

A sneak preview in the crystal ball

By Jan Lund



The former Danish ambassador to Singapore, Jørgen Ørstrøm Møller has been appointed head of a group of researchers trying to paint a picture of how Asia develops during the next 25 years.

How does Asia develop during the next 25 years?

That's a question asked by many – and even more people might try to find the answer. Celebrating its 40 years anniversary ISEAS (Institute of South East Asian Studies) has decided to give it a shot.

To provide the answers everybody are looking for, the former Danish ambassador to Singapore, Jørgen Ørstrøm Møller has been appointed leader of a research team looking into the crystal ball.

Since he left the post as ambassador he has been working as a researcher at Singapore-based ISEAS. Just this April one result of two years of intensive research was presented to the public: A 513 page book named "European Integration – sharing of Experiences".

The coming years his main task will be to lead the team of researchers who are going to contribute to the project describing possible future scenarios for the region.

Jørgen Ørstrøm Møller tells here how he is going to handle this complicated project and gives an insight of the mega-trends, that he considers will define the development out on the other side of 2030:

How will the project be organized?

I consider myself a coordinator of a group that will be build around the experts at ISEAS. My aim is to make it as informal as possible. That will be a huge advantage for the process. I will string together a basic group of 7-8 people, who are the frame. Around them will be a loose group of internal and external contributors and experts, who can support us from their special field of expertise.

Is there a time frame, and who is the target group for the results?

There's no time frame, so we are not under pressure to deliver at a certain time or date. We can use the time necessary. But I expect

our results to be published as a book during the coming 12-24 months. My intention is to create a hands-on tool, which can be used by Asian governments for their political planning and strategic decisions.

Which trends and conclusions can be seen already today?

From Deng Xiao Ping's opening of China back in 1979 and till today the global circumstances has been really favourable for Asia. There has been a high economic growth. We have seen low prices on raw materials, energy, commodities and food. The workforce has been increasing and the price of work has been low. The savings rate has been high, and there has been plenty of money around.

All those trends are going to change. For instance can we already now conclude, that in 2015 the Chinese work force will begin to shrink and the price of work will begin to rise.

Asia will move from a situation with extreme favourable conditions for growth to lesser favourable conditions.

So far Asia had to administrate economic growth. Now the circumstances are changing, so Asia has to create the conditions for growth. That shift in the underlying structure will give the political system much bigger challenges and put the politicians under much more pressure.

What is the overall picture? Will Asia be able to continue the current boom?

Basically we can divide the underlying trends into three large groups

1. Factors that creates high economic growth
2. Factors that can create economic growth but also include certain liabilities.
3. Factors that will slow down the economic growth

For the first group Asia will still be strongly supported by factors such as innovation, research and creativity. In the second group one crucial factor is education. Can Asia deliver? In 20 years time most Asian people will be working in a job, which is not known today. Are the education systems good enough or can they create some systems that can match this challenge? If the system can solve this problem there will be created a high quality base of human resources. If not - we will see a lot of unhappy citizens in Asian countries. The third group are factors like the demographic development. For instance in Japan and China a lot of elderly people will need care. Will the systems be able to deliver?

Do you see Asia make it or are the challenges so big that there will be problems?

One fundamental observation is that the governments and societies are going from administrating a growth, which more or less appeared on its own - to be responsible for creating the basic conditions for growth. Many countries are already preparing themselves for this situation. It takes time to change, but of course it can be done. The environment is one classical example. In a very short time Asia has adopted this concept and is going to change.

Personally I believe that Asia will succeed. Fundamentally the political steering systems are good enough to make the right political choices. Asia has a tradition for creating new good political leaders and basically the current globalization is a win-win situation. The raise of Asia did not force a EU decline and will not do it. The growth in Asia is bigger than the growth in the EU. But both regions are growing and getting better off. But still, it will be long time before Asia is reaching the same average income as USA and Europe

How will the development of Asia be reflected in the global political systems?

"It is important that the current global leaders see the rise of Asia as a plus-sum-game. The challenge for the West is to acknowledge that a change in the balance of power is taking place. The challenge for Asia is to show patience. If the West makes counter moves and Asia loses patience, we can be heading for a conflict. Historically a power-shift like the current has rarely taken place without a conflict. But for the first time this might happen on the back of globalization. But if Asia does not keep up the economic growth and don't understand the need for a gradual transformation of power and influence, we might see a global conflict involving 6-7 billion people. And that will not be pleasant!

Are there some major global trends that form future political developments in Asia?

At this times of globalisation we are still living in a world, that has been built on Western principles and ideas. What is inspiring Asia now, is that the age of the European national state is in a decline. The way a society is organized is changing. The responsibility is moving from the national state to "others". Today it is possible to live in another society inside a national state. Also international cooperation will eventually find other forums than the national state. The political life and processes will find other platforms. The political mechanisms will be moving. But right now nobody knows to where.

What will be the success-criteria for the report?

My hope is, that if I'm alive in 25 years time, I will be able to say: "I told you so!" **DB**

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— Master of Science, Economics
from Copenhagen University 1968.

Worked at the Danish Foreign Ministry with EU and European Integration for 25 years from 1971 to 1997.

From 1997 to 2005 Danish Ambassador to Singapore.

Since 2005 Visiting Senior Research fellow at ISEAS

Has written numerous articles and columns in newspapers all over the world and has published

more than 30 books in English and Danish. His latest book is "European Integration – sharing of Experiences" from April published by ISEAS (www.bookshop.iseas.edu.sg)

