

# SECURITY OUTLOOK FOR THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION

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## **Introduction**

We all know that our mind can see farther than our eye. We can see miles away and years ahead. But there are many things even our mind cannot see. We could not foresee for instance the end of the Cold War or the financial crisis of 1997-1998. We could not foresee 9/11 and all that followed. We never saw the tsunami coming. No human can play God.

I therefore want to anchor myself firmly in what is reasonably foreseeable when I assess the security outlook for the Asia Pacific region. My views will be based on a balance of possibilities, and I am mindful here of the fact that there will always be the X factor that we all could not see, that can come upon us from the blind side.

I must also clarify here what I mean by “security”. Security to me is not just issues of war and peace, of conflict and threats of conflict. Security is more comprehensive. Security encompasses all the critical threats to our physical, political, economic and social well-being, threats that can eventually result in the destruction of our core interests and values. For a man constantly seized with the pangs of hunger for instance, security is not safety from a bullet or a bomb. It is the next meal. For the seriously ill it is that which will heal and save his life.

## **Perspective, past, present and future**

Let me first put things in perspective. The Asia Pacific region is grappling with many security challenges, and I will highlight some of them soon. But one clear strategic trend has been a substantial improvement in the regional security situation. The Asia Pacific is a much safer place to live in today. Northeast Asia has never been more peaceful in the last 100 years. Southeast Asia has never been more peaceful in the last 50 or 60 years. No shots are being fired across borders. The Cold War is largely

over. Domestic insurgencies that used to rage in nearly all Southeast Asian countries have either disappeared, or subsided in the countries where they still persist, namely in Myanmar, southern Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia. Relations among Southeast Asian states, and between them and China have improved tremendously. Cooperation is largely replacing confrontation, and regional processes such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Plus Three process are strengthening peaceful collaboration further.

Similarly, while no other region in the world has as many people living in abject poverty, in no other region too is the number or proportion of poor being rescued from their plight as dramatically as in this region. And no other region gives as much hope for the remaining poor, because the Asia Pacific is developing more rapidly than any other region in the world.

This relatively peaceful and generally benign situation may not endure. Several things can go wrong or become worse in the region, and I will dwell on some of them shortly. But I am an optimist. I believe that if we manage our affairs reasonably well, and if we are able to restrain the doctrinaire and the hawks that are present on all sides, there are sufficient countervailing forces at work that can continue to keep the Asia Pacific region a largely peaceful place.

Let me now dwell on some of the major security issues that I think warrant our attention.

### **Human security and the war against poverty**

I would put human security as the most important security challenge confronting the region. At the core of human security is freedom from poverty, because when you are less poor you are better able to take care of the critical and important things like your health. You are better able to protect yourself from HIV/AIDs and take precautionary measures against lethal diseases like SARS and avian flu. When the people are less deprived, your society is more stable, other things being equal. When you are more affluent, you are better able to recover and pick up the pieces after a natural disaster.

The Asia Pacific has literally hundreds of millions of poor. One-sixth of the population of China, or 150 million people, lived on less than US\$1 a day in 2001. One in every five Mongolian, and one in every three Cambodian and Laotian, is poor even by their standards. The situation in North Korea is somewhat better now, but still it is little better than just above famine for the bulk of the people. There are many poor in urban ghettos, but we won't really know the meaning of abject poverty until we have been to the rural interiors of Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines or Indonesia, or even the remote villages in the Northeastern provinces of Thailand or the interiors of Sarawak.

For the Asia Pacific region therefore the war against poverty is the greatest war it has to wage. All other wars are lesser wars. All other security threats pale in comparison.

The war against poverty and for human security will be waged with greater success in the countries whose economies are performing, like China and Vietnam. They will be much more difficult in the North Korea and the Myanmar, and in other economies where jobs are in short supply in relation to demand. Ultimately the war will have to be waged by the countries concerned themselves, through sound economic policies implemented in a stable and peaceful political environment. Neighbours and outside parties can and should help, but they can only play a subsidiary and supporting role. In general however, poverty in the region will continue to decline.

### **The resurgence of geopolitics**

When the Cold war ended many of us thought that it would spell the end of geopolitics as well. We thought that the primary force animating relations among states would no longer be geopolitics, but something far healthier and more welcome, namely geoeconomics. We thought that the battle between ideologies and doctrines would be over, and that economics would be the major consideration in the affairs of the world. We looked forward to what we called a peace dividend, expressing itself in decreased spending on weapons and increased spending on raising human welfare.

