

26/2020

2 September 2020

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As Asia breaks through, the West
is navel-gazing

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Abstract:

The World is in a process of rapid geopolitical transformation: Asia emerges to recover after five centuries the lost centrality in human history; China could displace the US in a couple of decades. USA, as the first global power and the fourth Industrial Revolution, which Asia is facing very favourably, also promises major alterations in the social and economic premises we know. The coronavirus crisis that Asian nations have faced with far better results than Western nations has confirmed the good star of the former.

All this is happening at a time when the great challenges of humanity are global, the multilateral mechanisms are weakening, and the West seems to have lost the strength and self-confidence that have made it so unique. Security strategies can no longer ignore this real revolution in the global landscape and will have to adapt to the new Asian leadership.

Keywords:

Asia, the West, China, USA, international order, leadership, future, security strategy.

How to cite this document:

PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. *As Asia breaks through, the West is navel-gazing*. IEEE Analysis Paper 26/2020
http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA26_2020JOSPAR_AsiaOccidente-ENG.pdf and/or [bie³ link](#) (accessed day/month/year)

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Mientras Asia se abre paso, Occidente se mira el ombligo

Resumen:

El mundo está en un proceso de rápida transformación geopolítica: Asia emerge para recuperar después de cinco siglos la centralidad perdida en la historia humana; China podría desplazar en un par de décadas a los EE. UU. como primera potencia global y la Cuarta Revolución Industrial, que Asia afronta muy favorablemente, promete también grandes alteraciones de las premisas sociales y económicas que conocemos. La crisis del coronavirus que las naciones asiáticas han afrontado con muchos mejores resultados que las occidentales ha confirmado la buena estrella de las primeras.

Todo esto ocurre en una época en la que los grandes retos de la humanidad son globales, los mecanismos multilaterales se debilitan y Occidente parece haber perdido la pujanza y la confianza en sí mismo que le han hecho tan singular. Las estrategias de seguridad ya no pueden ignorar esta verdadera revolución del panorama mundial y tendrán que adaptarse al nuevo liderazgo asiático.

Palabras clave:

Asia, Occidente, China, EE. UU., orden internacional, liderazgo, futuro, estrategia de seguridad.

Introduction

In mid-February, just before COVID-19 became a global concern, the Munich Security Conference 2020 proclaimed the de-Westernisation of the world¹, which is recognition of the end of a long five-century period in which the international community has been westernising at the rate that the planet was globalising. In the last century this process has also been carried out by identifying the democratic and liberal model as a reference of modernity.

The reason for this process of de-Westernisation, although it also responds to elements of internal crisis in the West, is fundamentally due to the rise of Asia, the continent that is home to more than half of the world's population, and to the clear will of the Chinese Communist Party to modernize its country by rejecting the democratic-liberal model. Today, Asia is the fastest growing region in the world and during this decade its economy will outpace all others combined². The centre of gravity, not only quantitative, of human activity is shifting eastwards and the Pacific Ocean has replaced the Atlantic as the main channel of trade, restoring Asia to the place it has occupied for most of history. On the other hand, the West, as a whole, is ageing and losing percentage of the global population. Only the US has a reasonably healthy population. In a globalised world, demographics are gaining geopolitical weight by leaps and bounds³.

The deep crisis produced by the current pandemic has also highlighted how the most advanced nations of the Asian continent have been able to react faster and with better results than the old leaders of the West, taking the baton of excellence, until recently a monopoly of the nations with European roots, and reaffirming themselves as their own models and not just as good imitations of the nations that were once the colonial powers.

¹ *Munich Security Report 2020, Westlessness*. Available at https://securityconference.org/assets/user_upload/MunichSecurityReport2020.pdf

² LEE, Hsien Loong. "The Endangered Asian Century. America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020.

³ EBERSTADT, Nicholas. "With Great Demographics Comes Great Power. Why Population Will Drive Geopolitics", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2019.

This uneven performance, so favourable to Asians, is leading many Western intellectuals to make harsh judgements about their own states. Thus, British historian Niall Ferguson, who in 2011 in his famous book *The West and the Rest* predicted the unstoppable rise of Asia, “is being extremely critical of Western governments for their late, and in many cases even stupid, response (in the historian’s words), in the face of the pandemic”⁴ and he often recalls how, in January this year, at the Davos meeting, he was surprised by the scant attention paid to the danger of a pandemic arising from the Chinese coronavirus outbreak and how all the attention was directed towards climate change and young Greta Thunberg.

