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**WILL THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY BE ASIAN?**

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Will this – can this – be the ‘Asian century’?

In 1988, Deng Xiaoping, then the paramount leader of China, met Rajiv Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, and told him: “In recent years people have been saying that the next century will be the century of Asia and the Pacific, as if that were sure to be the case. I disagree with this view.”<sup>1</sup>

I start with this sobering assessment from China’s greatest modern leader, because 35 years on, the idea that the 21st century will be Asian just as the 20th century was supposed to have been American, is too often regarded as axiomatic: taken as self-evident and thus more often repeated than examined.

The idea that the 21st century will be Asian is in fact a simplistic, and often politically motivated, trope that ignores complex realities. My purpose this evening is to add some of those complexities to the discussion. I thank the Asia Society of Switzerland and the University of Zurich for giving me the opportunity to do so. A special thanks to President Michael Schaepman for his kind introduction.

I will make my argument in very broad strokes and leave details to question time.

There have indeed been important global shifts in which ‘Asia’ has played a disproportionate role. But to attach a geographical adjective to them conceals much more than illuminates. The proposition that an ‘Asian century’ will replace or already has replaced an ‘American century’ is flawed both in its underlying premises and factually.

Apart from the conventional geographical sense of the term as one of the seven continents, ‘Asia’ is too broad a category to have any coherent political or strategic meaning. It is more accurate to say that certain specific Asian countries or leaders have

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<sup>1</sup> Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume III, (Foreign Languages Press, 1994) p 274-276.

played disproportionate roles in global shifts of power and ideas and this has been going on in different ways since the early 20th century when Imperial Japan defeated Imperial Russia in 1905.

It would be tedious for me to repeat this qualification every time I use the word 'Asia', but bear it in mind.

One of the earliest uses of the phrase 'The Asian Century' that I am aware of was the title of a book by the Dutch historian Jan Romein first published in 1956 about the rise of nationalism in Asia.<sup>2</sup> In this process Japan's defeat of Russia had a significant influence. At other times and in different ways, leaders from India, Indonesia, Malaysia, both Koreas, Vietnam, among many others, even my own tiny city-state, Singapore, have been associated with the impact of 'Asia' on the world.

Today, 'Asia' is often a code-name for China, particularly among the most enthusiastic proponents of the idea of an 'Asian century'. On China more later, but there are serious conceptual and historical difficulties with associating an entire political era or order with any single country or continent because it imposes a unity of thought and purpose that often simply does not exist.

The long European 'century' – something like two to three hundred years if you date it from the colonial systems that began to take root during the late 17th century, reached full bloom in the 19th century, and lingered on until the second half of the 20th century – was rife with intra-European rivalries and it was those rivalries that often propelled Europe to expand their empires globally.

American intervention in the First World War in 1917 may have marked the beginning of the end of the European era. But a US internally divided about its global role soon returned to its own preoccupations, allowing Europe a reprieve of a few more decades. So when Henry Luce, publisher of the influential *Life* magazine, wrote an editorial entitled "The American Century" in February 1941, it was still more an exhortation to his compatriots to play an active role in resisting dictatorships, than the description of an established American order.<sup>3</sup>

If there was indeed an 'American century', it was a short 'century' of about 67 years from December 1941 when the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the US into the Second World War, to 2008 when the global financial crisis catalyzed widespread disillusionment with US-led globalization, including among many Americans.

Competition is an inherent characteristic of any system of sovereign states and competition too often becomes conflict. It is a fundamental mistake to think that any

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<sup>2</sup> English translation: Jan Romein, *The Asian Century: A History of Modern Nationalism in Asia*, (University of California Press, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> "The American Century", *Life*, 17 February 1941, pp 61-65.

international order or era, whether geographically defined or not, is necessarily uncontested or even peaceful.

