

WORLD AFFAIRS JAN – MAR - 1997 VOL1 NO1

NEW ALIGNMENTS, NEW REALITIES EAST ASIA IN THE POST-COLD WAR SETTING

TON THAT THIEN

The demise of Soviet Union and the withdrawal of the western World has resulted in a completely new geo-political situation for the nations of East Asia. Under these conditions, the countries of the region are working to establish effective models of economic development and political systems, without compromising their distinct cultural identities.

THE WEIGHT OF THE PAST

In East Asia¹, as in all of Asia, people of the past two generations were obsessed with two words which evoked their two deepest aspirations as well the major tasks confronting their nations: “independence “ and “modernisation”

“Independence” possessed a strong motivational force psychologically and politically. It expressed the burning desire to be completely free from Western domination, direct or indirect. “Modernisation” conveyed the volition to establish a modern state possessing power and capable of giving the people a better life-improved living conditions, freedom, social justice and a distinct cultural identity- through the use of the most up-to-date science and technology as well as ideas.

Clearly, full national sovereignty and independence is the precondition of such a modernisation, for it means the complete freedom to make strategic decisions on national orientations and to use the national resources exclusively for the benefit of the people without any dictation, constraint or influence by foreign powers.

However, because of their inherent weaknesses, the East Asian nations could not achieve independence alone. They had to seek outside support. This inevitably drew them into the vortex of international politics. As a result, the achievement of independence did not quite depend on their will. The degree, the manner and especially the moment of its occurrence became contingent on the geo-political situation of the world.

Until World War I, Western domination remained practically unchangeable. Independence was therefore out of the question. After 1918, high hopes were raised by the promises of self-determination of peoples, only to be dashed, as, more than ever, the big powers indulged cynically in realpolitik.

¹ East Asia here is composed of the countries lying on the eastern part of the Asian continent: Korea-North and South-Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea (Cambodia), Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, Burma

World War II, with the proclamation of the Atlantic Charter and the establishment of the United Nations, raised the East Asian nations' hopes again. But, at the end of this war, while Japan lay prostrate, China was still kept in the position of a junior partner of the United States, and the rest of East Asia, composed of colonies of the West, did not obtain immediate independence.

The above situation was followed by the onset of the Cold War. Once again, the achievement of independence of the East Asian nations was delayed, for, in a new international geo-political setting characterised by bipolarity, willy nilly, these nations had to choose allies, or had alliances imposed upon them by the two main contenders-the US and the Soviet Union-the two new opposing world power centres, which also represented opposing ideologies.

In this new geopolitical-ideological situation the struggles for independence took a violent form. These were also civil wars, with their economic and political destabilising effects. They hindered the achievement of independence and forced shelving or a considerable slowing down on "modernisation". This situation was resolved only in December 1989, 'when the end of the Cold War was formalised at the Gorbachev-Bush meeting at Malta. On the other hand, Gorbachev introduced vast changes in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union which eventually led to the incapacitation of the Party and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself in December 1992.

The above events naturally had profound effects on the nations of East Asia. For the Communist states -China, North Korea, Vietnam- a vast part of the world communist edifice, including its "impregnable fortress", now lay in ruins. For all, the end of the Cold War meant that from now on they were no longer coerced, or even solicited, to choose sides. For the first time in 100 years, for better or for worse, they had achieved real independence: they were completely free to decide their national orientations, define their national identities and determine their place and their role in the world.

Freedom brought with it problems, some of them related to the past, some of them related to the present and the future.

The end of the Cold War placed the nations of East Asia in a new situation in which they not only could, but had to, exercise full sovereignty and independence, this time in full freedom, without constraints of any kind and from any source, as the Soviet Union was out of the picture and the West, tired of shouldering obligations, was only too happy not to interfere, or even to offer counsel and aid. They were forced to solve their problems entirely by their own means.

Once the problem of "independence" had been solved, they were forced to turn their attention to that of "modernisation", i.e. deal with four kinds of problems: national security and power; welfare and economic development; government and political system; cultural identity.

