

The rise of troubled Asia

Can an Asian century still be realised?

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What do the complexities of domestic, regional and international issues in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan, Myanmar and North Korea signify? What should we expect from the American foreign policy towards Asia as exemplified in the recent statements by Donald Trump about Iran, Afghanistan and now about North Korea? Where does the so called 'peaceful rise' of China figure in the calculations, and its relations with India and Japan, besides the US in the Indo-Pacific?

Clearly, troubled Asia is on the rise. There were projections earlier about an Asian century, and rise of China, India and Japan within the larger mainland continent and its extended maritime domain. Two questions need to be addressed, instead of being complacent about the rise of Asia and being calmed by some statistics that project it as our century. Perhaps, it could become one; however, given the current trajectory, Asia is not heading towards it. What are the contours of a troubled Asia? And, what can be done to address them and realise an Asian Century? This commentary focuses on the first question. One could identify the following seven trends that will keep Asia troubled.

First, is related to domestic conflicts within Asia, attracting international intervention, for example in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan and Myanmar. While Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan have received more

international attention, Yemen has become a regional playground limiting the actors primarily to the Middle East/West Asia.

Given the domestic problems of governance, positions of major actors — State and non-State, conflicts in these countries are unlikely to subside in the near future. International intervention only exacerbates the situation, for example in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Both Russia and the US from outside the region, and Saudi Arabia and Iran from the immediate neighbourhood are yet to find a common ground in the above three countries. Given this harsh reality, one could expect the western flank of Asia to remain troubled.

If the above three countries suffer from extra international intervention, the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar has garnered even greater international attention. If the international community considers the conflict as a distant one, unfortunately, the rest of Asia including the immediate neighbourhood — India, China and Bangladesh are yet to take serious actions to address the issue. India and China would like to look at the 'larger picture' in dealing with the military regime in Myanmar, than take any harsh measures.

Bangladesh will continue to cry about its limited capacity, push the refugees and accept them reluctantly for placement into temporary camps. A permanent solution will remain a far cry for the Rohingyas.

The second trend is related to international interventions exacerbating domestic conflicts further within Asia. Afghanistan is the perfect example since 1979; a historian would extend all the way to the Great Game, even before the World War-I. If Russia and Great Britain remained the primary villains before the World Wars, US, Russia and Pakistan became one post 1979. Despite their intentions, both China and India remain outliers to the Afghan conflict. Is the Afghan conflict likely to end in the near future? If the eastern flank of Asia is likely to remain troubled, will the "Heart of Asia" be at peace with itself during the next decade?

The third trend one could identify is relating to China as a saviour or aggressor in Asia. Pakistan and most of Central Asia would consider China as a great opportunity. Undoubtedly, for them China is — if one looks at the statistics and political expanse of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative.

China today is the biggest trading partner for most of Asia. China is also a part of numerous regional forums from East Asia to Central Asia and Russia. China is also one of the moving forces of new global structures such as BRICS including Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa. China also has the capacity to invest in new institutions — for example the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is a huge and bold initiative.

If China has evoked responses in some parts of Asia, it has also upset some of its immediate neighbours in three regions — East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia. Japan, Vietnam, Bhutan and India are wary of China's aggressive postures in mainland Asia and the maritime — especially in South China Sea. The ASEAN countries, barring Singapore, are wary of Beijing, despite China being their biggest trading partner. The fourth trend that is likely to impact on Asia's future is related to bilateral conflicts, having the

potential to threaten the peace in the immediate region and in the extended neighbourhood. Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have the potential to impact not only the immediate region (Middle East) but the sectarian peace within the entire Ummah, extending to even Indonesia and the Philippines. The contemporary Qatar crisis demonstrates this.

Given the domestic problems of governance and positions of major actors — state and non-state conflicts in these countries are unlikely to subside in the near future. International intervention will only exacerbate the situation

In South Asia, the impact of the Indo-Pak conflict on the entire region needs no further explanation. In East Asia, North Korea remains the potential flash point. With Trump's recent harsh statement against North Korea at the UN, East Asia is likely to supersede South Asia as the nuclear flash point of Asia.

The fifth trend is relating to nuclear weapons. North Korea and Iran in Asia are likely to bring the US back into Asia in a disruptive form. While Trump's position on Iran and the US-Iran nuclear deal is well known even before he became the President, not many expected North Korea would assume greater nuclear salience in the American calculations. How will nuclear North Korea's immediate neighbourhood (Japan, South Korea and China) respond vis-à-vis a belligerent Pyongyang? What are their options, if Trump decides to activate his threats against North Korea?

The sixth trend is relating to an ever expanding threat from the non-State actors — the clash of militant civilisations. Al Qaeda, and ISIS along with their affiliates present a clear threat to the entire world. The rise of militant Buddhism, as one could see in Myanmar — and to an extent in Sri Lanka- is likely to complicate and feed into militant Islam. Certainly, Asia will remain the primary grounds of this clash as well.

Finally, the US under Trump and the White House approach to all the above six trends is likely to complicate the situation further than alleviate it. While one can be critical of the US in Asia, the continent will also need a positive America. China is unlikely to replace the US in any of the Asian conflict theatres. EU will remain engaged with its own problem. An inward looking US will only exacerbate the existing troubles in Asia. One could add few more trends to the above seven. Can an Asian century be still realised? That question would need a separate analysis.

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