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## Asia

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# After the China card's demise, the winds of change begin to sweep the region

by Daniel Sneider

Asia, the continent where almost two-thirds of humanity lives, is a place where change takes place slowly. In a continent where cultures and civilizations are measured in millennial terms, people tend to talk of a decade as a short span of time.

Even in political terms, stability seems to be the most dominant feature of Asian life. This past year only one major government change took place—in Japan, where the Suzuki cabinet fell and was replaced by the administration of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone.

Yet the winds of change are stirring, and during the past year we have witnessed the portents of great shifts that could change the political, economic, and even the cultural face of Asia in the years immediately ahead.

The strategic map of Asia during the post-war period had been determined largely by the U.S.-Soviet Cold War polarization. That map underwent major changes when China split with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, and, little more than a decade later, shifted its weight toward a strategic axis with the United States. The American presence in Asia, which had become totally focused on the Vietnam War by the mid-1960s, has for the past 10 years been largely a projection of the single pole of the illusory "China Card." American relations in all parts of Asia, from the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia and even to the "cornerstone" alliance with Japan, were shaped by the pursuit of an alliance with the People's Republic of China.

To a large extent the presence in Asia of the Soviet Union, itself a geographic Asian nation, has also been shaped by its response to the Sino-American combination. Nations and relations among nations, have been determined in many ways by their response to this new aspect of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation.

If the year 1982 has any single significance, it is that it marks the end of that era of Asian political life. While the China Card may linger on as a policy in the minds of many Washingtonians, a new dynamic is clearly developing in Asia. The renewal of high-level contacts between the Soviet

Union and China, after almost 15 years since their cessation; the shift of Chinese policy toward a more "balanced" distance from the United States; and the growing tensions between Tokyo and Washington over trade and defense issues are all harbingers of that new dynamic.

These changes reflect the perception in Peking, Tokyo, and other Asian capitals that the United States cannot be depended on. Leaders of these countries search for signs of a positive Asia policy, and find nothing. It is not surprising that—as the Chinese have done—they then go elsewhere to ensure that they have kept all their doors open. All Asian governments are watching to see how the Sino-Soviet moves toward normalization will shift the balances and alliances in the region.

## The collapse of American power

The immediate catalyst of the shifts now taking place is not hard to identify: it is the effect of the decay of American power, both strategic and economic. The nations of Asia, including both the allies of the United States and its adversaries, are well aware that the United States is less and less able to act as a global power. Whether they like this fact or not—and most do not—Asian nations are considering the options before them should the decline continue.

That decline is linked in the minds of these nations with the global economic crisis. The depression has shrunk markets for exports while the U.S. Federal Reserve and the IMF/Bank for International Settlements monetarists have imposed cutbacks in credit and increased the debt burdens of many developing countries to an intolerable point. Asia's two questions—will the United States reassert its strength as a world power and will the U.S. economy, and with it the entire Western economy, recover?—are essentially the same question.

There has been a flow of Asian leaders to Washington in 1982, including the leaders of Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, and Japan. In most cases they were seeking an answer to their own questions about the future

course of America in Asia. In most cases it is apparent that they came away disappointed and confused, at best.

At the same time there is a cautious searching in two directions. One is unmistakably toward the other great power. Moscow has paid more attention to Asia, which borders the Soviet Union from Turkey in the west to Japan in the east, than to any other area of the world except Europe and the United States. The funeral of Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev witnessed a remarkable gathering of Asian leaders, more numerous than from any other region, including Afghan President Babrak Karmal, Pakistani military dictator General Zia ul-Haq, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Vietnamese leader Truong Chinh, Philippines First Lady Imelda Marcos, and most striking, then-Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua, the highest-ranking Chinese to visit the Soviet Union since the early 1960s.

### **The Asian non-alignment**

The roads from Asia do not lead only to Moscow and Washington. The other direction being tested may be simply termed "Asian non-alignment." One of the least understood, and least visible, trends in the past year has been toward greater Asian political and economic self-reliance. There is a slight but significant shift, for example, in the patterns of trade, particularly in East Asia, with less trade between these countries and the U.S./European market, and more within Asia itself. A good part of this involves the constantly growing economic interdependence between the developing countries of Asia and the Asian industrial giant, Japan.