The so-called 'American century' was never uncontested. For 40 of the 67 years of the so-called 'American century' it was the contest between the US and the Soviet Union and their proxies that defined international order. The Cold War was messy, the contest was often dangerous, but it was the only order we had.

It was only a short and historically exceptional period of 20 years or so from 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down, that the harsh reality of inherent competition and conflict was masked by the overwhelming dominance of US power and the US alone seemed to define the international order. That period was beneficial for most of us, particularly in Asia. But that does not make it any less exceptional or replicable. We are back to a more historically normal period of world history where the contest defines the order.

And that brings me back to China.

In his conversation with Rajiv Gandhi, Deng Xiaoping argued that excluding the US, the only countries in the Asia-Pacific that were relatively developed were Japan, the 'four little dragons' of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Even if the western regions of the US and Canada and the far eastern regions of the Soviet Union were included, this was only a small percentage of the region's population, dwarfed by the populations of China and India.

Deng concluded: "No genuine Asia-Pacific century or Asian century can come until China, India and other neighbouring countries are developed."

Of course, economic conditions today are different from 1988. You all know the statistics, but a quick reminder is in order. The IMF has estimated that this year in PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) terms, China was 19.3% of world GDP, the US 14.8%, India 8.2%, Japan 3.4%, South Korea 1.6%, Indonesia 2.6%, and Australia just under 1%; a total of over 50% of world GDP for the Asia-Pacific, slightly more than 40% if you exclude the US.<sup>4</sup>

There are good reasons not to exclude the US and I will deal with them later. But with or without the US, we should be cautious about arriving at conclusions about political and strategic influence from straight-line extrapolations from economic weight.

Not stated explicitly but clear enough in Deng's conversation with Rajiv Gandhi, was that China and India would not just have to grow together but work together. In a press article for his first visit to India in 2014, Xi Jinping himself explicitly wrote: "I am

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPSH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD/CHN/IND/JPN/USA/IDN/KOR/AUS/SGP/VNM>

confident that as long as China and India work together, the Asian century of prosperity and renewal will surely arrive at an early date”.<sup>5</sup>

The exact opposite happened.

By my very rough count, since 2014 to date there have been at least 10 serious incidents, some resulting in fatalities, on the Sino-Indian Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas. The first occurred within weeks of Xi’s visit. There would probably be considerably more if minor incidents not always reported in the media are included. China has deployed 200,000 troops to its Western Theatre Command, which is responsible for its border with India, which has in turn resulted in a build-up of forces on the Indian side. Both sides are enhancing their military infrastructure along the LAC.

And it is not just the Himalayas. The most active disputes in Asia all involve China: in the East and South China Seas and, of course, most potentially dangerous of all, over Taiwan.

Relations among the countries of Asia are complicated, often with China at the centre of many of the complications, which given its long history, is perhaps only to be expected. China’s relations with Japan, both Koreas, and Vietnam are historically fraught, as are many other intra-Asian relationships: between Japan and both Koreas, between Australia and Indonesia, between India and its neighbours, and between several members of ASEAN, to name just the main fault-lines.

I am not going to discuss any of these disputes or complicated relationships in detail – I will leave that to question time. For now, just note that they exist and are a serious limitation to the idea of an ‘Asian century’ insofar as that implies a minimal political coherence among Asians.

In the early 20th century, the nationalist revolt against European colonialism provided mutual inspiration and a sense of common purpose, although not as much common action as the early nationalists hoped. Now that every Asian country is independent, Asian nationalisms – the plural is crucial – are more often than not directed against each other.

None of this is in any way intended to denigrate the Asian growth story upon which the idea of an ‘Asian century’ ultimately rests, or to suggest that it is in any way illusionary. It is a real and inspiring story. There is no other example in history of so many people – hundreds of millions, particularly in the giant countries of China and India – lifted out of extreme poverty in a relatively short period of about 40 years since the 1980’s.

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<sup>5</sup> Xi Jinping, “Towards an Asian Century of Prosperity”, The Hindu, 17 September 2014.

