

# Is the Asian century inevitable?

## What is Asia's role on the global stage?

Many eyes lately seem to be on Asia, and with good reason. Over the last 30 years, few regions of the world have transformed as dramatically as the Asian continent. Its rise in global economic, political, and cultural influence a difficult reality to ignore. However, Asia is anything but a monolith and there is no guarantee that the next 30 years will unfold as a continuation of recent tendencies. The future of the continent will depend on how its constituent powers navigate their differences in light of forces largely beyond their individual control.

Where Asia was once, in eyes of the West, nothing more than the Eastern shore of the Aegean Sea, Europe and the world have come to better understand the significance of this third of the planet's total land area. The first millennium and a half of the common era saw Asian civilizations push the geographical limits of their ambition and develop the most important trade routes of Afro-Eurasia. Then came the centuries of Western colonialism and exploitation. Not until the tumultuous wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did much of the continent gradually emancipate from foreign hegemony and regain control of its destiny, though in a vastly different international playing field. The legacy of unbridled resource extraction, imposed ideologies, and poorly drawn borderlines left by alien governments challenges Asia to the present day.

From this starting position, the nations of Asia have stepped into the 21<sup>st</sup> century on different paths. Today, East Asia continues to emerge with China as an overwhelming center of gravity and North Korea as a potential radical force. The Southeast is taking the spotlight for low-end manufacturing and export growth. India still struggles with its neighbor Pakistan, the key to future of the South. West Asia, which makes up a large part of the Middle East, is redefining its identity for a post-oil future. Central Asia, meanwhile, sits at the literal crossroads of Russia and China with the potential to benefit tremendously from the latter's Belt and Road Initiative. The majority of the Asian population resides in nations that have managed to integrate into the functioning core of the globalized world, namely in India, China, and a few of their neighbors. Whether Southeast, West, and Central Asia follow suit, however, remains to be seen and is far from guaranteed.

Headlines of a flourishing Asia, on some metrics, mask the fact that this development has not been geographically homogenous nor is it entirely stable. Already the sustainability of broad economic growth is under question, especially considering the global environmental dynamics at play. China's long reach West across land and South across sea has raised alarms locally and internationally, triggering realignment in trade and security relationships. The future holds additional challenges for the continent in the form of demographic changes driven by aging populations, and migration and more border disputes as resources become scarce and the effects of climate change intensify. All this in a part of the world where regionalism has historically

had a distinctly different flavor from a European or an African Union, which begs the question of whether thinking of Asia as a unit is even a fruitful exercise.

The urgent global attention given to Asia is warranted. Each part of the continent has transformed uniquely in recent decades with ambitions of economic growth, political control, or technological superiority. Whether any given ethnic or ideological group in the region is able to manifest these dreams or not, the interaction of those pursuits with the environment and the world order—even if less connected or cooperative in some scenarios—will be a significant determining factor in the futures of all other nation-states. Though its future is uncertain, what plays out in Asia over the coming three decades will have decisive and lasting impact on planetary systems and the fate of humanity.

### **Are Asia's economic growth and expansion sustainable?**

What goes up must come down, or so they say. Asian economies have expanded over the last half-century, especially in the South and East, positioning the continent as the modern leader of global economic growth. Much of the rest of the continent has an imminent opportunity to benefit from this success in exchange for certain concessions. Regardless, the region must now discover how to make this position sustainable in two senses: maintaining its trajectory while weathering societal and political change and addressing the impacts of increased consumption on the environment. Contrary to popular belief, there exists no technological silver bullet to solve for this conundrum.

China is the posterchild of Asia's economic potential. Since opening up to the world in the 1970s, its growing production and trade has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty leading to a massive increase in standard of living and therefore, critically, consumption. India is on a similar course. In both countries, the rise in disposable income for these many millions has created an extremely attractive market for goods and services along with a favorable financial climate for entrepreneurship. A wealthier and better educated populace has led naturally to a rise in more skilled labor and associated jobs. Southeast Asia is set to reap the benefits of this shift as demand for its low-end manufacturing increases.

