remains the same: an absence of any pan-continental multilateral setting on

the world's largest continent. The Korean peninsula like no other Asian theater pays a huge prize because of it.

Why is it so?

How to draw the line between the recent and still unsettled EU/EURO crisis and Asia's success story? Well, it might be easier than it seems: Neither Europe nor Asia has any alternative. The difference is that Europe well knows there is no alternative — and therefore is multilateral. Asia thinks it has

an alternative — and therefore is strikingly bilateral, while stubbornly residing enveloped in economic egoisms. No wonder that Europe is/will be able to manage its decline, while Asia is (still) unable to capitalize its successes. Asia — and particularly its economically most (but not yet politico-militarily) advanced region, East Asia — clearly does not accept any more the lead of the post-industrial and post-Christian Europe, but is not ready for the post-West world.

By contrasting and comparing genesis of multilateral security structures in Europe with those currently existing in Asia, we can easily remark the following: Prevailing security structures in Asia are bilateral and mostly asymmetric, while Europe enjoys multilateral, balanced and symmetric set-ups (American and African continents too). These partial settings are more instruments of containment than of engagement. Containment will never result in the integration through cooperation. On contrary, it will trigger a confrontation which feeds the antagonisms and preserves alienation on the stage. Therefore, irrespective to the impressive economic growth, no Asian century will emerge with deeply entrenched divisions on the continent, where the socio-political currents of the Korean peninsula are powerful daily reminder that the creation of such a pan-Asian institution is an urgent must.

### The Cold War revisited

Currently in Asia, there is hardly a single state which has no territorial dispute within its neighborhood. From the Middle East, Caspian and Central Asia, Indian sub-continent, mainland Indochina or Archipelago SEA, Tibet, South China Sea, Korean peninsula — that Poland of Asia, and the Far East, many countries are suffering numerous green and blue border disputes. The South China Sea solely counts for over a dozen territorial disputes — in which mostly China presses peripheries to break free from the long-

lasting encirclement. These moves are often interpreted by the neighbors as dangerous assertiveness. On the top of that Sea resides a huge economy and insular territory in a legal limbo — Taiwan, which waits for a time when the pan-Asian and intl. agreement on how many Chinas Asia should have, gains a wide and lasting consensus.

Unsolved territorial issues, sporadic irredentism, conventional armament, nuclear ambitions, conflicts over exploitation of and access to the marine biota, other natural resources including fresh water access and supply are posing enormous stress on external security, safety and stability in Asia. Additional stress comes from the newly emerging environmental concerns, that are representing nearly absolute security threats, not only to the tiny Pacific nation of Tuvalu, but also to the Maldives, Bangladesh, Cambodia, parts of Thailand, of Indonesia, of Kazakhstan and of the Philippines, etc. All this combined with uneven economic and demographic dynamics of the continent are portraying Asia as a real powder keg.

It is absolutely inappropriate to compare the size of Asia and Europe — the latter being rather an extension of a huge Asian continental landmass, a sort of western Asian peninsula — but the interstate maneuvering space is comparable. Yet, the space between the major powers of post-Napoleonic Europe was as equally narrow for any maneuver as is the space today for any security maneuver of Japan, China, the Korean peninsula, India, Pakistan, Iran, and the like.

### Centrifugal — centripetal oscillatory interplay

On the eastern, ascendant flank of the Eurasian continent, the Chinese vertigo economy is overheated and too-well integrated in the petrodollar system. Beijing, presently, cannot contemplate or afford to allocate any resources in a search for an al-

ternative. (The Sino economy is a low-wage-and labor intensive-centered one. Chinese revenues are heavily dependent on exports and Chinese reserves are predominantly a mix of the USD and US Treasury bonds.) To sustain itself as a single socio-political and formidably performing economic entity, the People's Republic requires more energy and less external dependency.<sup>1</sup> Domestically, the demographic-migratory pressures are huge, regional demands are high, and expectations are brewing. Considering its best external energy dependency equalizer (and inner cohesion solidifier), China seems to be turning to its military upgrade rather than towards the resolute alternative energy/Green Tech investments — as it has no time, plan or resources to do both at once. Inattentive of the broader picture, Beijing (probably falsely) believes that a lasting containment, especially in the South China Sea, is unbearable, and that –at the same time—fossil-fuels are available (e.g., in Africa and the Gulf), and even cheaper with the help of battleships.<sup>2</sup>

In effect, the forthcoming Chinese military buildup will only strengthen the existing, and open up new, bilateral security deals<sup>3</sup> of neighboring countries, primarily with the US — as **nowadays in Asia, no one wants to be a passive downloader**. Ultimately, it may create a politico-military isolation (and financial burden) for China that would consequently justify and (politically and financially) cheapen the bolder

reinforced American military presence in the Asia-Pacific, especially in the South and the East China Sea. It perfectly adds up to the intensified demonization of China in parts of influential Western media.

