

Jump TO Article



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Jump TO Article

Perspective Three

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Admiral Singh has already given us an excellent overview of global security. I am going to give you an Australian perspective, but not the Australian perspective, because I do not think there is one – Australian analysts are pretty divided in how they think about the world. I will make some judgements firstly about the world as a whole and secondly about Asia.

First Judgement

Let me start with the world. We live in very tumultuous times and I refer not only to the Arab Spring under way in the Middle East, but to that whole panoply of events from 9/11 onwards, such as the opening of the international space to more actors, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and the long war against al-Qaeda. A lot of things have happened in the last decade and more than anything else they have fractured the prism of strategic agreement in many countries on issues such as who we are, what is important, what counts, and what the big strategic factors are in global security.

I want to underline a number of factors that are important to me. Firstly, we tend to focus in the Western world on our relative decline. That decline is not absolute. It is simply relative to the rise of the newly emergent powers. The reason the West has ruled the world for the last few centuries is that it got to the Industrial Revolution first. But the rest of the world has caught up and they are now experiencing that revolution at a breakneck pace.

As the rest of the world grows, the ability of the West to shape the world is declining. When you have rapid growth in the developing world and static growth in the developed world, you see a shift in priorities and the sorts of difficulties that advanced, high-technology Western armies have had over the past 10 years in dealing with asymmetrical opponents. In some ways, the global financial crisis has only accentuated those changes and lent support to those who say that a new world order is on its way.

These developments have some unique implications for Australia, because we are the Anglo-Saxon country that is closest to Asia and Asia is the part that is growing fastest. In Asia alone, half the world's population came late to industrialisation and they are not going to be deflected from that path because the economy stumbles. All economies stumble occasionally. The long term growth trend, however, is upward. As Australians, we will have to come to terms with living in a region that is going to look dramatically unlike the region in which we grew up.

Second Judgement

President Obama said in London overnight that the

West would continue to lead, and needed to lead, because of its values. It is an admirable sentiment and I agree with him completely that global leadership will not be divvied up in terms of a country's share of global gross domestic product.

Some countries are extroverted and some countries are introverted and, rising powers that come from introverted strategic cultures, are uncertain of what they want the world to look like. But long before they can run the world in their own right, they can frustrate the world they are in now. Rising powers have the capacity to frustrate long before they have the capacity to replace the global leader. We saw that at Copenhagen (United Nations climate change conference December 2009) and this year in the United Nations Security Council resolution on Libya. There were five abstentions on that resolution and they were not the votes of small countries. They were the votes of every member of the BRICs block (Brazil, Russia, India and China), plus Germany. Five of the world's great powers stood back from the global norm about the responsibility to protect. That did not stop the vote going ahead, but the disappointing feature of this was that a global consensus on the issue was not achieved. Indeed, these global divisions are likely to get worse long before the world gets more united.

Third Judgement

New strategic relationships loom. As power becomes more spread around the world, new opportunities will arise. This occurs because the diffusion of power is not just about the disempowerment of Western society and the rise of Asian society. It is a story about the relative empowerment of other players. And, as other players rise, new possibilities arise for our strategy. Some of those possibilities include new relationships with rising great powers. But it is not just great powers that are rising: in Asia a wave of second-tier players is also making its presence felt.

Asia itself is not necessarily a more adversarial place, though. Indeed, it is wrong to see Asia in mere power-balancing terms. It is not a see-saw. Rather, it is more like one of those mobiles that patients still encounter down in the dentist's surgery – a mobile where about fifteen dolphins are tied together by string and bamboo in complex and interrelated ways. Asia is like that mobile. There are a lot of connectivities which mean that, even when you have adverse relationships, things do not work themselves out by a rush towards war. Asian multi-polarity is not much like Europe's earlier experience with that condition. And for us here in Australia, multi-polarity in Asia will bring the possibility of greater diversity to our strategic connections.

Fourth Judgement

Non-state actors are not going away in the near future. Non-state actors benefit from very powerful, historical forces that pull power away from states. I know some commentators believe that the threat by non-state actors is not very significant; but this threat looks durable and lasting to me. Two analysts writing in the final issue of *Foreign Affairs* last year observed that we might be witnessing the growth of a 'mezzanine floor' in international relations – a floor that exists between states and peoples.

Regardless of whether that is true, new actors are on the rise and the death of Osama bin Laden is not going to change that. Napoleonic warfare did not die out because Napoleon had passed on. The war on terror, and catastrophic terrorism, are not going to die out because Osama bin Laden is dead. Non-state actors are being empowered by technology and interconnectedness. Compact explosives were invented back in the 1970s. When you pair them with the reconnaissance capabilities of Google Earth, and the triggering capabilities of mobile phones, you have a worrying combination.

Fifth Judgement

Finally, let me say something about globalisation. I know sometimes people say the bad side of globalisation is terrorism. There is also a good side of globalisation – we trade more; we travel more; and we

probably understand each others' cultures more. But we are still strategically blind to globalisation's effects. I think globalisation leaves us in a very interesting, connected world, with more industrial states and fewer agrarian states. While that inter-connected, industrialised world sounds nice, much will depend on the character of that world. Religious and national ideologies could still make a densely connected world an uncomfortable place in which to live.

Conclusion

Overall, I think we should be more conscious than we are of the age of geopolitical transformation that is already upon us. The tempo of geopolitical change is quickening rather than slowing. We should be prepared for new strategic realities to arise, whether we wish them to or not.

The Author: Dr Rod Lyon is Programme Director (Strategy and International) at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Before taking up this post, he was a senior lecturer in international relations at the University of Queensland where he taught courses on conflict, international security, and civil-military relations. His current research focuses on a range of problems associated with global security, nuclear strategy and Australian security. [Photo of Dr Lyon: Colonel J M Hutcheson, MC]