Asia's growth has led to regional integration and a vast realignment of international economic alliances. If geo-economics is in fact war by other means, then China is rapidly becoming one of the most battle-hardened nations on earth. The state is simultaneously flexing its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), so called "trade wars," and other significant foreign investments while learning from its mistakes in each area. The BRI may project the benefits of East Asia's growth more intensely into the Central and Western Asian nations. Then again, it could also entangle China in far-flung conflicts to protect its investments if it does not carefully manage its relationships, especially with its neighbour India.

The central importance of China to Asia's economic hopes presents a major systemic risk. The rest of Asia, and much of the world, has become to varying degrees vulnerable to abrupt

changes in the nation. Over the next decade, for instance, China needs to find a solution to its population's declining birth rate and increased life expectancy. A more favorable policy toward immigrants could help mitigate this looming crisis but may require or introduce societal liberalization that could be politically destabilizing. Sudden regime change, however triggered, would create a significant hurdle to sustained economic growth across the region.

The deeper existential risk lies in the impact of growth on the environment. While modern technologies have made significant strides toward lessening the ills of industry, they are unlikely to keep pace with the increasing demand for goods. Environmental concerns only influence consumption patterns in wealthy nations to the extent that they are economically viable to the consumer and do not compromise standards of living. The question then becomes whether the ruling parties of Asian nation states are prepared to sacrifice their economic gains in the name of environmental stewardship. The broad multilateral cooperation required to effectively mitigate climate change and environmental degradation makes it is possible, and dangerously plausible, that continued development may ultimately win out.

Asian economic leadership has an uncertain future, but the outlook is not without hope. Even if the Chinese engine of Asia's economic miracle stalls and internal and external political realignment ensues, it possible that this could usher in a wave of more sustainable growth, in both senses of the word. New policies, rather than technologies, to address shifting demographics and a changing global climate are likely to be the key deciding factors of what future unfolds. Asia's economy may have room to grow yet.

## **How prepared is Asia for its changing demographics?**

Among the most significant determinants of an Asian Century is demographics. The expectations and behaviours of a nation's people—driven in part by attributes that can be measured in aggregate, like age—influence economic performance and political dynamics. Projected declines in the working age populations in East Asia present a major challenge to maintaining their gravitas. Meanwhile, the rest of the continent generally has a much better outlook, at least in terms of potentially productive youth. Immigration policies that succeed in overcoming ideological intolerance may be the key to sustaining Asia's rise to global dominance.

Japan is a preview of what could potentially happen at a different scale for its neighbors. The archipelago nation is now selling more adult diapers than baby diapers in supermarkets. The increased spending on healthcare that comes with this age demographic inversion is unsustainable with a simultaneously shrinking workforce and tax base. Japan recognizes that efforts to raise its fertility rate will not be sufficient to address the problems already emerging. Longevity of life is coming to also mean longevity of work-life well beyond the age of 60. Automation of care is being developed, where possible, to lower the costs of the ballooning

system. It is yet to be seen whether this will be a successful formula for saving the nation's economy.

China is taking a different approach. Demographic data shows their working population shrinking and the trend portends a net population decline starting as soon as 2032. Like Japan, China has started offering cash bonuses and subsidies to encourage more births, but it is unlikely that this will be enough to cover the dearth of young people to care for the elderly in the short term. Nor will automation of such services soon be ready to take on the task at scale. Instead, China is bolstering its economy by moving the value chain from the Middle Kingdom to tributary states in Central, South, and Southeast Asia through its Belt and Road Initiative. In a time of national economic war, however, it is not unthinkable that some of these target states may attempt to limit the extent to which others draw on their resources.

Migration will increasingly be a flashpoint as Asian demographics change. Cultural similarities make Southeast Asia the clearest option from which China and Japan could draw human capital, or at least extract the output. China is adamant that newcomers assimilate to their norms, an approach that may need to be loosened in light of its expanding global reach. India's government, particularly in the case of Muslims, seems determined to reject even its own over ideological differences. West and Central Asia have growing populations that could strengthen the Asian position but are better poised to bolster Russian and European populations, even though immigration policies in both destinations are lacking. All of these tensions will escalate if regimes do not adapt quickly enough to the inevitable changes in their constituencies.