What made Asia different? While many, perhaps every, country in every region in what we now call the Global South, talks about placing priority on economic development, few countries really mean it – their real priorities are too often elsewhere – and almost all the countries who really meant it were in Asia. This is the real ‘Asian miracle’. Much of what the World Bank described in a widely cited 1993 report on the East Asian miracle was to my mind largely standard macro-economic policies open to all countries in all continents.<sup>6</sup> What set most Asian countries apart was political commitment to growth.

Economic success is not specially vouchsafed to any Asian country by God. Although Asia will probably still grow faster than most other regions, the time of ‘miracles’ is over and all Asian countries will now have to grapple with thorny problems if they are to continue to grow and realize their potential. The politics of key Asian countries is becoming more complicated and in some cases is becoming a hinderance to the single-minded focus that had hitherto characterized their approach to economic development. Here too we are witnessing what could be termed a return to ‘normalcy’.

China is not exempt from these trends. However, the challenges facing China are of a qualitatively different kind.

Professor Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University has described the belief that China’s rise was “granted by nature.”<sup>7</sup> The deep sense of victimhood and entitlement that permeates that attitude, reinforced by the strongly ethno-nationalist narrative of humiliation, rejuvenation and achieving the ‘China Dream’ by which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) legitimates its monopoly of power, as well as a traditional political culture that equates order with hierarchy with China at the apex, drives the often counter-productive behaviour that has aroused anxieties across the world, even in countries highly dependent on China. Even if not always publicly articulated, such anxieties are part of the new reality of ‘Asia’.

These anxieties are the key drivers of developments such as the Quad, AUKUS, the sharp shift in Japan’s strategic posture away from post-war pacifism, and India away from purist notions of non-alignment, as well as quieter but no less significant shifts in the strategic approaches of key Southeast Asian countries.

This attitude, or something very similar, also lies at the core of China’s slowing growth.

The three interrelated challenges that confront China – a precarious property sector that accounts for a quarter or more of GDP, burgeoning local government debt with consequent stresses on commercial banking, and a lack of confidence that, so far at

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<sup>6</sup> *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy*, (Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Yan Xuetong, “The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 10, Number 26, 2001

least, has limited the effectiveness of the measures Beijing has taken to deal with slow growth – are familiar and much discussed.

But what is perhaps less well-known or insufficiently stressed, is that these issues are only economic in form and are symptoms of a much more fundamental political challenge.

As early as 2007, then Premier Wen Jiabao warned that China's development was "unstable, unbalanced, uncoordinated, and ultimately unsustainable." In 2012 at its 18th Congress the CCP acknowledged that the economic model that had led to spectacular growth in the 1990's and first decade of the 2000's was unsustainable. In 2013, the CCP rolled out a plan that envisaged a restructuring "to allow the market to play a 'decisive role' in the allocation of resources."

Very little of this 2013 plan has been implemented; according to some academic studies, perhaps only 15-20%. Why?

China is, we sometimes forget, a communist country, not so much in its ideology but certainly in its political structure. It is a Leninist state led by a Leninist-style vanguard party.

The primary value of a Leninist party is political control over all aspects of state, economy and society; the most core of its core interests is to maintain control. The market by definition means less political control.

What the 2013 plan required was a new balance between control and economic efficiency and it is this new balance that the CCP under Xi Jinping has been reluctant to establish. In fact, the first decade of Xi's administration has seen the Party under his leadership insisting on ever more control over the economy, state and society, tilting the balance in the opposite direction to what the 2013 plan envisaged. Xi Jinping is clearly a true Leninist in that his almost Pavlovian response to problems seems to be 'more Party'.

In the meantime, the expectations of the Chinese people have risen. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi himself acknowledged that the "principal contradiction" facing China was that between "unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life." This set out a lengthy domestic agenda to meet those expectations.