We were not entirely wrong. The titanic struggle between the US-led West and the Soviet bloc waged on every continent is over. The great contest between capitalism and communism has subsided. Even in the countries where communism still prevails, such as in China, Vietnam and Laos, the ideology is essentially dead as an organising principle in the economic sphere. They are all going the way of the market. The major powers are no longer spending as much on arms as they did during the Cold War.

But the war of ideologies, and the contest between alternative systems and values persists in other forms. In some respects there has been a resurgence. The battle between secular ideologies continues in the form of the pressure on Leninist systems to initiate political reform and promote democracy and civil and political rights. The pressure is of course not exerted on Leninist systems alone. They are exerted on less democratic and authoritarian systems in general, and they are by no means an altogether bad thing. But the kinds of strategies and measures employed are important. In general outside pressure has limited capacity to effect change, except on weak or failed states. Persuasion is also better than coercion, although it may take longer to bear fruit. In most cases change has to come from within, frequently and unfortunately at high cost.

The United States and Western Europe however tend to adopt a more muscular approach. Countries like India, in fact the largest democracy in the world, do not engage in exerting pressure upon other countries. They do not, for instance, operate radios in neighbouring countries broadcasting into socialist states. They do not lecture their hosts on how to run their countries during state visits. They do not apply sanctions to induce political reform or precipitate regime change.

The resurgence of geopolitics at the present however, also differs from that during the Cold War. It is no longer confined to a contest between secular ideologies and systems alone, one democratic capitalism and the other totalitarian socialism. Today it is increasingly more evident between a secular Western camp with a strong

religious (Christian) identity and underpinnings on the one hand, and a religiously defined Muslim world on the other. The “clash of civilisations” that many of us were so quick to dismiss when Huntington first postulated it, is becoming more credible today.

This is not to deny that many Western and Muslim countries work closely together and indeed help each other. Or that the Muslim and Western worlds are united against each other. They are not. But old issues such as the Palestinian question and US support and assistance for Israel are being reinforced by new issues such as Al-Qaeda terrorism, the illegal invasion of Iraq, Abu Ghraib, the US-led Western pressure on Iran, and the caricature of the Prophet Muhammad to define and harden lines of distrust, and confrontation between the two worlds.

The antipathy if not animosity is not very evident at the level of governments, because they are forced to respond to the dictates of national interest and *realpolitik*. But they are very evident at the level of people, in their attitudes, their prejudices and their level of trust and comfort towards each other. It will take many decades to mend the rift.

Fortunately for the Asia Pacific region the problem here is not as severe as in West Asia. At the social level, I believe that there is greater trust and tolerance for Westerners in the Muslim countries here than there is trust and tolerance towards Muslims in the US. There is great admiration and respect for the many achievements of the West too. Once we get over the problems of terrorism, Palestine, Iraq and all the rest, the antipathy and friction between the West and the Muslim world will subside.

### **Changes to the regional strategic balance**

China is unlikely to ever again recover its status as the Middle Kingdom and the regional hegemon that it was for several hundred years until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. But when a country that is home to a fifth of humanity; is the third largest real estate on the globe; the second largest economy in PPP terms; that has grown faster than any

other country in the world in the last 10 years and appears not to be letting up; is a nuclear weapon state; and is in possession of the largest standing army on earth, when that country is on the rise, it cannot do so without creating waves that wash not only around the region, but around the globe.

Responses to the rise of China however have ranged from the sensible to the irrational. Different countries are adopting different hedging strategies. The worry is that some of these strategies may in fact create, or aggravate, the very problems we want to avoid. Malaysia's strategy for instance, is to generally embrace China in a web of cooperation for mutual peace and prosperity, while it does not neglect altogether a modest deterrent capacity.

Countries like the US and Japan in particular however, have come to regard China very explicitly and publicly as an emerging or potential security threat. They are adopting a strategy that can be described as a mix of containment and constraint even as they engage China economically (The National Security Strategy Report, March 2006 and the Quadrennial Defence Review 2006). Containment is expressed in initiatives to strengthen existing military alliances and forge new strategic partnerships around China, including India (10 year defence pact signed between US and India in June 2005; 2006 QDR: "...the US will work to achieve greater integration of defence systems amongst its international partners in a way that would complicate any adversary's efforts to decouple them"). At the same time they demand greater transparency in China's defence policies and expenditure, and they pressure entities like the European Union to refrain from providing advanced military technology to China citing its poor human rights record.