Asian nations, on the whole, are unprepared for what lies ahead demographically. Economic and social policies are slowly and insufficiently trying to adapt to a future in which families are small and the old outnumber the young. Regimes attempting to unilaterally solve for these shifts without sufficient regard for pressures beyond their centralized control, like accelerated migration, will face the most serious challenge. While some nations may have more reason to be optimistic, they will need to be ready to compete to keep their workforce from migrating to other more attractive markets. If an Asian Century does come to pass, one thing is certain: it will be with a populace that looks quite different than the one we know today.

## **Could trade deals deliver a more unified Asia?**

Globalization is not on the decline, but it is evolving. Developments over the last two decades—including a financial crisis and a pandemic—have accelerated the change in economic relationships between and within all regions of the world. Trade with neighbors, in particular, have come into the spotlight as nations narrow their focus. Asia is no exception. Over the coming years, China and India will be playing an economic game with the rest of the continent that could lead to Asian unity or heightened distrust and paranoia. Deep trade integration could bring a form of economic unity to Asia that would totally eclipse Western markets.

The rise of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a signal of what could be realized across the continent. The regional organization has come to develop relationships with other Asian and Pacific nations, including China and later India. As the geographic scope of partnership has increased, so has the complexity of pursuing common interests in light of imbalanced power. India's recent decision to not participate in ASEAN's proposed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is indicative of these limits. India is an attractive market for exports but has concerns that the terms of RCEP could result in a flood of imports, especially from China, harming its domestic industry and agriculture. While India's economy continues to experience strong growth relative to the rest of the world, it is not yet capable of competing directly with its advanced Eastern neighbour in the trade arena.

In one possible future, India's growth outpaces China and it makes the necessary structural changes and infrastructure investments to dramatically increase its exports. These developments occur while the encircling Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) struggles through a decelerated Chinese economy and underwhelming returns on its massive foreign investments. India takes advantage of these trends to strengthen its trade relationships in both Southeast and Central Asia, creating a new balance of geo-economic power in the region. China reluctantly recognizes this new state of the world, scales back its assertiveness to avoid military conflict, and becomes a more amenable partner in a broader trade union across the continent.

In another future, India's infrastructure remains inadequate to take advantage of its demographic and economic growth lead. The BRI successfully draws Central Asian nations closer into China's orbit of influence, heightening tensions with interested neighbors Russia and India. China uses RCEP as a lever to increase pressure on Japan, Vietnam, and others with respect to its territorial disputes. Nations across Asia face a difficult choice whether to cave to Chinese pressure or face the economic consequences of their trade sanctions. The rest of world seeks to better balance its flow of trade with China while taking a careful approach to relationships in the rest of Asia, mostly seeking less risky deals closer to home. What unity exists in this future Asia is predicated on whether you are under Chinese economic influence or not.

Trade integration promotes peace, but it does not erase borders nor national interests. While disputes about exactly where some Asian nations begin and end may not be settled anytime soon, successful strengthening of trade agreements could lead to unprecedented regional integration and stability. While unanticipated events in the coming decades could accelerate the balance of power in favor of China or India, what is certain is that trade relationships with these two nations will be a determining factor for Asia's future. The way these regional economic alliances develop will either create a newfound unity or an uneasiness felt around the globe.

## **What does increased attention from Moscow mean for Asia?**

In 2018, former Putin aide Vladislav Surkov wrote that "Russia's epic journey toward the West ... [after] numerous fruitless attempts to become part of western civilization" had concluded. If this is indeed true, then the nation's borders dictate that increased interest in Asia, from the Black Sea to the Sea of Japan, is likely over the coming decades.

China's future as a great power and its reach west through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) threaten Russia's influence in the region as a whole. Cooperation between China and Russia in the Western and Central Asian states could be a regional stabilizing force if economic and security agendas can be harmonized. On the other hand, these agendas could lead to flashpoints along Russia's entire southern border if integration is resisted. Either way, Moscow's game in Asia will assuredly affect the nation's identity and regional alignment into the future.

Russia is keenly aware of its need to have a non-hostile relationship with China. While it is possible that a more complete alliance could form, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century psychology of great power politics remains alive and well in Moscow. It is therefore more likely that the coming decades will see a warm-yet-wary relationship emerge with Beijing. In this future, Russia will play a careful game of reinforcing its security and economic partnerships with China while engaging in bilateral relationships with India and Southeast Asian nations as a hedge. Russia will also take advantage of its natural gift as the wide belt of land that separates China and all other nations to its South from direct access to the Arctic.