Dealing with that agenda in a country of China's size will require immense resources over a long time. This has set up something of a vicious circle. China must grow to acquire the resources to deal with rising expectations; sustaining growth requires a new balance between political control and economic efficiency; establishing that balance entails political risk; mitigating risk requires growth, and so on and so on.



China is not about to collapse. It is quite an adaptable system. But unless the Party finds the political courage to break the vicious circle, the Chinese economy is going to operate sub-optimally. China will be pulled in contrary directions, as for example it has been by passing a broadly encompassing espionage law while Premier Li Qiang is trying to encourage foreign investment.

Little wonder then that China is facing a domestic and foreign crisis of confidence. Xi himself is the basic cause of the crisis of confidence. His record of admitting mistakes during his first decade in power is not encouraging. While Xi may make tactical adjustments to meet pressing immediate problems as he did over Zero-Covid, fundamental changes during the further 10 to 15 years that Xi may remain in power seem unlikely. And by mid-century, whether or not Xi is still in power, long-term demographic factors will kick in to slow growth.

None of this means that we have reached 'peak China' whatever that phrase may mean. Even if China grows at 4% or 5% annually, that is roughly equivalent to adding another Australia to the world economy every year. That's not a bad 'peak' if indeed it is one. Whether that will be sufficient to satisfy China's external ambitions and domestic expectations are questions only time can answer. And if insufficient, only time will tell how a frustrated China will behave.

But nobody is ever going to shun China any more than anyone will shun India or Japan or South Korea or Indonesia, or for that matter Brazil or South Africa or Nigeria, or any big country anywhere even if its economic performance is less than 'miraculous'. As long as Asian economies, big and small, are performing relatively better than economies in other continents, that is reason enough to deal with them.

This moves us closer to the crux of what the idea of an 'Asian century' really signifies.

Asia now has to be dealt with in its own right and not as an accessory to some other concern: not only in so far as it affects Europe as during the colonial era, or only as one of the arenas of US-Soviet competition during the Cold War, or as a blank sheet where protean abstractions such as 'democracy' and 'authoritarianism' advance or retreat seemingly regardless of specific contexts of history and culture.

This cast of mind has led to serious policy mistakes. In Indochina during the 1960's and 1970's, a civil war between competing variants of Vietnamese nationalism was mistaken for a move on the global strategic chessboard by 'international communism' – another abstraction – and thus drew interventions by the US that had little regard for local dynamics with very tragic results for the peoples of the countries enmeshed in the conflict.

There is now a better understanding that China, India, Japan, both Koreas, Vietnam, Indonesia, to name but a few, are countries with long histories and deep pride in their

cultures and are never going to be anybody's tool or play deputy to any sheriff. To state the obvious – which nevertheless is often ignored –, they have their own interests. Even small countries like my own are never without agency and can use it. Otherwise Singapore should not exist. Of all countries in Europe, Switzerland should understand this.

There is today better understanding of this fact. But the mental transition from thinking of 'Asia' only as an arena to thinking about 'Asia' as actor, is still incomplete as the continuing appeal of the conceit of an 'Asian century' itself demonstrates. Simplistic binaries such as contrasting the 'Asian century' with the 'American century' or the starker Chinese version of 'East rising, West declining', objectifies the countries involved, brushes aside their diversity, and reduces them to mere representations of whatever larger forces may strike one's fancy.

My former colleague, Kishore Mahbubani, one of the most ardent promoters of the 'Asia century', has even gone so far as to argue "the last two centuries of Western domination of world history have been a major historical aberration. From the years 1 to 1820, the two largest economies of the world were those of China and India ... All historical aberrations come to a natural end. Therefore the Asian Century is irresistible and unstoppable."<sup>8</sup>

He is probably right that China and India were the world's largest economies centuries ago. But of what relevance is that today? It is a debating point that sounds clever but proves nothing and is misleading. To conceive of the 'Asian century' as the recovery of Asia's historical place in the world prior to contact with the West echoes the Chinese line of 'rejuvenation' and completely ignores the profound changes the West and Asia have wrought on each other through centuries of interaction.

