

Are We Entering an "Asian Century?": The Possibility of a New International Order

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KEITA KAWAKITA, JUL 4 2020

Asia has been increasing its influence in the world, largely, because of China's exceptional economic growth. A creative study of the global economy's center of gravity, which indicates the average location of economic activity across geographies, showcases that though, in 1980, that center of gravity was the mid-Atlantic, by 2008, it had moved to the east of Helsinki, and, by 2050, it is predicted to be located between India and China (Quah, 2011). This favorable economic prediction, combined with the arguable decline of the West, is propelling quite a few international relations scholars into advancing the argument that we are entering an "Asian Century". Some of them go so far as to contend that China will rule the world. However, a strong economy is just one of the requisites for the "Century." Luce (1941), who coined the term "American Century," laid out the important factors needed to realize the American Century: the American economy, American ideals, and responsibility for leading the entire world. In addition to those three factors, most importantly, structural advantages within the US-led liberal international order enabled the American Century. Even if China had a preponderance of the total economic size over the US in the future, China could not create a China-led international order in which China and other states enjoy economic, political, and social prosperity due to China's intrinsic political issues and external factors.

In this essay, I argue that we are not entering an Asian Century because Asia lacks a decisive requisite for the "Asian Century," which is an Asia-led international order in which states, both in and out of Asia, cooperate and benefit economically, politically, and militarily. Asia has been unable to create such an international order due to both internal and external factors. Thus, Asia or China would not rule the world in the foreseeable future. This essay is structured as follows. I first define the "Asian Century." Then, I introduce why creating an Asia-led international order is necessary to realize the "Asian Century." Third, I point out Asia's and China's various obstacles to the realization of the Asia-led international order. Finally, I specify the unparalleled American advantages within the US-led liberal international order, which enable American predominance and preclude the realization of the "Asian Century."

What is the "Asian Century"?

The term "Asian Century" should be more than just an economic concept. The concept of the "Asian Century" is often considered as an era of economic prosperity in Asia. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Asian share of global GDP is predicted to reach 52 percent by 2050 (Kohli, 2011). This narrow focus on the economic aspect, however, overlooks a significant fact. China and India were the world's largest economies in 1870. However, China was humiliated by Western countries and Japan, and India became a colony of Britain at the time (Beckley, 2012). This negative experience leads us to the more comprehensive definition of the "Asian Century," which is an era in which Asia enjoys economic, political, and social preponderance without enormous conflicts. Considering China's rapidly increasing economic potential, the possibility of the "Chinese Century" will also be explored. Based on the above definition, the "Asian Century" has not been attained yet.

The Necessity of an Asia-led or China-led International Order to Realize the "Asian Century"

Creating an Asia-led or China-led international order is imperative for Asia to realize the "Asian Century." In terms of the economic aspect, though China and India have been expanding their economy in the US-led liberal international

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order, as the ADB points out, whether they will overcome the possible middle-income trap is uncertain unless they create their own international order to preclude the hindrance. Moreover, creating their own international order will be instrumental in boosting the Asian economy in the long run without heavily relying on US assistance, which might be suspended due to a possible political conflict. Furthermore, the US-led international order prevents China from achieving political preponderance.

Liberal pessimists contend that there is a clear contradiction between the existing liberal international order and the Chinese political regime (Yamaguchi, 2016). Not only China but also Vietnam and Singapore still have nondemocratic regimes. Since it does not seem like the Chinese political regime will change in the foreseeable future, constructing an international order, which affirms a wide variety of regimes, including the Chinese political regime, is crucial for China in achieving Chinese political preponderance and positively influencing other countries regardless of ideological differences. Most importantly, in the US-led order, Chinese influence in the First World will have limitations because those fully developed countries do not support the Chinese style of governance, which contradicts the US-led liberal international order's major objectives. Thus, the achievement of the "Asian Century" has a long way to go.

Internal Obstacles Within Asia to the Realization of the Asia-led or China-led International Order

China and Asia, as a whole, have internal obstacles to the achievement of the new Asia-led international order, which is necessary to the realization of the "Asian Century." To influence other countries or to create a new order, power is essential. Nye (2019) argues that power has three aspects: coercion, payment, and attraction. First, in terms of payment, Chinese economic power, based on GDP per capita, is not comparable with that of America. As of June 2019, the US is 6.38 times higher than China in terms of GDP (nominal) per capita. The fact that China still has numerous poor citizens in rural areas showcases that the country does not have a capacity to create its own international order. Second, in terms of coercion, China also falls behind the US. Chinese military expenditure is currently four times lower than that of the US. Moreover, China has much fewer allies than the US, and those Chinese allies are either poor or politically undesirable (Cox, 2011). Nor does the third aspect of power, attraction, give China a favorable position. In soft power, China was ranked 27th, whereas the US was ranked 4th in 2018 (Portland Consultancy, 2018). Hence, the less powerful Chinese military power, combined with few allies and weak projection of soft power, cannot provoke other countries to help construct the China-led international order.

Asian countries also have many conflicts rooted in territorial and historical issues. China and India, the two most populous and geographically expansive states, still have unsettled borders and territorial disputes (Lieber, 2014). The relationship between Japan and South Korea, two neighboring countries, has also suffered, owing to contradictory understandings of historical events. These ongoing disputes will make the creation of the Asia-led international order unlikely. Thus, unless these internal issues are resolved, the region cannot achieve an Asia-led or China-led international order, which is vital for the realization of the "Asian Century."

The US-led Liberal International Order and American Preeminence

The US will arguably continue to rule the world within the US-led liberal international order, which would make the "Asian Century" even more difficult to achieve. The US-led liberal international order has allowed the US to flourish and remain first. However, America has to exercise leadership and pay the costs in blood and treasure to maintain the existing order (Stokes, 2018). Nevertheless, the US has been exercising leadership to keep the order, and it would continue to do so.

This ambivalence can be explained by hegemonic stability theory, which contends that the international system is likely to be stabilized when a single country is a dominant power within the system (Stokes, 2018). Stokes (2018) argues that US hegemony is best understood by considering the US as a structurally advantaged hegemon. He argues that the hegemon gains positional advantages in the system without coercion because the hegemon can provide global public goods while reinforcing its position by acquiring resources from the rest of the countries and reinvesting them to help strengthen its hegemony. One of the positional advantages that the US enjoys is dollar hegemony by which America does not have to worry about foreign exchange reserves (Stokes, 2018). Moreover, US-

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led international security regimes influence other countries to conduce to American economic interests. President Donald Trump, however, seems to disregard the international order due to the costs of maintaining it. Yet, as America still holds unparalleled advantages within the order, the US-led liberal international order will remain, and America will continue to rule the world, as endorsed by hegemonic stability theory. Thus, Asia or China would not easily replace the US, much less the US-led liberal international order.

Conclusion

Although Asia has been and will probably be expanding its total economic size, the "Asian Century" is now improbable because the region lacks the foundations to realize the Asia-led or China-led order, which, I argued, are essential for the realization of the "Asian Century." Internal obstacles within Asia and China, combined with American strengths, are further hindering the realization of the "Asian Century." This essay has assumed that China needs to be a revisionist if the country seeks to accomplish its "Century." Yet, it is still unclear whether Asia or China really wants to achieve its "Century" or maintain the status quo.

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