Hence, the Chinese grab for fossil fuels or its military competition for naval control is not a challenge but rather a boost for the US Asia-Pacific –even an overall—posture. Calibrating the contraction of its overseas projection and commitments — some would call it managing the decline of an empire — the US does not fail to note that nowadays half of the world's merchant tonnage passes through the South China Sea. Therefore, the US will exploit any regional territorial dispute and other frictions to its own security benefit, including the costs sharing of its military presence with the local partners, as to maintain pivotal on the maritime edge of Asia that arches from the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, Malacca, the South and East China Sea up to the northwest-central Pacific. Is China currently acting as a de facto fundraiser for the US?

A real challenge is always to optimize the (moral, political and financial) costs in meeting the national strategic objectives. In this case, it would be a resolute Beijing's turn towards green technology, coupled with the firm buildup of the Asian multilateralism. Without a grand rapprochement to the champions of multilateralism in Asia, which are Indonesia, India and Japan, there is no environment for China to seriously evolve and emerge as a formidable, lasting and trusted global leader.<sup>4</sup> **Consequently, what China needs in Asia is not a naval race of 1908, but the Helsinki process of 1975. In return, what Asia needs (from China and Japan) is an ASEAN-ization, not a Pakistanization of its continent.**

<sup>1</sup> Most of China's economic growth is attributed to outsourced manufacturing. The US, the EU, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, and other Asian and non-Asian OECD countries predominantly take advantage of China's coastal areas as their own industrial suburbia. It remains an open question how much this externally dictated growth of China has a destabilizing effect on the inner compact of the Sino nation.

<sup>2</sup> Since the glorious Treasury Fleets of Admiral Zhèng Hé have been dismantled by the order of the Mandarin bureaucracy in 1433, China has never recovered its pivotal naval status in the Asia-Pacific.

<sup>3</sup> More bilateralism (triggered by unilateralism) is not only less multilateralism—essentially, it is a setback for any eventual emancipation of the continent.

<sup>4</sup> More on the pan-Asian security architectures and preventive diplomacy in: Bajrektarevic, A. (2011) *No Asian century without the pan-Asian Institution*, GHIR (Geopolitics, History, and Intl. Relations) 3 (2) 2011, Addleton Publishers NY

Opting for either strategic choice will reverberate in the dynamic Asia-Pacific theatre.<sup>1</sup> However, the messages are diametrical: **An assertive military — alienates, new technology — attracts neighbors.** Finally, armies conquer (and spend) while technology builds (and accumulates)! At this point, any eventual accelerated armament in the Asia-Pacific theatre would only strengthen the hydrocarbon status quo, and would implicitly further help a well-orchestrated global silencing of consumers' sensitivity over the record-high oil price.

With its present configuration, it is hard to imagine that anybody can outplay the US in the petro-security, petro-financial and petro-military global playground in the decades to come. Given the planetary petro-financial-media-tech-military causal constellations, this type of confrontation is so well mastered by and would further only benefit the US and the closest of its allies. China's defense complex is over-ideologized, under-capitalized, technologically outdated and innovation-inert, while the US' is largely privatized, highly efficient, deployable and prime innovative. Thus, even in security domain, the main China's problem is not a naval or overall military parity, but the disproportionate technological gap. After all, China's army was not meant (by Mao) and maintained (by Deng and his successors) to serve the external projection purpose. It was and still remains an ideological enterprise of cohesion, an essential centrifugal force to preserve territorial integrity of this land-co-

lossus. (However, a design of the armies in the China's neighborhood significantly defers.)