Former Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang has boasted that China had "shattered the myth that modernization is Westernization"<sup>9</sup>. This claim, which also underpins Xi Jinping's Global Civilization Initiative, is at best only partially true. The 'myth' was shattered long ago and not by China.

China's general development trajectory is not essentially different from that of Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, India, Vietnam, Indonesia or any other example of successful modernization and development.

Modernization has always necessarily entailed westernization (spelt with a lower case 'w') and never Westernization (spelt with an upper case 'W') – which is to say

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<sup>8</sup> Emanuele Schibotto and Gabriele Giovannini, 'Singapore's Role in the Asian Century' – interview with Kishore Mahbubani, Asian Century Institute, 12 February 2015 as cited in John West, [Asian Century ... on a Knife-edge: A 360 Degree Analysis of Asia's Recent Economic Development](#), pp2-3, open access.

<sup>9</sup> Zhao Ziwen and Dewey Sim, "China's 'two sessions' 2023: Chinese development 'shatters' modern-is-western myth, Foreign Minister Qin Gang says", [South China Morning Post](#), 7 March 2023.



modernization has always necessarily involved adapting the ideas and techniques of western industrial society to local conditions – because until Japan developed after the Meiji Restoration, all modern industrial societies were western.

The only choice was the US-European model, which stressed the market economy and liberal democracy based on the individual, or the Soviet-Russian model which emphasized the planned economy and ‘people’s democracy’ in which the individual is subordinated to the vanguard party. China’s choice was the latter. Marx, Engels and Lenin are not ancient Chinese sages. Adding the phrase ‘with Chinese characteristics’ cannot erase the strong western influence on China since 1911 and which continued after 1949.

But whatever the choice, there were always national particularities that could not be ignored. From Meiji Japan to the present day, the most successful non-western modernizers have never been mere carbon copies of either model. They are all adaptations to local conditions. China is only a particular case of a general phenomenon and unique only in the trite sense that every country is unique.

More crucially, to conceive of the ‘Asian century’ as reclaiming a place held in the past, ignores the very reason for Asia’s economic success.

If Asian countries have generally adapted better to western-defined modernity and grown faster than countries in other non-western regions, it is because they have more thoroughly enmeshed themselves into the world economy and occupied some of the most important nodes in it. China itself is the prime example.

Under-pinning this system is the foundation of stability provided by American power. In so far as modern Asia is characterised by economic success, there can be no ‘Asian century’ without America.

Does this make the US ‘Asian’? Geography is never just geography but is always to at least some degree politically determined. The very terms ‘Asia-Pacific’ and ‘Indo-Pacific’ and forums like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and APEC, implicitly recognise that to deal with either China or the US effectively, you must deal with both simultaneously. Without the US, there can be no balance to China and we will deal with China in a heavily unbalanced strategic environment that can only be detrimental to our interests; without China, the risk that US will take our interests for granted and disregard them rises considerably.

Uncontrolled strategic competition between the US and China is thus of grave concern to all Asian countries, including US allies and partners who have their own concerns about Chinese behaviour. If US-China competition gets out of hand, it potentially reduces the space to deal with both simultaneously.

US-China strategic competition is a new structural condition of international relations that will shape many issues in all regions for decades to come. All the more reason to understand its nature precisely so as to be able to position ourselves optimally.

One of the most intellectually lazy tropes used to describe US-China competition is to call it a 'new Cold War'. This fundamentally misrepresents the nature of US-China competition because it evokes a superficially plausible but in fact inappropriate historical analogy.

The Cold War was an existential struggle between capitalism and communism. The US and the Soviet Union led two separate systems connected with each other only at their margins. Although the prospect of nuclear destruction tempered their rivalry and eventually led to détente, to the very end, in-principle if not always in practice, the essential aim of US-Soviet competition was for one system to replace the other.