THE NEW GEO-POLITICAL SETTING AND THE CHINA FACTOR

The concern for national security had to be addressed in a new geo-political setting. As the Soviet Union vanished from the East Asian scene and as the US, with no Soviet challenge to meet in the

area, receded into the background, China's profile rose considerably. In fact it has become a key factor to be reckoned with in the area. In the new geo-political, multi-polar world, for the East Asian nations, the main threat to their security now is obviously China, because, only it has the capability of projecting its power far and wide beyond its borders, and historically this is what it has done. The situation can be summed up in two words: *Chung Kuo* (Middle Kingdom), which carry with them China's old claim to be the centre of a world. Furthermore, until it was rolled back by the Western nations in the mid 19th century, as late as the 1880s, China had presided over a vast empire covering practically all of East Asia, demanding and receiving tributes from its vassal states. Often, the demands were accompanied by the threat of "punishment" in case of non-compliance.

TABLE 1
EAST ASIA: AREAS AND POPULATIONS (1994-1995)

COUNTRIES	AREAS (Square kilometers)	POPULATIONS (millions)
China	9,600,000	1,173
Japan	377,000	124
N. Korea	182,762	23
S. Korea	99,263	45
SOUTH EAST ASIA		
Vietnam	327,000	72
Laos	231,000	4
Kampuchea	181,000	9
Thailand	514,000	54
Malaysia	329,589	19
Indonesia	1,904,345	191
Singapore	587	4
Philippines	299,700	65
Brunei	5,765	-
Burma	670,000	42
TOTAL SOUTH EAST ASIA	4,462,986	460
TOTAL EAST ASIA	11,392,411	1,825

(Source: Compiled from The Statement Year book 1995-1996)

If figures speak louder than words, then the figures in Table 1 are a pointed reminder of the new geo-political realities in East Asia.

The Chinese leaders have repeatedly declared that China harboured no hegemonistic designs but its actual behaviour has contradicted those declarations. The Chinese government has laid claims to two-thirds (800,000 sq km) of the seas stretching from northern Taiwan to as far south as Malaysia, 1,000 Km from China's southernmost sea shores with the intent, as one Singapore paper

put it,² of turning this area into "a Chinese lake". Beijing has not hesitated to use force to back those claims. Twice, in 1974 and 1988, its naval forces attacked Vietnamese naval forces off the Paracels and Spratly Islands causing loss of lives to the Vietnamese.

In recent years China has maintained a very militant position regarding those claims. In February 1992, the National People's Congress, using what the Chinese Foreign Ministry called "a normal domestic legislative process"³, passed the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Its Territorial Waters and Contiguous Areas" to give a stronger legal basis to those claims. More recently, in March 1996 during the Taiwanese presidential elections, the Chinese put on an impressive show of force in the Taiwan Strait, interdicting navigation in that area, treating it as its home waters.

Militarily, as the figures in Table 2 show clearly, China dwarfs all the other nations of East Asia. What is more remarkable, or rather more disquieting, for the other nations of the region are that China has been making very great efforts to modernise its armed forces, especially its navy and air force. This gives it the capability of projecting Chinese power far beyond its borders, especially into the South Seas, to enforce its territorial claims there. The People's Liberation Army has ended its tradition of making the infantry its main component and has entered a new stage of modernisation featuring special units. The Army, air and naval forces and strategic missile units have been enlarged. Ground forces have been mechanised and motorised.

ARMED FORCES OF EAST ASIAN COUNTRIES (1994-1995)	
COUNTRIES	PERSONEL (000\$)
China	2,930
Japan	236
N. Korea	842
S. Korea	629
SOUTH EAST ASIA	
Vietnam	527
Laos	37
Kampuchea	38
Thailand	249
Malaysia	114
Indonesia	54
Singapore	276
Philippines	116
Brunei	4.5
Burma	136

² *The Straits Times*, July 23, 1992

³ *Beijing Review*, March 30-April 5, 1992

(Source: État du monde 1996, Éditions de la Découverte, Paris Montreal:1996)	

The proportion of "special troops" to ground forces exceeds 70 per cent, and substantive changes have been made in the structure of services and arms. The army has continuously explored new tactics and sought ways to overcome difficulties resulting from bad weather and complicated sea conditions. In the outline of the Ninth Five Year Plan approved in 1996 by the National People's Congress, the long range objectives reaching into 2010 include plans for the Chinese Army to train "crack troops".