At present, the growing confrontation between Washington and Beijing is undoubtedly the main strategic concern and the major element that is reshaping the international order. But this circumstance would not have such a revolutionary and transformative nature of the geopolitical order if it were not accompanied by the rise of Asia as a whole. In two or three decades’ time, the major global decisions will probably be taken in the capitals of that continent and not in those of the West, as was the case until very recently.

This document argues that the rise of Asia implies a gradual but profound transformation of the global panorama, the most important long-term vector of geopolitical change, that the Thucydidian Trap is gaining disproportionate attention, partially shielding the relevance of the global Asian phenomenon, and that the West can no longer expect the world to continue to conform to its criteria and leadership. Maintaining old strategic approaches will increase tensions between the powers and only make us live in a more dangerous world and the final “bump” is likely to be greater.

⁴ FERGUSON, Niall. Interview in *El País*, 2 August 2020. Available at: <https://elpais.com/ideas/2020-08-01/niall-ferguson-la-segunda-guerra-fria-ha-llegado-para-quedarse.html>

Asia comes of age

Until the 16th century, with the arrival of European navigators on the shores of Asia, this continent was the centre of gravity of the world and acted as an international system through economic and cultural exchanges⁵. From then on, European nations dominated the oceans and innovated in virtually every field⁶, until they came to dominate every continent through their colonial empires. Asian regions began to trade with and receive more influence from Europe, interacting to a lesser extent among themselves.

At the end of the 19th century, an Asian nation, Japan, entered the club of the most developed industrial nations. In World War II, the US wiped it off the map, but it soon re-emerged from Washington; the threat of the communist powers demanded it. The end of colonialism and the Cold War has allowed Asia's dependence on Western powers to be reversed and now Asian regions trade and relate to each other more than they do to the West. Since 2016, the volume of intra-Asian trade exceeds that of the continent with the rest of the world⁷. By promoting a more regionalised globalisation, the coronavirus pandemic is further strengthening the economic system of the great Indo-Pacific space, making that continent even more dependent on the outside world, with the exception of the import of raw materials, which, logically, is still growing.

Worldwide	China	Bangladesh	Cambodia	Vietnam	Nepal	Philippines
2.5 %	6.1 %	8.2 %	7.1 %	7 %	7 %	6 %
India	Indonesia	Laos	Malaysia	Myanmar	Thailand	Pakistan
5 %	5 %	4.7%	4.3 %	2.9 %	2.4 %	1 %

Table 1. GDP growth in 2019 by country Source: World Bank.

⁵ KHANNA, Parag. *The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict and Culture in the 21st Century*, Simon & Schuster, 2019.

⁶ PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. *What world is coming to an end?* IEEE Analysis Document 23/2019, 4 September 2019. Available at: http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEEA23_2019JOSPAR_mundo.pdf

⁷ KHANNA, Parag. *The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict and Culture in the 21st Century*, Simon & Schuster, 2019.

This process has occurred because of successive waves of economic development. The first one was played by Japan between the '50s and '70s. In just three decades, Japan overtook Germany and positioned itself as the world's second largest economy. Then, in the '70s and '80s, inspired by the example of Japan, came the wave of development of the so-called "Asian tigers" (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore). In the last two decades of the last century, the third wave of Asian development allowed China to make the great leap forward. The countries already developed in the two previous waves made it much easier thanks to their huge investment drive. Now, since the beginning of this century, the states of South and Southeast Asia, with their 2.5 billion inhabitants –one third of the world's population, the continent's youngest population and countries with very high economic growth (Table 1)– are immersed in the fourth wave of development⁸. Progressively, these last regions of Asia will gain global prominence.