It is certain that if the depression continues in the West, as the chimera of a "recovery" fades, a de facto Asian economic zone will begin to emerge, one which must necessarily depend on the continued relatively better performance of the Japanese economy and the better situation of Southeast Asian and even South Asian economies compared with the economies of Africa and Ibero-America. In inner circles in Tokyo there is discussion, for example, of a "fallback strategy" in the event of total global economic collapse: forming a semi-autarchic economic bloc including China, Southeast Asia and Korea, and possibly the South Asian countries.

Economic regionalism, so-called "South-South" cooperation among developing countries, has been the topic of formal conferences and informal discussion in Asia during 1982. While no one in a position of political power sees this as a substitute for a recovered world economy—and most are still "waiting for the recovery"—there is serious consideration of how such measures might marginally ensure survival in a time of crisis.

As for political non-alignment: the Non-Aligned movement of course had its birthplace in Asia, founded by nationalist leaders like India's Nehru and Indonesia's Sukarno, who from the first days of independence in the late 1940s and at the Afro-Asian summit in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 had declared their unwillingness to be trapped into choosing between the two post-war "blocs." Non-alignment, which as

Nehru many times made clear was not "neutrality," embodied from its earliest days a positive commitment to eradicate the political and economic legacy of colonialism. The rapid economic development of the former colonial nations was always seen as the key objective.

In the midst of the current world crisis, what is evident in Asia is a renewed desire to keep the U.S.-Soviet conflict out of the area, whether in South Asia in response to the Afghan crisis or in Southeast Asia around the Cambodia question. Non-aligned nationalism is the closest one can come to a label for the policies being pushed throughout Southeast, South, and even East Asia (including China)—a nationalism that is not focused so much, as in the past, on anti-colonialism in the political sphere as on the insistence be created to allow for economic as well as political independence.

The 7th Non-Aligned heads of state summit meeting will be held in March 1983 in New Delhi and India, through its premier statesman, Indira Gandhi, will be the chairman of the Non-Aligned movement for the following three years. That New Delhi summit will be a watershed for not only Asia but for the entire developing sector; it will test the political will of the developing countries to force debt reorganization and the creation of a new international monetary system.

India, under Mrs. Gandhi's leadership, is the nation most capable of leading the Non-Aligned at this moment. During the past year Mrs. Gandhi has traveled to Washington and Moscow, and has strengthened ties in Western Europe, particularly to France, whose President, François Mitterrand, visited India in November. India has sought to provide a bridgepoint between East and West and also to find allies in the West for the restructuring of the world economic order, the subject of much Franco-Indian discussion.

The restoration of better relations between India and the United States, despite differences over U.S. military aid to Pakistan, opens up the possibility which India desires of removing South Asia as an arena of U.S.-Soviet confrontation. It is in this context that talk about a settlement of the Afghan situation has some credibility, although the intentions of the parties involved remain to be fully tested by the U.N.-mediated talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The coming year will provide evidence of whether a political settlement, including an end to the Pakistan-based guerrilla operations, withdrawal of Soviet forces and creation of a new government in Kabul, can be reached.

The Indian role may also be important in a Non-Aligned settlement of the Cambodia question. While the ASEAN nations (Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore) and the Indochinese states (Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea) remain in political confrontation over the issue, during 1982 the outlines of a settlement began to come into view. ASEAN's backing for the formation this past year of a "coalition" of anti-Vietnamese Khmer guerrilla forces dominated by the murderous Pol Pot group and including former Prince Sihanouk is viewed by people in the area as an attempt

to create a bargaining chip for talks with the Vietnamese and their Cambodian allies.

For the Vietnamese, the major concern is Peking, a concern shared by many in ASEAN, not least the Indonesians. There is broad agreement among the ASEAN countries and the Indochinese on the need to create a "zone of peace" in the region; the shape of talks over Kampuchea will necessarily include a broader understanding along these lines, although how long it will take to reach that point is still uncertain.