The emphasis on enhancing the fighting capacity of the armed forces, especially of the navy and air force, and the vigorous efforts deployed to overcome difficulties posed by weather and sea conditions reflect the desire to back up militarily China's claims in the South Seas. According to the *New York Times*, China has been forming a military force capable of "rapid response" and designed to protect its island claims in the South Seas "as a matter of national priority". It is not surprising, the paper notes, that the man pushing the drive in this direction is Admiral Liu Huaqing, the present chief of the Chinese armed forces, a former commander of the navy and a member of the Politburo.⁴

The reason for the drive is also obvious. China may need more oil than it can count on from its own territory. In fact, 1996 is the first year that China has become a net importer. This preoccupation with assured oil supply was reflected in the leaking of a study in 1992 which stirred up a great deal of emotions.⁵ The study raised the question of *shen cun jung jian* (living space) in connection with the necessity of having control over the South Seas, described as an area rich in resources, especially of oil, whose reserves were put at US \$1 trillion, which should complement China's dwindling resources in the future.

Understandably, the reference to "living space"-which evokes Hitler's *Lebensraum*-scared not only the Vietnamese, whose history is full of wars to thwart the attempted extension of Chinese *lebensraum* to the south, but other East Asians as well. In their memories still lingers the image of Cheng Ho, the great Admiral in the reign of Ming Yung Lo, sailing a huge fleet into the ports of the South Seas at the beginning of the 15th century, demanding vassalage to China from all the local rulers.

Beijing has steadily continued its military build-up. From 1990 it has constantly increased its military budget: by 15 per cent in 1991, 12 per cent in 1992 and 10 per cent annually from 1993 to 1996. It has purchased 24 SU-27 aircrafts from the Soviet Union with the capability of taking off from an aircraft carrier, air-to-air refuelling aircraft from Iran, air-to-air missiles from Israel. It reportedly has been negotiating the purchase of an aircraft carrier from the Ukraine or the former Soviet Union. It has built an air strip on Woody Island in the Paracels - the equivalent of an unsinkable aircraft carrier stationed permanently there; it will thus have the capacity of projecting its power 4000 km to the south.

⁴ *New York Times*. 2 January 1995

⁵ The document was disclosed by the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 12, 1992

China has established a naval infantry brigade with a capability of staying at sea for 30 days, and trained flying crews in deck-landing and flight from simulated carrier deck platform. It has a fleet of 50 submarines, 57 destroyers and frigates and coastal vessels and work has been carried out to transform Hainan Island into a forward naval base. The Russian paper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* disclosed in a long article in June this year that China was buying from Russia *Vashayanka* diesel submarines with noise-free engines.

The same paper discloses that following Boris Yeltsin's visit to Beijing in April 1996, China has received Russian help in strengthening its air and naval capabilities. The Russians are working at secret facilities in China, helping the Chinese to build SU-27 aircraft equipped with the powerful Zhuk radars, giving the Chinese navy protection from the air. The air shipment of 26 SU-27 purchased in December 1990 was delivered in December 1995 and another 22 have been ordered with licence for their manufacture in China. With that, China will have more than 100 modern strike aircrafts by the year 2000 and the facility to replenish this fleet.

Furthermore, the Chinese have purchased SU-300 air defence missile systems, considered "somewhat better" than the American Patriots, and Tsikon missile launchers. They plan also to buy Russian TU-22M strategic bombers that would permit China to acquire an offensive nuclear weapons delivery system. They are also attempting to purchase SS-18 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) from Russia and the Ukraine, "the most powerful of ICBMs that we have in our inventory that are capable of carrying independent nuclear warheads", the paper says. Thus, at the beginning of the next century, China will have at its disposal 50-70 ICBMs capable of delivering a warhead to the European portion of Russia or the west coast of the US. It is modernising its nuclear arsenal, which is larger than that of the French. And finally, it will create a small nuclear warhead for a missile launched from submarine.⁶

SOUTH EAST ASIA AND PAX SINICA

China's military build-up and militancy have naturally disturbed the Southeast Asians greatly and prompted warnings from Southeast Asian geo-political thinkers. Thus, B.A. Hamazah, assistant director of Malaysia's Institute of Strategic Studies, says that those who have put the faith in a Chinese non-hegemonistic foreign policy must have been "stunned" by China's recent moves, which are indications of a reversion to "the Middle Kingdom mentality". Referring to China's aggressive attitude in its dispute with Vietnam, Hamazah says that Beijing's actions "strongly suggest that its ultimate aim is to replace the US and Russia in the region... What we are witnessing is a *Pax Sinica* in the making, in place of the reluctant *Pax Americana* and an impotent Russia. It could well be that China is pushing hard for a power projection capability in the South China Sea, hence the assertiveness... If China persists with its policy, it will reinforce the mistrust and misgivings that some leaders in the region have towards Beijing".⁷ Another scholar, from the Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, wrote that the political message contained in

⁶ *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 5 June 1996, translated and reprinted *FBIS Daily Report*. 5 June 1995

⁷ B.H. Hamazah, "China Strategy", in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 13, 1992

China's attempt to cover geographically almost half of Southeast Asia is that "China should be recognised as the most powerful force in the region... The Chinese threat has become alive again".⁸

The emergence of a Chinese threat to the other nations of East Asia is the natural result of the new geo-political situation resulting from the end of the Cold War and the new policies pursued by the big powers, especially by the US.