Constraint can be discerned from pressure on China to institute political reform and democratise and improve its human rights situation. This is laudable, except that if things go wrong and China implodes there can be great domestic turmoil with negative repercussions to the stability of the region.

A sub-set of this situation is the mounting strain in Sino-Japanese relations. In fact the two major emerging concerns for regional stability are US-China relations and Japan-China relations. Sino-Japan relations are being driven by several factors. They include inability to effect reconciliation between Japan and its Northeastern neighbours over Japan's wartime atrocities; territorial disputes (Senkaku and Dokdo/Takeshima); the Japanese PM's visits to the Yasukuni shrine; Japan's closer security collaboration with the US, including over Taiwan, which China considers a part of the country (February 2005: Japan and US issued a joint security declaration which identified the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue as a joint security concern); Japan's criticism of China's political system; Japan's forging of a strategic partnership with India as a balance to China; and rising nationalism and mutual antipathy in both countries.

The containment and constraint policies adopted by the US and Japan towards China, based on the threat they perceive from the latter, are unhealthy for the long-term stability and security of the region. A more benign and less provocative response will serve the region better. This will require more moderate stances from the leadership in Washington and Tokyo, which is presently rather hard-line (PM Koizumi, FM Taro Aso, Chief cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe). The US for instance could revert to its previous policy of regarding China as a strategic partner rather than a strategic competitor. This will require a major reassessment of the threat perceived from China. It would help in this regard if both countries ask some hard questions: What exactly is the nature of the threat from China? Threat to whom? What will it actually do? Why will China do it? What would be the costs and consequences to China of any aggressive action? How relevant and appropriate are the existing policies adopted by Washington and Tokyo in relation to any perceived problem?

That China poses a very major economic challenge to practically all other economies is to be readily acknowledged. But contrary to what would appear from the rhetoric of some major powers, the challenges are felt most keenly by the smaller and less competitive economies, not by these major powers. We can also be quite certain that China's strategic weight and influence will continue to grow as it becomes a very major economic and diplomatic player,

and as its military capability increases. This is only natural and to be expected, as natural and as right as it is in the case of the other major powers.

What is the more important question is, what China will do with its increased strategic power and influence as it grows? Will it be a constructive force or a belligerent and disruptive one? No one, perhaps not even the Chinese, can know for sure. But for the time being China could not be acting more right. Indeed, it has been a model and civilised citizen of the international community, much more than some other countries that see themselves as the civilised ones. China abides by international law, has shown restraint in the case of Taiwan, and does not easily succumb to provocations.

The China “threat” too is far from clear and is much manipulated. We owe it to ourselves to ask some very specific and pointed questions. Threat to whom? In what way? Taiwan yes, that is, if it moves precipitately and clearly towards independence, and diplomacy fails. No self-respecting nation will tolerate a declaration of independence by a part of what it regards as its sovereign territory. But if Taiwan does not rock the boat, it will be folly for China to invade, because the costs will be prohibitive and it is most unlikely that China can prevail.

Other than Taiwan under these circumstances, who will it attack? The United States? Japan? Why?

We must also ask other pertinent questions. If China has hostile intentions, what is its capability, compared to its potential adversaries? In what ways does it demonstrate its hostile intentions? By its military build-up? Certainly China is building up. It can afford more now, and there are voices in Taiwan talking and acting independence. China is assessed to have increased its military expenditure by 14.7 percent this year. This is a very big increase. But China is a third class continental power. The US is a premium class global power. They are worlds apart. Even today, according to SIPRI figures for instance, China spends less than one-tenth of what the US spends on defence (US\$35.4 billion versus US\$455.3 billion). In the 10 years between 1995 and 2004

### **The Challenge of Managing Democratic Change**

I believe that the days of governing without the express will of the people are numbered. Changing values, communications technology, market economics,



emerging civil society and international pressure will all conspire to move Asia's remaining closed societies in the inexorable direction of democratic change, if not within the next ten years in the not too distant future. There will be different forms of democracy with varying degrees of democratic space, but I believe that it is only a matter of time before forces in six countries – China, North Korea, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Brunei – push irresistibly for democratic change.

