

Nationalism or Integration: A US role for an Asian choice?

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The strategic landscape that covers Asia today reveals a vast region that is divided between regional integration and rising nationalism. The outcome of this confrontation between two diametrically opposite trends may well determine whether Asia turns into a stable and prosperous region, emerging as a stakeholder in the international community or slides down the road toward conflict and strife threatening not only its own stability, but global security too.

Confidence building measures, moves to improve long-standing ties between neighbours and buttressing of trade relationships merely scratch the surface. Only last month, the foreign ministers from China, India and Russia met in New Delhi in discussions to boost trade and economic cooperation. This was the second meeting since 2005, and with China offering to host the next meeting, these tripartite meetings are destined to feature prominently on the diplomatic calendar.

The Chinese foreign minister sped off thereafter to Tokyo, to prepare for Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit in April 2007 – the first time since 2000 such bilateral meeting is taking place in Tokyo. This came a month after a series of meetings in Cebu, Philippines between the ten ASEAN countries, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand.

Through complex diplomatic links, many countries are working hard at furthering economic integration, with concern directed chiefly at the economic prowess of China and India. ASEAN - 40 this year – has just published a report by an appointed group of eminent persons (EPG) pointing to an ASEAN charter that deepens economic integration among the Southeast Asian nations. A network is being built to foster mutual trust and confidence among these countries, representing that hardware necessary, without which integration does not appear credible. Across Asia, a large number of free trade agreements are already in place or under negotiation.

After the recent spat between China and Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited China in October last year and Wen Jiabao is scheduled to visit Japan this spring. Although Abe's recent apparent back-tracking over the comfort-women imbroglio is unhelpful and blurs the picture, the two countries seem determined to make a serious attempt at rapprochement, fully cognisant of the implications of an environment of mutual recrimination and mistrust. Any attempt at economic integration in the region without the participation of China and Japan faces an uphill struggle politically and economically.

All these efforts so far are good and commendable. They augur well for integration and recognise the benefits of economic globalisation must be spread to all Asian countries, to prevent a situation where some states feel left out and isolated.

Unfortunately this is not the only trend appearing over the horizon.

On 9 January 2007, the Japanese Self Defence Agency was renamed the Ministry of Defence. A new education bill designed to teach patriotism in accordance with the ideas put forward by Prime Minister Abe in his book, "Toward a Beautiful Country" was passed. In the slipstream of the North Korean nuclear test, the question of nuclear weapons for Japan became a topic for public debate with influential political personalities weighing in.

Foreign Minister Aso noted that there should be a public debate about whether the country should acquire nuclear weapons, but stressed that Japan would stick to its policy of not possessing nuclear weapons. On the other hand, in a policy brief emanating from a think-tank he heads, former Prime Minister Nakasone opined that there was a need to study the issue of nuclear weapons, arguing that while Japan should not acquire such weapons, "it is not necessarily known whether (dependence on US nuclear weapons as a deterrent) will continue."

Taken together, all these events do not reflect an adjustment, but represent a seminal shift in Japanese politics. Separately, Hu Jintao's call for a powerful Chinese navy and the successful interception of a de-commissioned satellite over the last three months might be perceived as occasional sabre-rattling.

China's upping of the military ante coupled with the recent announcement of a 17.8% rise in the 2007 defence budget could be due to a myriad of reasons. One theory is that it was a signal to Japan, because of the change in nomenclature of the Japanese Ministry of Defence. Another explanation for China's military posturing could be recent developments in Taiwan. Yet another theory perhaps is an all too clear signal to the US that in event of a crisis in the Taiwan Straits, China is no lame duck.

Whatever the explanation, these perceptible signals portend unambiguous indications that both Japan and China have selected policy options that are dependent on the employment of the nationalist card, whether subtle or not.

The same trend can be seen in Taiwan where President Chen Shui-bian apparently still harbours thoughts of introducing a new constitution while inducting a new history book that focuses solely on Taiwan instead of the historical association with mainland China. In fact, hardly a few days ago, Chen Shui-bian was quoted as saying, "Taiwan should be independent."

This state of affairs is likely to continue, with sovereignty and integration seen as mutually exclusive entities. In the circumstances, there is a clear and present role to be played by the US in spearheading integration. In fact, there is a degree of commonality to the US role in stimulating the European integration as a condition for American help after the end of World War II, even if the parallel is not absolute. Without that policy stance, European integration might not have taken off. This fact is not forgotten by many Europeans, and it represents one of the most important foundations of the Atlantic Alliance.

The alternative to integration in the form of a sullen of outright negative and parochial attitudes may lead to aborted Asian attempts to integrate with frightening perspectives. Economically, it will lead to lower growth among the Asian countries and connote rising inequalities with the larger economic powers throwing their weight around and the smaller ones facing difficulties to stay the growth course. Politically, it will open the door to rivalry, with traditional animosities raising their ugly head, while fermenting the birth of newer ones. For the American economy, it could spell an unprecedented set back, marked by a recession.

The US continues to retain a strong influence on developments in Asia in addition to equally strong interests. For the Asian economies, the health of the US economy is critical to their trade policy, even if recent figures suggest that at least for China, a swing towards domestic demand is occurring. An engaged US may well tip the balance in favour of integration pulling Asian countries away from the lure of nationalism.

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