But the US and China are today both vital, irreplaceable, parts of a single global system, intimately enmeshed with each other and the rest of the world by a web of supply-chains of a scope, density and complexity that is historically unprecedented.

The very metaphor of a 'chain' understates the complexity because a chain is an essentially simple linear structure. A more appropriate metaphor is the root-system of a tree leading to its trunk, leading to branches, twigs and leaves. The global system comprises a thick forest of trees intertwined with each other across continents.

That forest was planted and spread during the short post-Cold War period of unchallenged American dominance. It is now an established fact in its own right. Its consequences are what we now call 'globalization' and 'interdependence'. There had been earlier periods of interdependence between rival major powers, but nothing exactly like this complex forest has ever existed before.

This is what distinguishes 21st century interdependence from earlier periods of interdependence. This has blurred the line between 'the West and the Rest'. Asia is deeply integrated into this forest, and that line is less distinct in Asia than elsewhere. It also made it difficult to neatly categorise even the most complicated intra-Asian relationship as 'friend' or 'foe'. Attitudes towards China, even in countries that have active disputes with China, are ambivalent.

The US and China are both uncomfortable with their interdependence because it exposes their mutual vulnerabilities. Both have tried to mitigate their vulnerabilities: the US and its allies by trying to enhance the resilience of key sectors by diversification of their most important supply-chains to reduce dependence on China and by denying China key technologies; China by trying to become more technologically self-reliant and placing more emphasis on domestic consumption to drive growth.

Neither will succeed, at least not to the extent they hope. Diversification and self-reliance are both easier said than done. Even if these strategies work – which is open to question – it will take a long time to have a significant effect.

Partial bifurcation of the system has already occurred and there will be further bifurcations, particularly in areas of technology and finance with security implications. This certainly places pressures on globalization and is difficult to deal with. But apocalyptic scenarios of this exceptionally complex global system dividing across all sectors into two separate systems as existed during the US-Soviet Cold War lack credibility. Unless a full-scale war between the US and China breaks out – which is improbable – globalization will be patchy and slow down, but will not be reversed.

However deep their concerns about China, even the closest American ally is never going to cut itself off from China politically or economically. This reality was recognised by the change of western rhetoric from ‘decoupling’ to ‘de-risking’. On its part, the slogan of ‘Dual Circulation’ acknowledges Beijing’s reliance on exports – China’s most important markets are ultimately in the developed countries not the Global South – and despite all the tensions and the disruptions to trade, the total volume of US-China trade was more than USD 690 billion in 2022.

The US and China will compete and do so robustly, but they will compete within the single system of which they are both vital parts. The dynamics of competition within a system are fundamentally more complex than the binary competition between systems as existed during the US-Soviet Cold War. In complexity there is manoeuvre space and more opportunity to exercise agency.

More crucially, competition within a system is not existential because its aim is not to destroy the system and replace it with another; China may want to dominate the system and may be motivated by dreams of regaining its real or imagined former place in Asia and the world, but those are different matters. As one of the main beneficiaries of the existing system, Beijing has no strong incentive to totally upset it or seek radically different arrangements, even assuming it has the capability to do so which is not to be assumed.

China is certainly revanchist and very assertively so, but to call it ‘revisionist’ or a ‘systemic competitor’ is to overstate the case.

But facing no existential threat anywhere in the world, why should the US to bear any burden or pay any price to uphold international order?

After 40 years of sacrifice, the priorities of all post-Cold War administrations have been domestic, with the George W. Bush administration as an exception forced by 9/11. This is not so much a return to isolationism – another inappropriate historical analogy: the 1990’s and 2000’s are not the 1920’s and 1930’s. A more accurate description of the

American attitude would be a unilateral recalibration of the terms of America's engagement with the world.