As interest in the northern pole heats up and Siberia becomes more inhabitable, Russia will likely take full advantage of the desire for influence in the region. Moscow may begin to welcome an increasing number of immigrants from India and elsewhere into its Far East in order to balance out the increasing presence of Chinese workers and reap the rewards of a diverse labour force. This could in time start to tip the scales of economic power in Russia's favour. However, at least in the coming few years, Moscow will be more focused on holding its ground as an energy enabler and economic beneficiary of the Chinese powerhouse.

Without friendly relations between Russia and China, Western and Central Asia could become a hotter geo-economic, if not literal, warzone. Chinese political influence through the BRI buildout could lead a threatened Moscow to push neighbours like Kazakhstan to pick a side. This is a future in which Asia's middle increasingly resents the exploitative mindset of its behemoth neighbours, resists integration into this different flavour of globalization, and descends into fracture and volatility. Weakened economic relationships along its southern border, along with the need to secure it, could force a reluctant Russian reunion with Europe. However, Moscow will not be keen on making the concessions to the West that would likely be necessary.

Asia has long been a key arena of Russian foreign policy but is likely to now become the primary focus as an Asian Century looms. It remains unclear what course this future will follow, whether more cooperative or competitive. Cultural differences will continue to be a wedge

between still-European Moscow and its southeastern neighbors, but over time an alignment of values could add fuel to the fire of Asia's global growth. On the other hand, mismanagement of this partnership could serve to ignite conflicts in the unstable Central and Western Asian region. Regardless, if an Asian Century is inevitable, Russia may come to belong more and more to the continent over the next few decades.

## **Is an Asian Union possible and preferable?**

Asian regionalism has a complex past and an uncertain future. Events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century including a tumultuous process of decolonization, industrialization, and ideological reconciliation have set the stage for stronger relationships between Asian nations. The growth of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) provides a potential starting point in the eastern part of the continent that could lead to broader unification, continuing its legacy of increased economic cooperation. Central Asia could serve as another point of origin for unification with its compelling location as the geographic heart of Eurasia. Regardless of where an Asian Union emerges, its approach to international rules and norms—especially from a security standpoint—will ultimately determine how firmly it takes root and how successfully it grows.

The expansion of ASEAN over the years provides a thread toward increased economic cooperation across the continent at a minimum. Originally exclusive to Southeast Asia, the Association has added a “Plus Three” component to include economic heavyweights China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as an East Asian Summit that includes India, Australia, and New Zealand. This trajectory could continue into the creation of an East Asian Community that looks similar in nature to that seen in Europe as a precursor to a deeper Asian Union. However, it may be unpalatable to nations in Central and Western Asia who may not be keen on joining an organization that developed over many years without any of their influence in the process.

Alternatively, the dormant seeds of the short-lived Central Asian Union (CAU) could sprout in the fertile soil of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The establishment of this bloc would initially serve as a counterbalance to the Chinese-led and Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes many nations that continue to be wary of each other's intentions. The CAU could then be instrumental in leading to a more equitable framework for continental integration. As the geographic nexus between cultures in every direction, Central Asia could be a more acceptable birthplace for an all-inclusive union.

Whether emerging from East or Central Asia, negotiating existing international relationships and norms will make or break an Asian Union. For instance, many ASEAN nations enjoy a relationship with both China and the USA and would rather keep it that way. However, China has an interest in unchecked access to disputed seas along its entire coast. This could lead to an attempt at forcing the hand of these countries to “side with Asia” for handling its own regional security, thus creating the conditions for potentially decades of intra- and international

conflict. Central Asia would similarly need to play a careful balancing act between Chinese and Russian interests without picking sides. Even if successful in this endeavor, the region has historically not integrated well with the existing world order and may not have much incentive to push for the non-hostile establishment of a Union.

