



Realisation of an Asian Century: Opportunities and Challenges

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Asia is the home to nearly fifty percent of the world's population. Its rapid economic rise during the past three decades, along with substantial strengthening of military to match the economic might, has brought the continent at the forefront of global and regional affairs. Asia's burgeoning middle class offers huge market opportunities, with immense potential for further growth in all spheres of economic activities. Various studies suggest that if Asia's current rate of economic growth continues, by the mid-century, it would account for half of the global product output, trade and investment. An ADB study shows that by mid-century Asia can match per capita income enjoyed by the Europeans today and make about three billion people affluent by current standards. If these trends continue, Asia's political influence in regional and global affairs would increase. However, given Asia's diversity and complexity, its rapid rise also opens up various potential risks, which, if not mitigated in time can affect social cohesiveness thereby undermining the transformational processes. The continent needs to sustain high growth rates, address widening inequities, mitigate environmental degradation, compete for finite natural resources like energy, water, etc. and avoid 'middle income trap' to realize an Asian century.

Externally, the complex interdependence among rising and traditional powers, regional and global powers, and among rising powers themselves, may hasten or delay in the ushering of the Asian century. Economically many Asian countries are dependent on China, however, its military modernisation and growing assertiveness is a cause of concern. For example, ASEAN

has become a nucleus around which the interests of major powers in the Southeast Asian region have been consolidated. Yet, there is a danger that China, through its economic and military prowess, could threaten ASEAN's unity. On the South China Sea issue, the gulf between China and its ally Cambodia on the one hand, and Vietnam, Philippines, Japan and a number of ASEAN countries on the other, reflects the grim reality. How ASEAN countries would manage their unity to prevent a complete collapse of their premiere institution in the face of such potential challenges remains to be seen. Similarly, in East Asia Japan feels itself marginalized in the wake of the growing Chinese economy. Japan cannot rely on China, given the fact that both the countries have historical animosities, and are embroiled in maritime disputes in the East China Sea. The disputes on Senkaku/diaoyu recently flared up on account of Japan buying three disputed islands from its Japanese owners, irking China. The wide perception in China that Japan's economic dependence on China is more than the other way around, accentuates the bleak situation. So is the case between Japan and South Korea. Japan and South Korea share significant economic relations. Yet, the sentiments of 'historical wrongs' are also there in South Korea against Japan on 'comfort women' issue. Besides South Korea and Japan need to settle Takeshima/ Dokodo islands dispute. All these instances suggest that increasing trade differences and trust deficit among Asian countries in political and security spheres would limit the early realisation of an Asian Century.

It can be argued that the US presence in Asia has been a stabilizing factor in the region. Without the US presence and engagement in Asia, the region might get embroiled in various conflicts. This argument gets strength from the ongoing dispute between China and its neighbouring countries in the South China and the East China Sea.

The challenges in ushering an Asian century can be examined through the prism of conflict between traditional dominant powers and rising powers. Traditional dominant powers and their allies, being the beneficiary of the status-quo, do not want to lose their dominance over the existing economic and security architecture. Though the traditional dominant powers need the rising powers to support their economic growth, they are not ready to loosen their hold over the security architecture to accommodate the needs of rising powers. Nevertheless, rising powers want commensurate increase in influence in security architecture compatible with their economic power. This reflects a dichotomy between the traditional dominant powers and the rising powers.

The paradox in the overall power balance between the traditional powers and revisionist powers also raises uncertainties in the minds of smaller powers and nations. They appear to be in dilemma on how to deal with the changing power structures. While the traditional powers provide them with a sense of security in the form of status-quo, they are dependent on rising powers to meet their economic needs. Moreover, the traditional powers with their dominance of soft-power have the means to sow the seeds of apprehensions in the minds of smaller powers about the nature and intentions of revisionist powers.

How the traditional and revisionist powers will solve this discrepancy taking into account the interests and aspirations of smaller powers and nations, so as not to threaten their inherent insecurities, will be the litmus test for ushering in an Asian century. Within this overall discourse, how the big powers such as China, India, Japan, ASEAN, South Korea, Australia, will cope with the changing dynamics in the region such as the shifting of US pivot to Asia, changes in Myanmar, South China Sea issue, etc. by mitigating differences and building trusts among countries would set the tone for early realisation or delay in ushering of an Asian Century. Asian leaders need to devise bold and innovative national policies, while pursuing avenues for regional and global cooperation. The prerogative of early realisation of an Asian century rests on Asian powers themselves. However they choose to behave, the choice is theirs to make.

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