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The importance of Asia

By Aidan Foster-Carter

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The turn of the year is a season to reflect on what went before and what the new year may bring. Peace on earth, goodwill to all men? Tell that to suffering Syrians, and a myriad others in Asia and beyond where peace and goodwill, let alone good cheer, are but a distant dream. My hippie generation vowed to bring peace and love. How miserably and utterly we've failed.

Having reached the autumn of my years also encourages reflection. There's a great line in *Northern Exposure*, still my favorite TV show ever: "But Doc, I'm 62. My life is half over!"

I'm 66, and can count. My father died at 67, so I'm hoping my mother's genes (she made 91) are dominant. At this age you think harder - I do, anyway - and differently from when young.

In many ways I'm glad to be this old - saw the Beatles and Bob Marley, marched for Vietnam. And in the West we post-World War II boomers have done very nicely "before the state withdrew her tit and became a scold" - as Ian McEwen mordantly but accurately put it (in *Amsterdam*).

Even as we let it all hang out, we feathered our future nests nicely with final-salary pensions: something our children, and theirs, will never enjoy. Class war, sex war, race war - but who expected a generation war? Few saw this coming. Life would always just go on getting better.

Not so. In Asia as in Europe, future prosperity now hinges less on outmoded grand slogans -

Communism! Capitalism! - than demographic projections and actuarial fine-tuning: the size of the labor force, dependency ratios etc. Dull stuff, yet the difference between riches and poverty.

Colonialism: Good riddance

Half a century ago, the world seemed, and was, so different. Another reason I'm glad to be the age I am is because I remember colonialism - without nostalgia, I hasten to add. (It helped to have a proudly Irish mother, who as a scared child saw British troops break the door down.)

Indeed, I experienced colonialism. Sent by Amnesty to what was then Ian Smith's Rhodesia in 1966, soon after its illegal declaration of independence, I was swiftly expelled and found my way to a more benign variant: the Bechuanaland Protectorate, soon to become Botswana. There, I taught Latin among other things, thus doing my bizarre bit for Western civilization.

Enraptured by Africa before I knew Asia, the next year I took a boat (a boat!) from Marseille to Dakar, then travelled overland and by river across west and central Africa all the way to Kinshasa. Timbuktu, known to all, and Maiduguri in Nigeria - known to few before it gave birth to Boko Haram, aka the Congregation of the People of Tradition for Proselytism and Jihad - were among the places I visited. I wouldn't dream of doing this now, and you probably couldn't.

Decolonization and the debates thereon were still fresh. I read *The Colonial Reckoning*, the book of the 1961 BBC Reith Lectures - an annual series which remains a lodestar of British intellectual life - by the Oxford historian Dame Margery Perham. (Wonders of technology: you can still listen to this!) Forgotten now, Perham was an intriguing and influential figure.

But even then as a teenager, I found the whole premise intolerably patronizing: that one race - a word we use less now than in those days - could arrogantly sit in judgment on another, and deign to judge whether "natives" might yet be fit to govern in their own lands. Bloody cheek.

Thankfully, we've all long since moved on, yet the scars still linger. The anti-Western animus that inspired men like Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad or Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew surely derives in part from the anti-colonial struggles of their youth and the racism they experienced.

Anger is an energy, as the Sex Pistols sang. Today's Singapore is infinitely more advanced than its British rulers left it, half a century ago. All credit to Singaporeans for that, and Lee.

Does Asia exist?

Which brings me to something else Lee values: Asia and Asianism. It's sometimes said that Asia doesn't really exist as a single, natural unit. There's some truth in that. Europe, more compact, has a largely common history and shared culture. Ditto the Americas, North and South; and also Africa - or at least sub-Saharan Africa: *Afrique noire*, as the French call it.

In contrast, sprawling Asia isn't just one place, but at least five. Northeast Asia, southeast Asia, south Asia, central Asia, west Asia (aka the "Middle East", ethnocentrically): each of these is a more tangible entity, historically geographically and culturally, than Asia taken as a whole.

Yet as a wise sociologist said - W I Thomas, since you ask - if people think something is real, then it is real in its consequences. Going back to the anti-colonial struggles of yesteryear, the bolder spirits thought big: dreaming of not just free countries, but free and united continents. Let's call them Pans: not the god, nor Peter, but pan-Americanism, pan-Africanism and so on.

A noble vision, if doomed to fail. Simon Bolivar was the first. In our own time, his ambition was shared by his epigone Hugo Chavez, if mainly as an excuse to meddle in his neighbors' affairs. Bolivar was a true prophet, Chavez a false one. That's another hare we've no space to chase here, but see here for some debate and fireworks.