An Asian Union that spans the entire continent is an unlikely future for 2050 but should not be disregarded as impossible. Tremendous shifts that have taken place over the last century both within and between Asian states, in particular through the development of economic infrastructure under Western security guarantees, make such a regional institution worth considering. This could emerge from China's relationships with Central Asia and Russia in the west, or from China's involvement with ASEAN in the east. Either way, a successful Asian Union will need to carefully navigate its security framework in order to avoid provoking the distrust and potential opposition of the rest of the world. An Asian Century without a broad Union is a more probable outcome in the next few decades.

### **How might climate change affect borders in Asia?**

Climate change is inevitable, hard borders are not. The most significant threat to the continued rise of Asia is the impact of shifts in the natural environment, especially with regard to international relations. A rosy scenario would be increased regional and global cooperation that allows for a less restricted flow of ideas, migrants, and resources across borders for the benefit of all. However, such a future is dependent on the fearless acceptance of scarcity and deep uncertainty. History has shown that the typical response to such circumstances is more often than not restricted borders and protectionism. If this latter outcome is realized, the likelihood of an imminent Asian Century is greatly diminished.

Adapting to climate change may be the uniting cause that leads to a more integrated Asia. If better natures prevail, nations could look upon borders less severely and prioritize food, water, and energy security in a more benevolent regional manner. Such an approach could also help transcend the problematic mismatch of national borders with ethnic groups that are especially prevalent in Western and Central Asia. The result may be more comfort with existing "dotted lines" on the map or potentially completely redrawn borders with local autonomy but a shared vision for cooperation.

To the North, Russia could become more amenable to accepting migrants in an effort to accelerate the development of infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route. Even displaced agricultural workers will be a boon as fresh water from melting ice becomes more abundant in the region. This could lead to a special relationship with China involving increased exports of labor and goods and increased energy imports from Russia. Whatever the mix, a dramatic rebalancing of cross-border flows in pursuit of a new equilibrium will require trust and liberalization.



At odds to this sort of future is the present reality of border entrenchment. Finger-pointing for worsening environmental health conditions, including the occurrence and spread of infectious diseases, is likely to continue in the near term. Regardless of who gets stuck with the blame, unpredictable climate patterns will make long-term trade and investment agreements across borders highly unattractive. Asian nations will focus instead on energy independence and stabilizing agricultural output while making very selective covenants that fit with their adjusted tolerance for risk. This could effectively reverse the progress made through organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Resource scarcity, displacement, and economic contraction would result in more pronounced inequality and reactions to injustice. These disparities could lead to violent social shocks in underprepared areas. An unstable security landscape would heighten tensions between Asian nations and make any movement across borders subject to more stringent requirements and surveillance. Territorial disputes on land and sea will become flashpoints as the desire to control critical resources becomes more desperate. Tight control of borders in a changed climate will be the standard protocol.

The possible futures for Asia are bound to the continent's response to the changing climate. Resource scarcity and environmental volatility could well deteriorate relationships in the region, undoing decades of economic development and integration. Asian nations may instead choose to avert this outcome with policies designed to open rather than restrict international borders. Collaborating on a framework that protects national interests through the turbulent process of change will require a level of trust never before seen on the continent but is possible if the shared narrative of climate adaptation is strong enough. Achieving this unified vision would secure the potential for an Asian Century to manifest in the coming decades.

## **How could a China in turmoil affect Asia?**

It is said that nature abhors a vacuum. While the truth of that proposition may be debated in the physical sense, it is almost certainly true of power politics. In Asia, the incumbent powerhouse is headquartered in Beijing, where one could say that all major roads under construction on the continent lead. However, for much of recent history this has not been the case for China and, even with a substantial lead today, it is not a guaranteed future. If China were to soon fall into a state of internal turmoil, the rest of the continent could experience a period of political and economic refactoring. Alternatively, the collapse of an even more powerful China in the future could leave the rest of Asia in a state of dangerous disarray. As and when the country undergoes such a massive shock, Asia's future will change radically.

In a near-future turmoil scenario, China's still incomplete work of hegemony over Asia may allow for a gradual shift in the center of gravity. Southeast Asia could take back ownership of its manufacturing base, decreasing dependency on their giant neighbour and giving rise to a rebalanced ASEAN with a more assertive bloc of the smaller nations. However, with a more

volatile partner and less attractive market to their north, these states will need to look elsewhere for reliable trade partners. These will likely be found westward.

