

Interview - Simon Long

Written by E-International Relations

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Simon Long edits the Finance and Economics section of The Economist. Previously for six years he was based in Singapore and wrote “Banyan”, a weekly column on Asia. Before that, he worked in London for four years, as the magazine’s Asia editor, and for four years prior to that as South Asia bureau chief based in Delhi. He joined The Economist in 1995, as South-East Asia correspondent, based in Bangkok and in 1998 he returned to London for an earlier stint as finance and economics editor. Previously Mr Long spent nine years with the BBC, as an analyst on East Asian affairs based in London, as Beijing correspondent from 1989-91, and Hong Kong correspondent from 1993. He wrote extensively for the Guardian newspaper, and many other outlets. In an earlier career as an investment banker, with Morgan Grenfell, he worked in London and Singapore. Mr Long was educated at University College School, London; Trinity College Cambridge; Beijing Languages Institute; Nanjing University; Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Boston (as a Harkness Fellow).

How was Asia changing – socio-politically and economically – during the time you spent there?

The biggest part of the answer to your question comes from the question itself about what is Asia. It is a topic that I have been somewhat preoccupied with. I had a job as an Asia editor and wrote a column called Banyan out of Singapore which was supposed to cover events in Asia. We, at The Economist, are quite clear here on what Asia means as a geographical concept. Its borders are in the West between Pakistan and Iran, and in the North between the Central Asian Republics and Russia, to the East it extends to Japan and we include Australia and New Zealand in the South. Now, this is just a cartographical concept. It is not a unified area.

It is not like Europe where you can see a common history and a certain common culture. Asia is far more diverse. Part of the problem came when we looked to name the column. What were we going to call it? We have a column on Britain called Bagehot, named after a Victorian editor of The Economist. We have a column on Europe called Charlemagne. For Asia, the only equivalent would be Genghis Khan. Probably not a very good name for a column. We started looking for symbols and came up with rice. However, there are wheat-growing parts in Asia. Tea does not neatly work either. Asia is very diverse and the big names for the columns would either be Sino-centric or Indo-centric. To get something that covered both, we got Banyan, a tree which grows in Southeast Asia, South Asia and to a certain extent in bits of China. In Japan, it does not mean much. So, one of the biggest socio-political changes that happened during my stay is that Asia is starting to cohere more as a region because of the growth and more outward looking nature of China and India, the latter to a lesser extent. It does make more sense now to talk of Asia not just as a cartographical concept but more of a region.

How do you envision the development of bilateral relations between China and Japan in the near future?

It will continue to be tense and fraught. I think that whatever happens in Japanese politics we are unlikely to go back to the brief period when the Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) government made an effort to build bridges and make friends with China. However, Japan realises that it is dependent on China. It needs to co-exist with it but is deeply suspicious of its strategic intentions on its own territories – particularly in the Senkaku islands, but even further to Okinawa and Ryuku islands. In the international sphere, Japan is also hostile to China and sees itself as leading an anti-China coalition. It is unlikely that they will join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank but it will be a leading

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figure in the efforts to revive the Quad (US, Japan, India and Australia). So, I don't see good things. Nevertheless, I don't think it is likely to result in conflict because China in the East China Sea, as in the South China Sea, is becoming adept at pushing as far as it can without provoking conflict. China has been establishing facts on the ground in the East China Sea since 2012 and if it ever comes to it, has as much control over the Senkaku islands as Japan does.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) celebrated its 50th anniversary this year. How central is ASEAN to the regional architecture?

ASEAN has managed very adeptly and admirably to put itself at the centre of a whole lot of regional arrangements. However, this has been done partly because it does not have the power to influence and persuade the big powers to do what it wants. The competition between China and America, assuming that it continues, will pose continued difficulties for ASEAN. There will always be a spectrum of countries in Southeast Asia, some hostile and others friendly to China. At one time, it was Thailand on one end and Indonesia on the other. Now, you have got Cambodia on one end and I am not sure who will be on the other end. It could be Vietnam. However, ASEAN will always be torn on these issues and consensus will be harder and to the lowest common denominator.

The remaining 11 members of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) recently agreed to move ahead on a slightly revised trade pact – the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the TPP – without the United States. What could be the strategic and economic impacts of the CPTPP?

The TPP was always more important strategically and symbolically than economically. The ASEAN-centred Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has far more to offer economically because most of TPP is under the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). With RCEP, there are huge India-China tariffs that could be removed. So, what TPP-11 means in economic terms, I am not sure. What it means symbolically comes back to the question on Japan and how we see it. It is another way in which Japan is becoming an American sheriff, marshalling the region behind the goals that previous American administrations have traditionally upheld but the Trump administration seems not to have.