More than a century after Bolivar, pan-Africanism looked a better bet. This was a core belief of figures like Kwame Nkrumah, the first leader of Ghana: itself the first African colony (it had been the Gold Coast) to regain independence, in 1957. But again it failed. The one union that was tried, between Senegal and what is now Mali, collapsed in acrimony after two months.

And pan-Asianism? A distinctly mixed bag. It doesn't help that this was the slogan used by imperial Japan to try to rally anti-Western sentiment in Asia. Apart from rare exceptions such as India's fascinating Subhas Chandra Bose, few were fooled - or keen to swap one imperialism for another. Is being ruled by other Asians any better than being ruled by Europeans? Koreans would disagree.

Not long after, but with quite different anti-colonial wellsprings and wider in vision, came the Afro-Asian Conference, held in 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia. Africa was hardly represented, but this was a precursor of what would become the Non-Aligned Movement. The NAM still limps on today, though the end of the Cold War surely undermined its main *raison d'être*.

As for Afro-Asianism, its flame flickers on in the name of the distinguished Malaysian social scientist Jomo Kwame Sundaram: born in 1952, no doubt to laudably internationalist parents. Are there others similarly named?

Such a spirit is rare now. Perhaps it's more realistic to seek unity at lower levels: mini-pans? The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the obvious case. But compared with Europe, which in a few decades has moved from a loose economic community to an ever-closer union - too tight for some, though not me, ASEAN seems a slow and cautious body, its members unwilling to yield any real sovereignty.

Stupid squabbles

Yet Southeast Asia is in better shape than Northeast Asia. It's so sad to see three states as important and dynamic as China, Japan and South Korea squabbling like school kids about stupid little rocks. These countries have a painful history, true. But why sacrifice the promise and gains of a shared future to pick endlessly at the wounds of a past which can't be changed, but which can and must be moved on from? In Europe we have taken this lesson to heart: why can't Northeast Asia?

Indeed, those in the West who still think in Spenglerian terms - like Asia Times' eponymous columnist - must rejoice to see countries that could be so powerful if they acted in concert dissipating their might in pointless quarrels. Actual conflict, not impossible, would be tragic.

You'll gather I don't take a zero-sum view of the world. On the contrary, though no longer the silly left-winger I used to be - capitalism, for all its faults, is far better at unifying and developing the world than some illusory socialism - the ideals of my youth still burn bright.

So I rejoice at how well Asia is in fact doing, on several counts. It's an unmitigated good that recent decades have seen hundreds of millions of once poor people attain a degree of prosperity. Millions more remain mired in poverty, so the struggle to end that scourge must continue.

This has also made our world more equal. I'm glad the West no longer rules the roost, and all civilizations now command the respect they deserve. We have a lot to learn from each other.

But there are some universals, such as freedom. When Lee Kuan Yew claimed "Asian values" were different, it was a fellow Asian - Korea's Nelson Mandela, the late great Kim Dae-jung, who knew dictatorship from the sharp end - who famously put him straight. With China now inheriting the authoritarian mantle and preaching it as a virtue, Kim's firm rebuttal is still a necessary antidote and a damn good read.

Some see this as Asia's century. Personally, I'll be lucky to see more than a third of it, but I hope that turns out to be true. I trust the steady spread of prosperity will continue, in Asia and beyond - especially to Africa - and that this can somehow be done without destroying the environment. That's another betrayal of our children: one we are far, as yet, from resolving.

Yet my fear is that some of Asia will regress into needless conflict. Besides Northeast Asia - and I didn't even mention ineffable, incorrigible North Korea - the flashpoints are familiar, including India/Pakistan and the entire tinderbox from AfPak west as far as - Libya?

One way to try to avoid disaster is to create and hold fast to a sense of something bigger and more important. That, surely, is what Asia Times Online is all about. Memories are short these days, so some readers may not even be aware of the vision that underlay its launch back in 1995. Like Al Jazeera later, the idea was to create a non-Western media source that would cover and unify a particular region and also give voice to a different point of view, indeed many.

Alas, amid rapidly changing technology 1995 was not the time to launch a print newspaper. That folded in 1997, but Asia Times Online has proved a worthy successor. I'm biased, of course, having the honor of featuring in these pages. But I'm also sincere. Asia is important, and Asia Times Online does a valuable job not only of informing the world but also thereby building a sense of Asia and Asianness, for Asians and non-Asians alike. Long may it do so.