The challenge will be how the authorities, peoples and processes of each of these countries manage this crucial change. This will have enormous impact not only upon their national security, but upon regional stability as well as domestic developments, impact upon neighbours and the region and beyond. Where change takes place largely peacefully the security impact will be minimal. Where it is more violent and extended the impact will be greater. Unfortunately experience everywhere, including in Europe and Africa and here in Southeast Asia, seems to indicate that blood will have to be split before there is substantive change. It is only a question of how much blood. Political change in China is potentially the most cataclysmical due to its size and economic weight.

### **Territorial disputes**

This is another area that deserves serious attention. Territorial issues are among the most intractable political and security issues. It is an issue over which many nations are prepared to go to war. Indeed, the norm is for territorial issues to be resolved by war rather than by negotiations, even by nations that consider themselves “civilised.”

The Asia Pacific region is dotted with numerous territorial disputes on land and on sea. Every country, without exception, is involved. Fortunately, most of the disputes are lying dormant or are being peacefully addressed. It would be in the interests of long-term security if most of these disputes are resolved quickly and peacefully. Countries in the region should think seriously about the option of the ICJ if negotiations do not seem promising.

Disputes in East Asia: See [Appendix](#).

### **The North Korean issue**

- There are two divided states in East Asia, one a result of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War like Europe's Germany (the two Koreas) and the other through its own historical process (China/Taiwan). If mishandled both can lead to war inviting involvement of outside powers.
- The Korean issue was once between the two Koreas as the main protagonists backed by their respective superpowers or allies. Now the problem on the Korean peninsula is one that is more between North Korea and the US with four other States in the 6 party talks.
- North Korea appears prepared to end all nuclear programme activity in return for light-water reactor for civilian power. It says it already has nuclear weapons for defence purposes. It also wants economic assistance from South Korea and Japan and US, a non-aggression treaty from the US and an end to US military presence in South Korea. The US and its allies want an end to the entire nuclear programme before proceeding. The US also talks occasionally about regime change and preferring to wait until North Korea implodes.
- China is now playing the main mediation role.

### **The Taiwan issue**

This issue can be contained unless if Taiwan declares independence. Then all hell will break loose. For the time being the issue is fuelling military expenditure on both sides. Taiwan just dissolved its Reunification Council, which is interpreted as another move towards declaring independence. The issue needs moderation on both sides, as well as US and international pressure upon Taiwan especially.

### **Terrorism and militancy**

This is currently a problem only in the southern part of the Asia Pacific region at present, besides the serious threat to US and coalition/allied interests, for example Australia.

**Territorial Disputes in East Asia (a brief list)**

**Aksai Chin** – *People’s Republic of China and India*

**Ambalat** – *Malaysia and Indonesia*

**Most of Arunachal Pradesh** – *India and People’s Republic of China*

**Asmore Reef** – *Indonesia and Australia*

**Baitou Mountain** – *People’s Republic of China, North Korea and the Republic of China*

**Bhutanese enclaves in Tibet** – *People’s Republic of China and Bhutan*

**Do Lang** – *Myanmar and Thailand*

**Dispute over offshore islands** – *Cambodia and Vietnam*

**Lower Kurile islands** – *Russia and Japan*

**Liancourt Rocks** – *South Korea, North Korea and Japan*

**Ligitan dan Sipidan** – *Malaysia and the Philippines*

**Limbang area** – *Brunei and Malaysia*

**Macclesfield Bank** – *People’s Republic of China, Republic of China and Vietnam*

**Northern Bhutan** – *Bhutan and the People’s Republic China*

**Palau Batek/Fatu Sinai** – *Indonesia and East Timor*

**Paracel Islands** – *People’s Republic of China, Republic of China and Vietnam*

**Pedra Branca** – *Singapore and Malaysia*

**Prachin Buri area** – *Thailand and Malaysia*

**Sabah (Northern Borneo)** – *Philippines and Malaysia*

**Sakhalin** – *Russia and Japan*

**Scarborough Shoal** – *Philippines, People’s Republic of China and Republic of China*

**Senkaku Islands** – *Japan, people’s Republic of China and Republic of China*

**Southern Kuril Islands** – *Japan and Russia*

**Spratly Islands** – *People’s Republic of China, Republic of China, Vietnam, Philippines (part), Malaysia (part) and Brunei (part)*