East Asia Restored, Korea Restored

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It is an honour to address the National Press Club of Australia today.

East Asian ascendancy

Strategic trends dominating East Asia over the past few decades have shown a distinct divergence with regard to the region’s economic and political status. On the economic side, East Asia has already gained the status of the world’s largest and most dynamic region in terms of combined GDP and combined share of volume of world trade. However, the political status of the East is still overshadowed by Western strategic dominance.

This imbalance has already given rise to some uncertainties both within and outside the region, the magnitude of which will grow with the passage of time.

The West perceives that the emergence of the East provides a major challenge to its previous dominance, while the East lays claim to the notion of ‘East Asia restored’.

Therein lies the source of potential conflict between East and West.

Unless we can find a new paradigm or a new balance of power in East Asia, there is the potential danger of conflict emerging from clashes of either civilisations or strategic interests, or both.

Asia is entering a new era, one in which the relative standing of the great powers is changing. The process of change has accelerated with the demise of the Soviet Union and the perception that the United States now has fewer strategic interests in Asia. Asia’s dependence on the United States has been reduced, and US leverage and influence in the region has been correspondingly diminished. At the core of this process of change is the increasing confidence of Japan and China, based on their respective levels of economic might.

At this juncture, a brief historical review of five centuries of relations between East and West may be worthwhile.

According to Professor Paul Kennedy, East–West contact dates back to roughly the year 1500 when China and India were overwhelmingly bigger powers than any of the Western countries. Even in 1750, according to Bairoch’s calculations, China and India were the two dominant powers, with most of the European nations — England, Germany, France, Italy, the Habsburg Empire — together with Japan ranking only as middle powers.
But then came the ‘European miracle’ driven by developments stemming from the Industrial Revolution, scientific advances and military revolution. Europe began to gain ascendency over the Eastern nations and consequently the global balance shifted dramatically in favour of the Western world.

The West’s dominance of the East, as we are all well aware, has lasted for two centuries. In East Asia, China’s long-held dominance was first challenged when Japan invaded Korea in the late 16th century. Under its shogunate, a unified Japan started to accumulate national wealth by introducing advanced Eastern culture mainly from China through Korea, and advanced technology from the West, while China and Korea stubbornly refused to introduce Western culture and technology. From the second part of the 19th century onwards, Japan’s ascendency coupled with the simultaneous decline of China and Korea’s comparative power vis-à-vis Japan and the Western powers saw the disintegration of the long-cherished balance of peace in the ‘Middle Kingdom’ and relations in East Asia.

The so-called ‘East Asian miracle’ denotes a process which commenced more than two centuries after the emergence of the ‘European miracle’. This process started with Japan in the 1950s, followed in the 1960s by four other Asian economies — Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. These countries were joined in the 1970s by Malaysia, Thailand, China and Indonesia.

In the 1980s alone, Asia increased its share of world output from 17 per cent to 22 per cent. On the basis of actual production and consumption (purchasing power parity), Asia makes the greatest contribution to the world economy; the IMF calculates that Asia’s share of world economic output in 1990 amounted to 25 per cent, compared with that of North America and Western Europe, whose combined share was 46 per cent.

In the 1990s Asia continues to maintain its current strong momentum. The IMF estimates that, taken as a whole, Asia’s share of world economic output will be close to 30 per cent, even in nominal dollar terms, and more than that in purchasing power parity terms.

The World Bank predicts that Asia as a whole will account for half the growth in world trade in the 1990s.

The East Asian miracle has been accomplished in less than half a century following on from the absorption of the West’s experience of industrial revolution, scientific innovation and democratic enlightenment. East Asia could also have gone a long way towards shifting the balance of world economic power.
Some experts talk of the clash of civilisations. Other scholars speak in terms of ‘the rise and fall of great powers’.

Ancient Chinese philosophers subscribed to belief in ‘Tao’ — a process of continual flow and change between polar opposites, the Yin and the Yang. The Yang, having reached its climax, retreats in favour of the Yin; the Yin, having reached its climax, retreats in favour of the Yang — all in a harmonious fashion.

Arnold Toynbee views the rise and fall of civilisations as a pattern of interaction of ‘challenge and response’.

East and West and each of the large powers are therefore left to grapple with the age-old dilemma of ‘the rise and fall of civilisations’ and new challenges and responses.

Faced with the new phenomenon of a re-emerging East, the West as well as the East has to map out a new paradigm. It must avoid short-sightedness in doing so and also pessimistic assumptions about ‘the clash of civilisations’ or ‘the challenge to Western dominance’. Rather, the West needs to adopt a long historical perspective, perceiving the ‘East Asian miracle’ as a product of the transfusion of Western civilisation into Eastern civilisation.

Thus, the East needs to accept the reality of the ‘established West’, while the West needs to accept the new reality of the ‘restored East’ — that is, ‘East Asia restored’.

‘East Asia restored’, together with Europe and the Americas, can provide the three pillars of the globe, divided by the Atlantic and Pacific, earnestly striving for harmonious global order, with peaceful coexistence and cooperation to advance humanity serving as the norm for the global community.

But many challenges and opportunities lie ahead.

First, how can China constructively engage with the world as a partner and contribute to world order without becoming over-assertive?

Second, will Japan find a new role and attain a status commensurate with its economic achievements without posing any threat to its neighbours, and in the meantime come to terms with its recent history?

Third, how can the United States continue to maintain proper engagement with the region while its alliance network re-adjusts to more complex and perhaps more flexible security frameworks?

Fourth, how can an artificially divided Korea be reunited without disrupting the existing order and balance among the surrounding powers, thus removing a fundamental seed of conflict?
Fifth, how will Australia and other partners engage with East Asia, and how will that engagement be accepted by Asian countries?

Finally, the most crucial challenge, as well as the greatest opportunity, is: can the nations situated across the Pacific resolve the divergent cultures of East and West into a new ‘Pacific civilisation’, thus paving the way for a ‘Pacific community’ in what should be the ‘Pacific Era’ of the 21st century?

History teaches us that in a meeting between heterogenous civilisations, it is only after a painful process of conflict and accommodation that a harmonious new order becomes possible and that this process at times gives birth to a new hybrid advanced civilisation.

At the moment, neither pessimism nor optimism is warranted.

Peace and the unification of Korea: its implications for the security of East Asia and beyond

In terms of the security of East Asia, the two most conspicuous flashpoints since the end of the Second World War continue to be the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait.

I had first-hand experience of these two issues when I was in charge of the negotiation of the normalisation of relations between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Korea in 1992.

Soon after the negotiation process started, it became obvious to me that the central Chinese concern was the Taiwan issue, the so-called ‘one-China policy’.

For me, China’s unequivocal support for the peaceful reunification of Korea, as a *quid pro quo* for the ‘one-China policy’, was a central prerequisite.

In the final normalisation document, signed by the two foreign ministers on 24 August 1992 in Beijing, reciprocal support for the ‘one-China policy’ and for the early attainment of peaceful reunification were clearly stipulated, back to back.

The Korean Peninsula remains the only region in the world where the Cold War conflict continues.

There are four main areas of tension which threaten peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, and beyond.

First is the artificially imposed division of a purely homogenous nation into North and South sharing several thousand years of history, language and culture, and which lived under unified rule ever since the 7th century. Despite the promise of the leaders of the Grand Alliance