The first two waves had less impact on the global economy because the population of all those nations together was two-thirds that of the US. However, the third –China, with a sixth of the world's population– ended up generating a sustained period of global growth in the first decade of this century, as well as a rise in the price of raw materials that had a very positive effect on the economies of the regions that exported these goods, such as Latin America, Africa and the Middle East. Another phenomenon that has been a determining factor in the configuration of the globalised order, as the Asian giant has become the factory of the world, has been the expansion of value chains at the planetary level. Most trade flows are now linked to complex production processes, where goods may cross international borders several times before reaching their final destination in the market. The World Bank estimates that more than two-thirds of total trade occurs through these global value chains that support cross-border production⁹.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ GERSTEL, Dylan, SEGAL, Stephanie. *Allied Economic Forum, Lessons Learned*. CSIS Brief, August 2020, pg. 2. Available at: file:///C:/Users/Jose/Downloads/200805_Economics_AlliedForum_v5_FINAL.pdf

This has contributed to an increase in world merchandise trade from 16.7% of world GDP in 1960 to 46.1% in 2018. Including services, the value of total trade amounted to almost 60% of world GDP in 2018. As the world has become more integrated, economic activity has become less concentrated in North America and Europe, while East and South Asian countries, especially China, account for an increasing proportion of global output. The US share of world GDP fell from 40% in 1960 to 24% in 2019, while for China it quadrupled from 4% to 17% in the same period¹⁰.

The fourth wave of economic development in Asia may have an even greater impact than the previous one. It is not only the demographic issue already mentioned, as this region is home to one out of every three inhabitants of the planet, with a young and expanding population. China's great New Silk Road project is mobilising unprecedented resources of all kinds there, and weaving an extraordinarily dynamic connectivity network. By the time of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Indian subcontinent had the advantage of having excellent mathematical and computer skills among its population. As its states improve in percentages of quality education, the relevance of this uniqueness will grow. Furthermore, in the technological transformation of the world, the most advanced nations in Asia already dominate many of its key vectors, offering the continent's less developed countries models of imitation and success, in the manner of a great Asian osmosis which is further enhanced by the regionalisation of the new globalisation.

The combination of this economic growth, with the geopolitical stability and technocratic pragmatism characteristic of Asian governments, has given rise to a new Asian ambition for the global order. Asian nations see their return to the leadership of history as a natural destiny and no longer accept the tutelage of the West. On the contrary, they have full confidence in the potential of their peoples and want their States to be increasingly guided by their own civilisational references, taking from the West what is convenient for them. In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping testified before a meeting of Asian leaders in Shanghai: "It is up to the people of Asia to manage Asia's affairs, solve Asia's problems and defend Asia's security. Its neighbours fear China's meteoric rise and ambitions, but they share Xi's sentiment. The Asians also want to have a say in the

¹⁰Ibidem, pgs. 2 and 3.

rules of the game which, until now, have been dictated by foreign powers¹¹. On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that the liberal rule-based international order that until recently served as a reference for the international order is a Western construct in all its aspects.

An added advantage of Asian nations is that they have greater strategic patience and look to the long term as a priority, while Westerners seem to fall prey to immediacy¹². In Asia, there is also talk of Asian values: work ethic, primacy of the collective over the individual, trust in the state, technocratic governance, mixed capitalism and social conservatism, all with a certain Confucian paternalism. Values would justify different approaches to international relations and set the tone for Asia.

The success achieved in the fight against COVID-19 seems to confirm this point of view. Certainly, Asian nations have benefited from the experience gained from the previous SARS pandemics in 2003 and MERS in 2015 which affected them much more than Western countries¹³. However, the overwhelming difference in the data of deaths per million inhabitants in the current crisis between the most advanced nations of both groups of states –in the West: Belgium 868, United Kingdom 704, Spain 597, Italy 583, Sweden 568 and the US 516; in Asia: India 36, Indonesia 23, Japan 9, South Korea 6, Singapore 5 and China 3¹⁴–, although they must be taken with some scepticism, have strengthened the self-confidence of Asian nations. Their economies also seem to be better off from the shock of this pandemic. Francis Fukuyama argues that the coronavirus crisis may make the countries that strengthen their influence and prestige those that are perceived as effective in the fight against COVID-19, the type of regime (liberal democracy or authoritarianism) would matter less than the speed with which solutions are adopted¹⁵.

¹¹ PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. *Geopolitics of Asia, the world's new centre of gravity*. Strategic Overview 2020, IEEE, March 2020, pg. 135. Available at http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/Panorama_Estrategico_2020.pdf

¹² ROJAS, Enrique. *Having perspective*. Third of ABC, 1 August 2020.