With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the bi-polar world has ceased to exist. Its successor state, Russia, considerably weakened in the last two decades preceding 1990 and beset by a host of internal problems, will be in no position to bring its weight to bear on the world political arena, especially in Southeast Asia. The evacuation of Cam Ranh Bay by its navy and air force is symbolic of this state of affairs.

As the Soviet Union and communism have ceased to be the major concern, the US administration has turned its interest to business and trade. As the *New York Times* notes, American diplomacy has become "commercial diplomacy"; the biggest change wrought by Clinton is "the use of America's power to bolster economic growth -even if doing so risks destabilising traditional alliances". Clinton's entourage calls this policy "realistic" and dismisses suggestions that Clinton should make a real effort to provide strategic vision for the world as "stratocrap and globaloney". In an interview with the paper in July 1996, Clinton neatly summed up his administration's policy as "peace through trade, investment and commerce".⁹

Against this background, the Southeast Asian nations cannot expect the US to deploy any umbrella, nuclear or non-nuclear for their protection against China. They could not even take any comfort in the fact that during his visit to Japan and Korea in April 1996, President Clinton declared that "the US will be in the region", for he added, pointedly "as long as it is wanted".¹⁰ In view of what has happened to non-communist Vietnam-which desperately wanted American aid in 1975 but was turned down coldly-and the generally accepted policy of withdrawal from Asia introduced by the Nixon doctrine, concretised by the ease with which the US evacuated Subic Bay, it is difficult to envisage a situation in which the US would rush to the rescue of a South East Asian nation in danger.

Could the nations of Southeast Asia look to Japan as an alternative counterweight to China? After all, Japan obviously has good reasons to be concerned. Indeed, if for decades, in Japanese defense plans, the Soviet Union was viewed as the main threat to Japan, and Japanese defence forces were deployed to meet a threat from the north, since 1992 Japanese planners have found it necessary to redeploy a significant part of these forces in the West to guard against possible attack by China. One could expect Japan to react strongly if China dramatically pushes southwards, and the acquisition of an aircraft carrier would be such a signal. For the time being, and for still some time, however, Japan is in no mood, and in, no position, to confront China. It itself needs protection and enjoys protection from the US, with which it has had defense arrangements going back to the 1950s. These arrangements were quite acceptable, even to a socialist government. And more, they

⁸ *The Straits Times*, August 1, 1992

⁹ *New York Times*, 29 July 1996

¹⁰ The (Toronto) *Globe and Mail*, April 18 April, 1996

were not only renewed, but reinforced during President Clinton's visit to Tokyo in April 1996.

At the same time there are clear indications that, in the face of the Chinese threat, Japan feels that the more the safer. It believes that it is a good policy to strengthen all those who can play a part in resisting China's drive southwards. This explains its interest in strengthening Vietnam economically, and militarily, for Vietnam has the strongest and the most seasoned military force in the region capable of standing up to China. This it has proved well in history, and again, more recently, in 1978-1979 when it inflicted heavy losses on Chinese forces invading Vietnam.

It is thus no surprise that during the visit of Foreign Minister Yukohiko Ikeda to Vietnam in July 1996, Japan increased economic assistance to Vietnam, adding 3.5 billion Yen (US\$ 32.5 million) to the 80.5 billion Yen (US\$ 747.7 million) already granted in March 1995. Japanese investments in Vietnam were second only to Taiwan's, standing at US\$ 2.3 billion. But, more significantly, Japanese officials stressed the desire of Japan to boost political and security links between Tokyo and Hanoi to forge "future-oriented" relations. On that occasion, Vietnamese defence officials were invited to visit Japan.