The key here, as in the case of concerns over Afghanistan, is that the countries of Asia do not want Cold War politics to impose conflict in the area. It is not uncommon in the ASEAN nations, which are allied with Washington in many respects, to encounter vociferous criticism of a United States which obsessively views everything in light of the "Soviet danger," and is insensitive to the actual political realities of the nations in the region. The general complaint in capitals like Jakarta is that the U.S. doesn't really "care" about what is going on in Southeast Asia.

### **The Japanese question**

Perhaps the most important Asian development of 1982 took place in Japan, where there is growing unease over relations with the United States. The Suzuki government's fall in October can be seen as a product of internal Japanese political compulsions triggered by the problems of economic slowdown and trade war, as well as tensions with the U.S. over differing views on strategic security issues. American pressures on Japan to increase its defense spending, coupled with escalating demands on the trade front, are the major issues of concern.

The general Japanese view is that they are being victimized for their relative economic success in the face of a global economic crisis caused in large part by the monetarist policies of the U.S. monetary authorities and their allies in London and Switzerland. Even on the defense issue, the Japanese object to direct pressures for increased spending and for a larger regional Japanese defense role in the Western Pacific, something that was reflected in strong Japanese opposition to the economic sanctions against the Soviet Union.

The new Nakasone government is likely to act on the increasingly nationalistic sentiments in Tokyo, although the first effort will be, as is always the case, to ease tensions over trade and defense with Washington. No one in Tokyo seeks a confrontation with the United States on these issues—they fear it and wish to avoid it. But it is also clear that we will see subtle moves to "diversify" Japanese foreign policy in the area of economic cooperation with the Soviet Union and with developing countries, especially in Asia. One of the more low-keyed but important efforts is an upturn in Indo-Japanese economic relations.

The Japanese are carefully considering how to handle the crisis in their relations with their American ally. The "consensus" policy still is to do anything to maintain that alliance. But the discussion beyond that covers many options, such as

the improvement of ties with Moscow (although not at the expense of the huge Sino-Japanese link) and an economic "pan-Asianism" reminiscent to some of the ill-fated "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere." The Japanese must tread carefully in any case, because there is little love for a revival of Japanese domination of Asia, as evidenced by the sharp objection from ASEAN quarters to U.S. pressures for an expanded Japanese military role in the region.

### **Will Moscow gain in Asia?**

The developments in Sino-Soviet talks during this past year have raised the prospect in some minds of a full-scale Sino-Soviet reconciliation which would totally reshape the Asian scene. The prospects for such a return to the 1950s are considered very dim by most experts, including Asian ones. However, it is clear that Peking has moved to "non-alignize" its foreign policy, hedging its bets with Moscow while keeping the door open to Washington, and trying to refurbish its image as a part of the "Third World." The Chinese talks with India are significant as an indication of their attempt to work their way out of the profile of a U.S. ally.

Even if the Soviets and Chinese do not become friends, the Soviets have undertaken a drive to build up their relations throughout Asia. The spring speech of the late Soviet President Brezhnev in Tashkent was not simply an overture to the Chinese—the most noted aspect of that event—but also included an overture to the Japanese and praise of India and of Indo-Soviet relations as a model for "friendly" ties throughout the area. This was followed by the breakthrough in talks in Peking and Huang Hua's visit to Moscow. Yuri Andropov has explicitly stated the continuity of his policy with the Tashkent speech.

All this has revived talk of a Soviet "zone of peace and stability" in Asia, an idea floated by Brezhnev in the 1970s. The creation of some formal Soviet-sponsored pact in Asia is highly remote, but the re-emergence of these ideas reflects the reactions of Asian nations to the global economic crisis and failure of U.S. policy.

If Moscow is succeeding to some extent in Asia, it is not so much because of the greater attractiveness of the Soviet Union, but because the Soviets have been able to project their policies as being more in tune with Asian sentiments than those of the United States. In short, Moscow succeeds because it has moved toward Asia, at least in appearance, not vice versa. That policy includes Soviet support for the stability of governments like that of India, even against the positions of local communists, support manifested not only politically but in increasing trade and economic ties with Asia.

If the United States is to reassert its role in the region, it will have to take note of the winds of change, of the kind of Asian nationalism which exists, and the strong impulse for economic modernization throughout the continent. No one will buy a relationship shaped solely on the grounds of strategic confrontation with the Soviet Union—those days are over, even in Peking.