Meanwhile, India and Russia would find themselves in a struggle to lead the continent's economy and to pursue their agendas in Central Asia more tenaciously with one major player distracted. The full potential of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) dashed, affected nations will be left indebted to a nation unable to effectively enforce its covenants. New projects could take control of and repurpose some of this existing infrastructure to more strongly connect Russia and Europe to India and the Southeast. The net effect would be an Asia now led from its West.

If China is able to keep major change at bay until after the successful entrenchment of the BRI and significant military expansion, the rest of Asia may react in a more extreme manner. In this future, Japan's debate over remilitarization will be resolved overnight in favour of protecting itself from an unpredictable neighbour. The island nation would likely also need to quickly overcome its differences with South Korea in order to establish a stronger defensive position. China's struggle for sovereignty of its coastal waters would heat up quickly.

Resentment toward Chinese hegemony in BRI-dependent states would also begin to boil over as dependent economies collapse. India and Russia would see opportunities for strategic advantage in greatly weakened Central Asia, Pakistan and Kazakhstan especially, but would need to tread carefully. China would be in a position to retaliate swiftly and forcefully if threatened by such encroachment, assuming the military takes a leading role in re-establishing stability in the state. However, rising threats in the East could weaken this position.

Whenever a tumultuous social and political change strikes China, its neighbors will be obliged to act. Peaceful outcomes would involve significant rethinking of economic flows and relationships across Asia with an opportunity for China to reintegrate when it stabilizes. If China's turmoil occurs after its rise to dominance is more complete, the continent would at best be thrust into a state of heightened tension, and at worst into the next global war. Asia and the world can only hope that any major difficulties in China will occur slowly enough, and perhaps soon enough, to avoid such an outcome.

## **Could a united Asia withstand resource scarcity?**

Contrary to some popular notions about "abundance," no resource is infinite. Over the last few decades, Asia's demand for natural, human, and capital resources has grown tremendously as the process of globalization has helped restore the region to a place of prominence in the world economy. However, this marked upward trend is likely unsustainable. As Asian markets have developed, the continent has made slow strides toward regionalism. It is possible that stronger cooperation on issues of governance and security could mitigate the protectionist reaction that would naturally occur when the adverse effects of scarcity begin to materialize. The extent to which these relationships make Asia able to weather coming resource pressures will determine whether the region is able to continue cohering in decades to come.

Resources are not evenly distributed within Asian states. Oil reserves in Western Asia are an easily exportable source of energy that remain vital to continued economic growth on the continent. Meanwhile, China and India, home to roughly a third of the global population, are increasingly thirsty for energy as outsourced manufacturing and information technology services have lifted many into a higher standard of living. Along with this increased demand for energy, growing prosperity has also led to more consumption of resource-intensive goods, including automobiles, electronics, and animal protein. Critically, these processes also require reliable access to fresh water, one of the most challenging resources to secure in light of pollution from industry and agriculture, climate change dynamics, and the cross-border nature of many waterways.

In a future where regional organizations like ASEAN and the SCO have led to a more unified Asia, it is possible that resource scarcity may be overcome. If a regionally integrated Asian market similar to the EU is created, the combined leverage in dealings with other regions would be formidable. With a fully realized Belt and Road Initiative reaching into Africa, the resources of another continent would also be available, at least to China. Enforcement of covenants across such a vast geography would rely on a strong security framework that would impose a form of regional stability likely somewhat draconian toward Central Asian states. Unity in this resource-scarce future of Asia would thus look less like the liberal ideal pursued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century but would at least hold the continent in equilibrium.

Alternatively, the project of Asian unity could fall apart if tensions over resources turn into flashpoints. Like the Chinese effort to circumvent its reliance on energy imports passing through the Strait of Malacca, India could be faced with a similar dilemma over water access. Unlike oil and gas, water is not so easily extracted and transported. Technological solutions like desalination will not be sufficient. India and other nations in similar circumstances will be left with little choice but to attempt to take control of this resource by force. A future in which this precedent is established is also one in which no territorial dispute will have the option of being left unresolved.