¹³ *What's Happening with South Korea's Pandemic Response*. CSIS video. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QW0Q8cSBpUA>

¹⁴ *El País*, the coronavirus crisis, global situation. Consulted on 15 August. Available at: https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020/06/29/actualidad/1593428011_709853.html?rel=friso-portada

¹⁵ FUKUYAMA, Francis. "The Thing That Determines a Country's Resistance to the Coronavirus", *The Atlantic*, 30 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/thing-determines-how-well-countries-respond-coronavirus/609025>

As Asia looks towards the future, the Western nations are showing clear signs of civilisational fatigue. The great American nation is splitting into two opposing souls and in the EU the original project has stagnated; in addition to *Brexit*, anti-European parties and those at the extremes of the political arc are proliferating. On the other hand, its societies are consumed in sterile debates, knocking down statues and questioning to the point of absurdity the divine and the human, in an act of extreme rebellion against human nature, ignoring the very valuable contributions of all kinds of nations with European roots to universal history. All this diverts attention from the great process of geopolitical evolution that will alter many of the premises on which the world we know was built until now.

The world is turning faster and faster

If there is no cataclysm to stop the transformation of the world, in a couple of decades it will be little like today: China will be the nation with the largest economy, according to all indicators, Asia will have become the centre of gravity of human activity as a whole, the technological transformation will have become more evident in Asia than in any other continent; in short: as in the imagination of Christopher Columbus, the monsoon lands will have become once again synonymous with unparalleled wealth and vital exuberance.

The convergence of these three great agents of geopolitical change, each of them revolutionary in nature: the replacement of the US by China as the leading global power, the shift of the worlds centre of gravity from the West to Asia and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, means that we are living in a Heraclitian-inspired international order, where permanent transformation is the very essence of the order¹⁶. But, unlike previous reconfigurations of the global order, those produced by the world wars, the fall of the Berlin Wall or 9/11, this time it is not an abrupt change, but a gradual process that weakens the reaction mechanisms.

¹⁶ PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. *Heraclitus' revolution, everything flows and nothing remains in the multipolar global order*. Analysis Document 05/2020 IEEE, 26 February 2020. Available at: http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA05_2020JOSPAR_multipolar.pdf

The attitude of Beijing, which shows an increasingly determined attitude in the pursuit of its geopolitical objectives, as well as its clear refusal to accept the liberal international order based on American-inspired rules, focuses the strategic attention of the Western powers and means that not enough attention is paid to the full complexity of the strategic landscape and that it continues to be interpreted with a Western-centred perspective. The fact that one power cedes to another the position of primacy on the Olympus of world power does not cease to respond to the cycles of history and sooner or later it will have to do so. Certainly, this circumstance generates strong tensions and pushes to the confrontation between the implied parts, as Graham Alison indicates, when referring to the Thucydides Trap¹⁷. But the essential idea, as the American political scientist also proposes, is to prevent this trap from being consumed.

On the other hand, China's rise has its limits and it is not foreseeable that we will move from an American to a Chinese hegemonic world, nor that Washington will cease to be a major strategic decision centre. The US will continue to be a great strategic and economic power, since it has some not insignificant advantages: it is located between the two great oceans, the Atlantic and the Pacific, which give it security, allow it to choose its alliances and provide it with free access to the great routes of world trade. It is currently the world's leading economy and industry. It has a superior scientific-technological sector; it has the most advanced Armed Forces, with a global network of military bases; it has a large national territory and is rich in natural resources.

The global picture is likely to evolve into a complex and variable multipolar system. It is not only the world that is moving in that direction, Asia in particular, as well. In this decade, India will overtake China in population both in total numbers and, above all, in the proportion of citizens of working age and, if China currently has the demographic advantage over the US of four to one, by the end of this century this could be reduced to just two and a half, with a much older Chinese population¹⁸.

¹⁷ ALISON, Graham. "The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War?", *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756>

¹⁸ EBERSTADT, Nicholas. "With Great Demographics Comes Great Power. Why Population Will Drive Geopolitics", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2019.

The role of the North American power will continue to be decisive in the Asian continent, because it continues to be the state with the most powerful military force deployed in the Indo-Pacific space and because it is essential in the system of regional balances. Moreover, its military presence remains vital. Without it, Japan and South Korea would be forced to contemplate the development of nuclear weapons¹⁹.

