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The global security outlook: four Australian perspectives

Perspective One

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Admiral Singh's stimulating and wide-ranging address reminded me of a board game we used to play called "Risk". The board depicted Europe and the Middle East; and the six players represented the pre-World War I powers – Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Austria and Turkey. Any player could end up winning by becoming the dominant power, even Czarist Russia or Ottoman Turkey, if you played the power tsunamis right.

Global Outlook

Like Admiral Singh, we are all trying to come to grips with the abstract lines and murky details of what a new multi-polar world order might come to look like as this century progresses. We can, though, see one militarily-dominant power, the United States, and no-one can see it losing that dominance in the near future.

We have the two rising powers of China and India. Both are very much concerned with their domestic development and their internal economic situations. They are both aware that, without a strong economy and a strong industrial base, military power is a very shallow instrument and both are well aware of their great internal weaknesses and fragilities. China is devoting about \$US100 billion a year of its budget on development of powerful military forces, yet as Admiral Singh mentioned, it has a declining population and a rather more precarious hold now on its eastern regions.

Then we have the "Ottoman Turks" or "Czarist Russians" of the 21st century, North Korea and Pakistan, whose politics could take any of several paths, some quite radical, and which have gone for the nuclear fallback as their regimes feel threatened. And there are the middle powers – South Korea, Indonesia, Australia and one or two of the other ASEANS¹ – with significant strategic weight locally, and more widely in concert.

China

China is built on an export model and is hugely dependent on it. It is very focused on foreign trade, both on exports and increasingly on imports. There is an imbalance of wealth domestically between the coastal

fringe and interior regions; and a contested hold on two chunks of territory in western China – Xinjiang and Tibet. China is surrounded by other states of dubious long-term stability – it has land borders with no less than 13 nations – and is largely boxed in by the dominant maritime powers on its sea approaches. Following the philosophy of Mahan, the United States has deployed naval power right up to the coast of potential rivals, including China.

India

Turning to India – although as the Admiral said we are all cheering India and are hoping India would rise to counterbalance to China – it is equally clear from what Admiral Singh and other have said that India is not an ally of anyone. India enjoys a good relationship with the United States, but the Americans are starting to find this does not mean India is going to be another subordinate ally like Japan, Australia or South Korea. The economic relationship between India and China has only just started to take off, and conceivably it will come to overshadow in global importance the linkages of these two economies with the United States and Europe.

Admiral Singh indicates India has no particular ambitions to throw its weight around the world. It wants security and spreading prosperity, while its democracy continues to broker all of the nation's inequalities, disputes and internal divisions. Long may it continue to do so. The Indian model of development is sound, despite periodic bouts of self-doubt on corruption and sectarianism. As the latest census shows us, literacy levels are rising and other social indicators are improving. It is becoming a much stronger country socially. This is very important. In New Delhi, I used to drive past a billboard which had a saying of Rajiv Gandhi's: "Without a strong India, no Indian can be strong". I always thought this was the wrong way around. It should be: "Without strong Indians, India cannot be strong". Thankfully, Indians are getting stronger: better educated; even more assertive of their individual rights. This human development can only strengthen the country.

When I was stationed in India, the focus on developing the armed forces and particularly the navy was evident. Despite severe budget limitations, the navy nursed along its capabilities. At that time, the old

¹Association of South-East Asian Nations

aircraft carrier, *Vikrant*, a sister ship of the old HMAS *Melbourne*, hardly ever left port; yet the Indians were keen to retain their naval air power, at least theoretically. It was probably shore-based for a long time and still will be for a while until their new carriers start coming into service later in this decade..

But, in contrast to China, still converting a guerrilla or “people’s army” into a modern tri-service defence force, India is well-positioned. India inherited fine traditions, military doctrines and practices from the British. The Indian Air Force puts in a lot of time in practice – maintaining flying hours has become a very proud tradition. In Bombay, there is a wonderful mural on the outside wall of the naval base that stresses a “three-dimensional” navy with air power, surface ships and submarines. India has written its ambitions on the wall. India’s military traditions, I think, will serve India very well as it develops to become a significant power for whatever purpose it sets.

Conclusion

Australia and India can certainly cooperate in what Admiral Singh said are the two things that most of Asia wants – stability and security, particularly the stability and security of sea lanes. There are many positive elements in the evolving Asia-Pacific strategic outlook. India will be a most significant and appreciated player in this century’s emerging game of “Risk”.

The Author: Hamish McDonald, the Asia-Pacific Editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, has been a foreign correspondent in Jakarta, Tokyo, Hong Kong, New Delhi and Beijing. He is the author of books on Indonesia and India; has twice won Walkley Awards; and a report of his on Burma has been read into the record of the United States Congress. He was made an inaugural fellow of the Australian Institute of International Affairs in 2008. [Photo of Mr McDonald: Colonel J M Hutcheson, MC]