

Who Will Dominate Asia?

Paris, February 2, 2010 – China and India stopped being part of what was called the “third world” when the “second” world, the Communist world, disappeared in a shattering of global illusions in 1989.

Since then there has been a search to find a new King of the Global Hill. The United States rejoiced for a few years in being the sole superpower, considering it an opportunity to remake the world according to its own advantage (including its effort to shove NATO bases into Georgia and Ukraine).

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 gave it the opportunity and encouragement to try remaking the Middle East and Asia. The effort has not produced the desired results. In Afghanistan and Iraq the U.S. found itself mired in interventions it has been unable successfully to conclude. It has found itself drawn into deeper and much more dangerous engagements in the political and military affairs of Pakistan, the Iran nuclear imbroglio, and an out-of-control Israeli government.

Then came economic crisis. First the credit and Wall Street collapse, an unexpected recoil of international opinion against the American model of globalized capitalism, together with an international consensus that the system has to be replaced on terms that are not America’s terms.

China has assertively placed on the table its claims to international status and authority, recognition of its geopolitical rank and diplomatic weight, and its demand that international opposition or interference cease with respect to its political claims on Tibet, Taiwan, contested islands in the South China Sea, and – for future attention – frontier adjustments with respect to North Korea, Vietnam, and India.

It wants economic as well as political respect. China has been financing the American deficit (and its own exports) for years now, and is unmoved by American and West European complaints about the managed exchange value of its currency, its trade practices, and what widely are considered its predatory practices in securing foreign raw materials for Chinese industry.

Now there is political trouble between the United States and China on the Dalai Lama, and on the supply of arms to Taiwan -- an affair whose origins lie in the Second World War and American support for the wartime Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek.

Many since 1989 have promoted China as a model for speedy economic development, a candidate to become the new "top nation" through state mobilization of popular energies and ambition. India was at the same time promoted to second place in the Asian competition by showing how similar results could more humanely be produced by democratic government.

China acquired an increasingly glamorous reputation in the West because of its very rapid growth and the soaring living standards of that small minority of Chinese who live in the modernizing sector of the economy. India has acquired the same reputation with the added advantage of democracy.

In both cases world rank has been claimed (and often rewarded by the press) by competitive GDP -- in these cases, initially at least, resulting from relatively unsophisticated offshore production for western markets.

This is now changing, but it will be a long time before China and India will manufacture innovative high-technology goods of autonomous design, competitive with North American and European producers. It will be even longer before standards of living throughout China and India remotely approaches North American and West European levels. By that measure, most observers would name the European Union the new world's King of the Hill

But politics has a potentially destructive role to play in all this, both domestic politics and international politics. China has an extremely dangerous and unresolved transition to make from one-party dictatorship, ruled by the self-nominated successors to a leadership that gave China a half-century of government that at best has been despotic, and at worst rivaled, or surpassed, Stalinism. The Dalai Lama is a symbol of what has happened to democracy in past and present China. Indian democracy is real although ramshackle, riddled with corruption and petty despotism at local levels.

The Barack Obama government in Washington (or should one say, of corporate America) has uncritically accepted the sterile foreign policy of fighting over who is political (and potentially military) King of the Hill in Asia.

It has been making trouble with Japan (the real industrial power in Asia) by insisting on a profitable but potentially politically disastrous perpetuation of the quasi-occupation of Okinawa by the U.S. Marine Corps.

With respect to China, the United States is legally obligated to guarantee the security of (what now has become) a democratic Taiwan. China's legal claim to the island is impeccable (unless we go back to

the original aboriginal population, and the Portuguese, Dutch, and Spanish who claimed the island; there was no Chinese presence until a renegade Ming Dynasty general arrived in the 17th century.) Its moral claim is not.

The Taiwan issue will nonetheless eventually find a sane resolution if American secretaries of state, and Chinese governmental authorities can find it in themselves to refrain from bombastic mutual denunciation and efforts at political and economic blackmail over matters, like Iran, that have nothing to do with Asia.

Economic progress and political development will eventually decide who is future King of the Hill in Asia. China, with a continuity of history that extends back to the Bronze Age, knows how to wait. So do Tibetans. One cannot be so confident about American statesmen and stateswomen.

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