However, from the perspective of most Asian political and academic elites, Washington's commitment to Asia during Trump's term is being limited primarily to the Korean peninsula and China, with everything else taking a back seat. By turning its back on alliance building, it has weakened the management framework required to inhibit military escalation in Asia at a time of complex interactions between high-end weapons systems. The mutual trust and implicit understandings that united the US with its allies in Asia have been seriously diluted²⁰.

Strategic response

In some instances in Washington and the allied capitals, a large front of democracies is proposed to oppose China, the authoritarian power. The battlefield would be mainly of an economic-technological nature. This strategic design aims to continue with the complicity and at the expense of the most favourable Asian powers the Anglo-Saxon strategic leadership of the world. This would require the strong involvement of the Asian democracies and they do not seem to be very favourable. Most Asian states do not want to be dragged into their confrontation with China by the US. Its continent would be the main theatre of the conflict and would suffer the most serious consequences, endangering the resurgence of Asia.

Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, puts it as follows: "Asia has prospered because since the end of World War II the *Pax Americana* provided a favourable strategic context. But now, the problematic relationship between the US and China raises deep questions about the future of Asia and the shape of the emerging

¹⁹ LEE, Hsien Loong. "The Endangered Asian Century. America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020.

²⁰ KAPLAN, Robert. "Asia's Coming Era of Unpredictability", *Foreign Policy*, 1 September 2019. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/01/asias-coming-era-of-unpredictability>

international order. The countries of Southeast Asia are particularly concerned, as they live at the intersection of the interests of several major powers and must avoid being caught in the middle or forced to make obnoxious decisions”²¹.

On the other hand, while geopolitical tensions are growing in the world and multilateral mechanisms are being weakened, the major concerns that are holding back humanity, such as sustainable development, climate change or health security, require approaches to understanding and collaboration that a world divided into antagonistic fronts would make very difficult.

In the future, it will be necessary to develop imaginative and different security strategies that adapt to the rapidly changing geopolitical panorama, that include the points of view of the Asian powers and that rely on the containment of China to the plurality of powers that naturally associate to resist the emerging regional hegemony, while seeking spaces of agreement to address the great challenges of the common agenda. This would require a strong Europe that truly deepens its external and security dimension, but leaves its old nations at home so as not to inflame nationalist passions further. The relationship with Moscow is also key, because if its link with Beijing weakens, China will be forced to moderate its strategic expectations.

Conclusions

The global geopolitical landscape is being transformed by the convergence of three major revolutions –the emergence of both Asia and China, its main power, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution– which place the continent increasingly at the centre of international developments. In a couple of decades the process will have been completed, but as it is gradual it is not generating the perception of profound change that results from it. It is not only a question of moving from one international model to another, the transformation is the very essence of a Heraclitian global order where “everything changes and nothing remains”.

²¹ LEE, Hsien Loong. “The Endangered Asian Century. America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020.

The old inertias make the West want to continue with strategic logics that have been overcome. Moreover, the rivalry between Washington and Beijing is partly hiding the significance of the other two vectors of disruption of the world order. However, in the great Asian continent, which is home to more than half the world's population, there is full awareness that its time has come –or simply that after five centuries it has returned to normal– the best results in the face of the coronavirus crisis have confirmed to their nations that it is time to shake off the tutelage of the West. The perceived crisis of societies with European roots also facilitates this.

Progressively, Western values and models will no longer be the only global references. In the areas of security we are seeing the emergence of multiple poles of power with their own ambitions. The US will go from being the great referee to another actor, undoubtedly of the highest order, but with very little moral authority. The main strategic designs will focus on the great Indo-Pacific space, but in the plurality of the international order there will be much room to defend values and legitimate interests and to preserve as much as possible the great legacy of the West.

Europe must not be left out of this. Backing a major front of the democracies against China, the leader of the authoritarian powers, is a very dangerous move, as well as a losing one; the Asian nations are not going to accept such a game: they would be the biggest losers and neither do they wish to perpetuate the hierarchies established in the colonial era.

If the EU does not seriously deepen its integration in foreign and security matters, it could become less than nothing or a “theme park”, as Minister Josep Piqué points out²². In any case, it is necessary to accept and adapt to the new Asian leadership in a complex and variable multipolar order where the future of humanity will depend on the ability to preserve peace and address the great common challenges.

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²² PIQUE, Josep. *The World to Come. Challenges and Hopes of the 21st century: A Post-Western World with Western Values?* Editorial Deusto, May 2018.