A more unified Asia may be its best hope to withstanding the impacts of resource scarcity. However, this will depend upon the ability of the continent to draw on resources from other parts of the world, enforce regional stability, and find creative ways to access fresh water. Overcoming these challenges will necessitate some form of regional cooperation beyond what is currently in place today. Thus, it is possible that as resources become scarce a unified Asia may become the most desirable path forward despite traditional reservations in the self-interest of individual states.

## **Could Chinese colonialism disrupt the world order?**

Asia is no stranger to colonization both from within and from without. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this approach to national development is generally not welcomed in the international community.

Foreign control is now more often achieved by means of economic pressure rather than by brute force. China has followed this norm for the last two decades as an international creditor doling out high levels of credit to developing countries. Sensitivity to the nation's neocolonial expansion could end up proving overblown if in the end it simply helps fuel the continued growth of the world economy. On the other hand, if China's financial commitments abroad turn out to be unsustainably fragile, it may disturb the world order as established in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Either way, this expansion of influence will have Asia the rebalancer of global power.

Africa is the most prominent example of Chinese colonialism and also the place where it may be least disruptive to the world order as currently known. Over the following decades, aggressive Chinese investment in resource extraction across the continent may have the effect of accelerating development of infrastructure and industry. If China attempts to apply in African countries a similar pattern to the one it experienced with the West, it could begin outsourcing more of the labor required to turn raw materials into manufactured goods and thus grow more distributed wealth in the region. It is possible that similar relationships could be established elsewhere in the global South including Latin America and Southeast Asia. These countries could eventually grow into enormous markets for exports from all around the globe, remain in good standing with their creditors, and become stronger sovereign states. In this scenario, China will have secured a privileged position with many emerging economies but will not have abruptly challenged the international order.

However, certain realities of the current model of Chinese foreign investment herald a more uncertain future. China's continued issuance of large sums of credit will create a situation wherein it feels justified in seizing its new assets on foreign soil if the host countries are unable to make payment. This scenario is not unlikely, as many of China's debtors have historically lacked strong institutions, resisted global integration, and are not sufficiently resilient to economic hardship. Resentment toward the colonizers in these countries could result in rioting and terrorism targeted at the new projects, which are often accompanied by Chinese staff employed in their construction and operation. Such escalation would lead to the deployment of military force potentially across Eurasia. The real response from the West, keepers of the old world order, in this case may be limited due to their own dependencies on China. Most of the eastern hemisphere, in effect, would have become the new Chinese Empire.

A dramatic shift in the international power structure is no guaranteed result from China's international endeavours. If the nation's neocolonialism manifests more in the form of sustainable foreign direct investment, it could result in greater inclusion within the existing framework and could fuel the rise of emerging markets. The resources and benevolence will required to realize this scenario, however, may not exist in reality. It is possible that the severe terms of China's deals with foreign nations could end up setting the stage for a future in which it not only controls but owns significant resources across the globe, backed up by occupying military force. This latter scenario would cement into existence a distinctly Chinese Asian Century, but not one for which the rest of the world hoped.

## **Could the shared threat of climate disaster unite Asia?**

If science fiction has taught us anything, it may be that existential threats to humanity can either unite us in a common cause or tear us asunder. Attempts at coordinated global responses to the impacts of climate change, however, have so far had mixed results. It is possible that regional agreements, for example in the Asian continent, could lead to more significant actions and meaningful results including the framework for enhanced unification. On the other hand, different levels of economic development could lead to inequitable demands and distrust that cause Asia to destabilize and splinter. In either case, when disaster strikes the continent, regional players will need to decide how to move forward both together and individually. The extent to which those competing interests can be aligned will determine whether more or less unity results from a climate catastrophe.

The imbalanced nature of Asia's path toward unification could be what leads to its undoing when faced with dramatic effects of climate change. While China may continue attempting to add a benevolent spin to its international expansion, few are convinced that the country is doing much beyond securing its position of power into the future. The nation's assumed role as an international climate leader could be used to impose unfavourable economic limitations on its less developed southern and western neighbours in the name of protecting the environment. Russia will likely not use climate policy in this way but will continue to pursue its interests in Central and Western Asia while carefully navigating its relationship with China in those regions. As Central and Southeast Asian countries are more severely hit by extreme weather events, droughts, and rising sea levels, Chinese and Russian indifference to this plight will outweigh whatever benefits their projects afforded to these regions. In this scenario, climate disaster exposes the frailty of a seemingly unified Asia and leaves the worst affected countries looking outside the continent for aid.