But the other countries of Southeast Asia do not share Vietnam's attitude towards Japan. They were subjected to a very harsh occupation and many atrocities by the Japanese's forces during World War II and are wary of the resurgence of Japan as a great military power. Like Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore, they feel that "if Japan can carry on with its current policy, leaving security to the Americans... the world will be better off".¹¹

Thus, the fear of a Japanese military resurgence, plus the fact that Japan itself needs protection and is subject to major constitutional constraints regarding the use of Japanese military forces abroad, rules out a reliance of Southeast Asia on Japan as a counterweight to China in the foreseeable future. This means that the Southeast Asian nations, in particular the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), have to face China practically alone and they have to find appropriate ways of coping with this situation. The most logical and practical way would be a three-fold approach: to band together; to tackle the problem collectively, and to broaden their ranks. All three courses are being pursued. Firstly, the member states have been coordinating their defences and holding joint military exercises. Secondly, ASEAN, founded officially in 1967 as an economic cooperation organisation resolutely excluding discussion of all military affairs -has placed security on its agenda as a major item since its meeting of July 1992. And thirdly, its original membership of five has been broadened to include Brunei and even Vietnam, with Laos, Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Myanmar (Burma) given observer status and expected to be admitted in the near future.

The admission of Vietnam, formalised last year, deserves special comment. During the Vietnam Wars, the present Vietnamese regime and the nations forming ASEAN were on opposite sides, the former being communist and the others are inclining towards the "Free World". For many years after 1975, the situation did not change because of the Vietnamese communist leaders' invasion of Kampuchea in 1978. The situation eased after Vietnam's withdrawal from this country in 1989, and still more, with its adoption of a policy of opening to the world. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was left with no choice other than seeking some form of cooperation, and

¹¹ Lee Kwan Yew: in conversation with F. Zackaria, see Foreign Affairs March-April 1994

eventually of association, with ASEAN. The present leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party decided to seek admission to this organisation. Vietnam was granted observer status in 1992 and full membership in 1995, earlier than expected.

ASEAN's decision to admit Vietnam was not dictated by any consideration of political or social congeniality, or of economic and commercial necessity, as Vietnam was socialist and much less developed than the rest of the organisation. The other members were believers in capitalism and Vietnam occupied only a small part of their international trade. The membership of Vietnam, would bring into the organisation a first class military force of over half a million regular troops, plus 1.4 million paramilitary forces, all proven seasoned fighters, especially from a country with considerable experience in resisting Chinese invasion, the most recent demonstration of which being the war against China in 1978-1979. Moreover, geographically Vietnam would represent the first line of defence of an enlarged ASEAN. The Vietnamese forces would keep the Chinese forces 1000 kilometres from the nearest borders of the original ASEAN nations giving them time for perfecting their defences, seeking support and awaiting the eventual arrival of rescuing forces, American or other. Thus, the new world geo-political situation has produced new alignments in East Asia.

POLITICS VS ECONOMICS

The next problem the East Asian nations have to deal with is the search for good working model of economic development, for sound political systems and for appealing cultural identities. These problems are more complex, more elusive, but, in the long term, their satisfactory solution is more important in so far as durable stability and real progress are concerned.

The most important of these problems is economic development, whose solution is the key to enhancing the power of a nation and the welfare of its people.

In the past five decades, the countries of the region have chosen different paths ranging from rigid Soviet Stalinist style of socialism to liberal capitalism.

In the years immediately following the end of World War II, the three communist countries-China, North Vietnam, and North Korea followed closely the Soviet Stalinist model. But while Communist Korea and Vietnam clung to that model until recently, China began to break away from it, by adopting a more pragmatic policy under Deng Xiaoping based on the principle that "what matters about a cat is not his colour but his ability to catch mice".

The "Dengist" model, which should guide China "for the next 100 years" advocates using capitalist features for the realisation of socialism. According to Deng Xiaoping, China should not be afraid of introducing too many capitalist features and of taking the capitalist road. The real criterion should primarily be whether it promotes the growth of the productive forces and improves people's standards.

With regard to Vietnam, following closely Ho Chi Minh's teachings, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) leadership applied the Stalinist-Maoist model, to the North before 1975 and to the whole country thereafter. But when faced, in 1980, with undeniable disaster followed by the

spectacular crash of the Third Five Year Plan (1976-1980), it was forced to revise its policies, abandon "voluntarism", relax bureaucratic control and adopt more and more features of the free market economy, in particular, tolerance of "non-socialist" production (allowing the existence of private producers) and opening up to the outside world.