Is there an occasionally thorny nature to the relationship between governments in Asia and the Western media?

I will say that this relationship exists in some parts of Asia, not all. There is a genuine conflict and clash between Western journalists who see the need to expose government and injustices. Some Western journalists have a prejudice in favour of openness, in favour of self-determination and democratic freedoms. When those prejudices are not shared by the host government they are going to inevitably come into conflict. Occasionally some evangelism is fair criticism. At other times, it is unfair as journalists are simply pursuing their own ideals in a different cultural setting. Sometimes, it is not even a different culture but a different political system.

The tide has turned a bit in the past few years. It did seem to many of my generation, that we were going to win the argument, particularly in Asia. I look back at my career in journalism and we saw dictatorships fall in Philippines in 1986, South Korea in 1987, Taiwan in 1990, Thailand in 1992 and Indonesia in 1998. There were uprisings for reform in a number of other places, for instance, Malaysia in 1998. Two popular uprisings that did not succeed were in Burma (1988) and China (1989). And those seemed like exceptions to the rule. Even then, they were probably exceptions that were not durable. The only reason why the uprisings failed was because the armies were prepared to shoot as many people as it took. In the other places, the armies were not prepared to do that just as they were not prepared to do it in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. There was a tide of democratisation then in Asia.

What are your thoughts on the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar?

Myanmar and Bangladesh have signed an agreement on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees who fled Rakhine state. I spent quite a lot of time in Rakhine state in 2012 during the unrest there. I have never been anywhere so depressing. You have two communities who absolutely would have nothing to do with the other. There are two

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choices. One is that Rohingyas don't settle their future in camps, go back to Rakhine state and essentially have the same future there in what will be camps or open camps but with partitions or no contact. The other choice is that the Rohingyas are resettled elsewhere but this is not going to happen. So, I do not see any good outcome.

I have found much of the reporting of the crisis depressingly ignorant. This is not excuse in any way for Aung San Suu Kyi's position on it. However, partly, there has been an unfairness in criticising her for not being the icon that she never said she was but rather the politician she professed to be. Also, some journalists have partly not understood how much she is hemmed in by the army. In one sense, what has happened is that the army, as they tried in the early 1990s, are getting rid of a minority that they along with virtually every other Burman and every other member of the recognised minorities in Myanmar considers to be illegal immigrants. Today, they are trying it again with Aung San Suu Kyi as cover. It is a horrible situation and I cannot see how it will end.

The other factor that is missed out in the reporting is that the important people in Rakhine are not the Rohingyas. The other minority in Rakhine are the Arakanese who are as suspicious of the Burmans as the Rohingyas in many ways. The real worry is that they will go back to fighting.

How can journalists ensure that the news they report is reliable and credible? Meanwhile, how can journalists stem the scourge of “fake news” that is disseminated by governments?

On the second question, I am not sure we can. On the first question, the basic journalistic principle of checking things remains important. One of the first things I was taught as a journalist when I joined the BBC was that we can only report something if it comes from our own correspondent who knows and sees it. Or, you have two independent sources. Quite often, that will be the AP and Reuters. If you look at the Associated Press and Reuters, they will be relying on the same source. This sort of laxity is something we have to be careful about. Some of the reporting on the Rohingya crisis in the early days *were* very third hand.

In 2012, I was reporting from the ancient capital of Rakhine when it was the kingdom of Arakan, Mrauk-u. It was one of the most depressing things I did as a journalist. When I got there, I climbed up a mountain and saw that there was a smoke nearby. I walked down and discovered that Rohingya villages were being set on fire. You could see militia armies going out with axes and swords, hunting down Muslims. Apparently, a fight broke out the night before and somebody got killed when he or she was trying to sell rice in Mrauk-u to a villager. During this time, the militia was trying to starve them out. I could imagine that terrible things were happening but it was impossible to report because there was no mobile phone or internet connection. So, in those circumstances, it is very tempting to report very plausible sounding atrocities that people are reporting to you without actually knowing. There was some of that during the early days of the Rohingya crisis. Some misreporting on TV by using some old footage also took place. This was the reason why even Aung San Suu Kyi started using the term “fake news”.

How best can a student prepare for a career in journalism?

Practise writing! As a student, I was always writing and prior to working as a journalist, I was a banker and used to write a lot then too. Also, read a lot and all kinds of books.

What advice would you give to journalists reporting in Asia?

I would recommend learning languages to any foreign correspondent. The other thing for any foreign correspondent to have is humility. In some ways you are a guest in the foreign country that you don't know best. The preconceptions and prejudices you bring, even if you don't recognise it, will have to be questioned the whole time.

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This interview was conducted by Bhargav Sriganesh. Bhargav is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.