Alternatively, the potential for renewed Western intervention in Asia under the banner of climate salvation could force local concessions from the great powers in the region. India will experience some of the worst effects of climate change and may serve as the leader for this future given its south-central position, large economy, and cautious relationships with China and Russia. As the climate causes India's economy to suffer, the country may look to shore up its security assurances with more trusted partners in the West. In the interest of preventing this development and the ripples it would likely have in Central and Southeast Asia, China may consider a more generous approach to its neighbors to be geopolitically expedient and Russia may do likewise. In the interest of maintaining some order as the full impacts of climate change unfold, a union could form around this new multilateral system. Such an institution would allow Asia to find a new internal equilibrium while keeping the rest of the world at bay.

Even if Asian nations implement policies that attempt to avoid the most severe impacts of climate change, fully averting those outcomes appears unlikely. When the continent finds itself grappling with a disaster scenario, the inadequacies of existing regional relationships and

institutions will be exposed. This may cause the continent to fracture as the self-interest of great power states is pursued without pretense. Depending on how likely external intervention appears, it may instead lead to the establishment of improved regional relationships and institutions. Climate disaster is sure to complicate Asia's complex regionalism but could end up being the catalyst for a unified Asian Century.

## **Is the Asian Century inevitable?**

There is no shortage of speculation about whether the present century belongs to Asia. Many projected futures in the affirmative rely on a continuation of the same global economic forces that lifted the continent and especially China to prominence at the turn of the millennium. No trend, however, is destined to last forever. Asia's future dominance depends on how it navigates myriad emerging challenges including a changing climate, demographic shifts, and intraregional tensions. Some argue that these forces will halt and potentially reverse the region's fortune. Regardless, as nations of the world reassess their approach to globalization over the coming decades, what happens in Asia will in large part decide the future international order. Whether Asia becomes the preeminent region in that new balance of power remains open for debate, but the probabilities lean decidedly in favor of the continent.

Asia's starting position is strong. The region has historical precedent as a global economic powerhouse and has recently reestablished that position. It has the potential to realize significant gains with a large and increasingly diverse population. The majority of Asia has embraced the global norms of the developed world. While environmental degradation and extreme weather events threaten to exacerbate regional disputes and prejudices, Asia's developing institutions may provide the necessary framework for mitigating these issues and ensuring security. Included in these institutions is Russia, whose renewed focus on the region will hedge its future against an ever-frosty Europe. A formal Union may not be established, but if some form of continental unity is honestly pursued and maintained it is likely that an Asian Century will prevail.

Asian primacy, however, may be a tall order in the face of what the future appears to hold. History is littered with far more failures than successes when national resources become scarce. Asia is no exception. As these pressures mount, effective cooperation will need to overcome the rich cultural diversity across the continent that is also the fuel for longstanding prejudices. Regional redistribution of capital across state lines will likely come with onerous strings attached, as evidenced by China's approach to global projects. The continuation of this attitude portends increased scrutiny from the international community. If China overextends or otherwise falls into turmoil, peer global powers may seize the opportunity to destabilize the region and reassert their own strength in the global political landscape. This could look oddly enough like former colonizers taking on the mantle of "liberator" to justify such an intervention. A future such as this jeopardizes the emergence of an Asian Century, at least in a peaceful fashion.

The manifestation of an Asian Century in coming decades is not entirely inevitable, but it is a future for which the rest of the world must prepare. Significant headwinds are on the horizon for the continent, but most of them are not unique. Demographics are changing all over the planet. Climate change, while felt differently in every city and state, is a collective crisis. Global trade agreements are evolving but are far from driving the world economy toward national isolationism. What puts the future of Asia at risk are many of the same forces that all other global powers must also successfully confront. The most likely scenario is that Asia will adapt these challenges into opportunities for international leadership. The Asian Century that comes to fruition, therefore, will not be in spite of the coming waves of widespread, systemic change, but because of them.

**Travis Kupp**