Within the OECD/IEA grouping, or closely: the G-8 (the states with resources, infrastructure, tradition of and know-how to advance the fundamental technological breakthroughs), it is only Japan that may seriously consider a Green/Renewable-tech U-turn. Tokyo's external energy dependencies are stark and long-lasting. Past the recent nuclear trauma, Japan will need a few years to (psychologically and economically) absorb the shock — but it will learn a lesson. For such an impressive economy and considerable demography, situated on a small land-mass which is repeatedly brutalized by devastating natural catastrophes (and dependent on yet another disruptive external influence — Arab oil), it might be that a decisive shift towards green energy is the only way to survive, revive, and eventually to emancipate.

An important part of the US-Japan security treaty is the US energy supply lines security guaranty, given to (the post-WWII demilitarized) Tokyo. After the recent earthquake-tsunami-radiation armageddon, as well as witnessing the current Chinese military/naval noise, (the cabinet of the recently reconfirmed PM Noda and any other subsequent government of) Japan will inevitably rethink and revisit its energy policy, as well as the composition of its primary energy mix.

Tokyo is well aware that the Asian geostrategic myopias are strong and lasting, as many Asian states are either locked up in their narrow regionalisms or/and entrenched in their economic egoisms. Finally, Japan is the only Asian country that has clearly learned from its own modern history, all about the limits of hard power projection and the strong repulsive forces that come in aftermath from the neighbors. Their own pre-modern and modern history does not offer a similar experience to the

<sup>1</sup> Historically, both Europe and Asia had a weak centre with the continent's peripheries traditionally pressing on a soft centre. With the strengthening of 19th century Germany (Bismarck's Greater Prussia), and of late 20th century's Deng's China, the centre started pressing on its peripheries for the first time in modern history. One of the central security dilemmas between Bismarck and Helsinki times was 'how many Germanys' Europe should have to preserve its inner balance and peace. Europe and the world have paid an enormous price in two world wars to figure it out. With the bitter memories of Nazism still residing in the body and soul of the continent, the recent unification of Germany was only possible within the Helsinki' tranquilized Europe.

other two Asian heavyweights, China and India.

This indicates the Far East as a probable zone of the Green-tech excellence, as much as ASEAN might be the gravity center of the consolidated diplomatic and socio-political action, and a place of attraction for many Asians in the decade to come. The ASEANized Korean peninsula — if patient, nuanced and farsighted (and if the unilateral peninsular assertiveness is always met with a de-escalating restrain, and never with a spiraling reciprocal provocation) may become this part of Asian excellence.

### **Post Scriptum on the Korean peninsula:**

As one of the exceptionally few world regions, Korean peninsula so far holds both what is otherwise missing in many other world's theaters — stabilized demographic growth and an impressive economic growth. However, the demographic and economic growth poses an additional environmental stress, which — if not under check — may result in confrontational domestic policies and practices aimed at to maximize a grab for finite, scarce resources.

Hence, be the outside world Kantian or Hobbesian (be it driven by the sense of higher civilizational mission and common Korean destiny, or by the pragmatic need to strengthen the nation's position), all necessary means are here! To register its future claims, the Korean — as well as wider East Asian theater — have to demonstrate its lasting and decisive vision and will.

Tentatively, we can cluster that will around three main tasks:

**1. Prosperity:** Support to all three sides of the knowledge triangle: research (creation of knowledge); development/innovation (application of knowledge); education (dissemination of knowledge), as well as the promotion of life itself;

**2. Solidarity:** Human dimension enhancement through promotion of cohesion policies, including the full respect of authenticity as well as the preservation and promotion of indigenous socio-cultural and environmental diversities;

**3. Security:** Enhancing the human-centered (socio-economic) safety, based on freedom, justice and inclusive collective (environmental and socio-political) security.

This opportunity should be understood as history's call — which both invites and obliges at the same time. Or, as Hegel reminds us that since: "reason is purposive activity..." the state should be: "...the actuality of the ethical Idea, of concrete freedom..." for all. An effective long-range prosperity, solidarity as well as (external or internal) security cannot be based on confrontational (nostalgia of)'religious' radicalism and other ideological collisions. Clearly, it cannot rest on the escapist consumerism, corrosive socio-economic egoism and exclusion, restriction and denial, but only on promotion and inclusion. Simply, it needs to be centered on a pro-active, participatory policy not a reactive, dismissive one.

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