America now defines its external interests more narrowly and more transactionally. In this respect, the primary difference between the Trump and Biden administrations was that the latter was politer and more predictable about its transactionalism. True, Biden is more consultative than Trump – but he is not consulting you for the pleasure of your company, but to see what you are prepared to do to advance his agenda.

Post-Cold War America expects and demands more of its allies, partners and friends. This new reality has not yet been fully internalised, although Asia perhaps understands it somewhat better than Europe because Asia's relationships with the US has always rested more on common interests rather than the illusion of common values.

Still, in Asia as elsewhere, debates about the reliability of the US have resurfaced – given a sharper edge now that wars in Ukraine and Gaza have underscored America's indispensability in maintaining regional balances. Anxieties are enhanced by the more-than-usual polarization of American politics and the angst this has engendered among the traditional American elite.

But there is only one America and each country will have to decide for itself what it is – and, equally important, is not – prepared to do with the US to maintain regional balances.

Ladies & Gentlemen: I have tried your patience by speaking for too long. Let me now wrap up by drawing together the main threads of my argument and relate them to the question I posed at the beginning: will this – can this – be the 'Asian century'?

I hope the layers of complexity that swath the apparently straight-forward idea of an 'Asian century' are now clearer. As we try to navigate those complexities, we are confronted with two fundamental strategic realities. First, the US and China are geopolitical facts that no country can ignore. Second, there are concerns about both American and Chinese behaviour.

Faced with these realities, most countries are going to try to maximize strategic flexibility within the constraints of their specific circumstances. No country anywhere, even formal US allies or those economically dependent on China, will want to align all their interests across all domains in one direction or another. They will try to align different interests in different domains in the most advantageous direction. Since all countries face the same imperative, no country's choices need be confined to only the US or China. The US and China may be the most important actors but they are not the only potential partners.

What I see evolving as the 21st century progresses is what I call a system of dynamic multipolarity. The US-China relationship will be the main axis around which eclectic groups of countries will continually form, dissolve, and reconstitute themselves in different coalitions on different issues as their interests dictate. Each coalition will have different participants and leaders. Some may include both the US and China, some one or the other, and some neither. These ever-shifting coalitions will not displace existing alliances, institutions and forums, but form an overlay that shapes their dynamics and in turn will be shaped by them.

There are several developments that already point in that direction: Japan taking the initiative to form the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) after the Trump administration renounced the Trans-Pacific Partnership, India's concerns about China leading it to join the Quad, but those concerns not preventing India from also joining the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization. India left the ASEAN-led RCEP but along with the US, China and Russia, among others, is part of other ASEAN-initiated forums such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Plus meeting.

Asia's diversity makes it a naturally multipolar region. Since Asia is also the epicentre of the broad shifts driving dynamic multipolarity – the rise of China and India; the deep and pervasive influence of US-China competition; and Asia's increasingly important role in the global web of supply-chains, among others – Asia will be the test-bed for the emerging new system which I believe will eventually spread to other geographic regions. In this sense, Asia as a model may well come to define an 'Asian century'.

But such a fluid and multi-faceted system cannot be geographically constrained. The trends that are driving the evolution of such a system are global. Implicit in all I have said, is that conventional geography is becoming less relevant as an indicator of political or strategic alignment. Membership of many of the forums and institutions I have mentioned is already not confined to Asia. The US is in the EAS. Australia, Japan and South Korea have attended the NATO summit. The UK, to give another recent example, joined the CPTPP in March this year. I doubt it will be the last European country to seek membership. This cannot be a purely Asian 'Asian century'.

We are too often trapped in a binary mode of thought that limits our strategic horizons. But does everything really need to be only one thing or another? On that perhaps somewhat enigmatic note I shall end. If you find this unsatisfactory, I beg you to remember that Schrodinger's cat was simultaneously alive and dead.

Ladies & Gentlemen, thank you for listening to me. Please remember that these views are my own and the only official position I have is that of a pensioner.

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