The above concessions to free enterprise moved the country more and more away from socialism. The collapse of the Soviet Union, which shook the faith of many cadres and members, made a reversal to orthodox socialism practically impossible. It drove away not only the people, but also party members and cadres, so that, today, there is general recognition that in Vietnam, socialism is but an empty shell and in its place there has sprung up a kind of savage capitalism, covered by corrupt members of CPV working hand-in-glove with crooked business people. Paradoxically, this is the consequence of the Party leadership clinging to "pure" Marxism-Leninism as the best way to guard against "peaceful evolution"-meaning the suppression of socialism by peaceful means being plotted by capitalist foreign powers -and to prevent the penetration of "flies and mosquitoes" social evils of decadent capitalism- which would enter the country together with bourgeois liberalisation.

Little need be said about Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. They have followed the capitalist road, avoiding the obstacles, which have hampered sound economic development, as in China and Vietnam, and achieving spectacular successes. They are among the "Asian tigers", the others being Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, which have followed similar policies and achieved similar spectacular successes.

Of the remaining states, Indonesia stands somewhere between the rigid state control system of Communist Vietnam and the free enterprise economies of Malaysia and Singapore. Laos has not been much in the limelight. It has been under the strong influence of Vietnam, but has pursued a less radically marxist course. Kampuchea, after the Pol Pot episode, followed by the Vietnamese invasion and internecine war, then UN intervention, presents an unclear picture, except for one thing: the country has been undergoing a phase of development which shows strong indications of savage capitalism. Only Myanmar (Burma) stands out: unlike any other Southeast Asian nation, it has isolated itself completely from the outside world for decades. Only recently have there appeared signs of a loosening up, as the country prepares to join ASEAN.

For the time being, with the exception of North Korea, which is reported to be going through a severe economic crisis, and Myanmar (Burma), whose economic development has been stifled by years of almost hermetic isolation from the outside world by a not very enlightened military dictatorship, the nations of the region have experienced a remarkable growth. During the period 1971-1990, economic growth in the East Asian region was of the order of 6.8 percent; double that of the world average of 3.4 per cent. During 1992, average growth in China, in "the four small dragons" (Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore) and in the ASEAN countries was 8.6 percent and this rate has been maintained, or surpassed since then. Even Vietnam has joined this remarkable group with a growth rate reaching more than 8 per cent during the 1992-1995 period (8.6 per cent in 1992, 8.1 percent in 1993, 8.8 per cent and 9.6 per cent in 1995).

As a result, the peoples of these countries have seen a dramatic increase in their incomes: from a general average of US\$ 60 a year in the 1960s, these are now 60 to 50 times or more, higher. As the above figures suggest, East Asian nations have experienced considerable growth and this

tendency is expected to continue well into the twenty-first century. But the big question remains: what pattern of development will the East Asian nations eventually settle on as the most appropriate in the medium and distant future? The answer to this question is bound with that of the choice of their political systems, as well as the need to find cultural identities recognised as distinctive, attractive and modern.

IS CULTURE DESTINY?

Apart from Japan, and to a lesser extent, the Philippines and Thailand, none of the ruling elites of the region favour a really democratic government based on liberalism as in the West. They all exert tight control may be more or less totalitarian, more so in countries which have espoused communism like China and Vietnam -and less so in countries which had been British colonies-like Malaysia and Singapore. The governments of the region have steadfastly rejected Western suggestions that they accept political liberalisation and show respect for human rights.

The main arguments invoked for the rejection are: as sovereign states, they brook no interference in their internal affairs; each country has different traditions, different needs and should adopt the most appropriate form of government to take care of these needs. Human rights is understood differently in Asia than in the West; the West must not seek to impose its values on Asians, for they also have values, which are different from those of the West, which are just as worthy of respect, and which are better suited to the temperament of their peoples. Economic development requires political and social stability, whereas the Western form of democracy engenders instability and chaos. Put succinctly: the Asian nations must follow the destinies dictated by their cultures.

TABLE 3

**Per capita GNP of East Asian Countries
(1994 and projection for 2005)**

COUNTRIES	1994	2005
Japan	37,556	45,000
Singapore	24,425	40,000
Hong Kong	20,590	40,000
Taiwan	11,604	25,000
S. Korea	8,483	18,000
Malaysia	3,406	8,000
Thailand	2,343	4,800
Philippines	952	1,600
Indonesia	795	1,400
China	510	3,200
Vietnam	182	700

Source: Compiled from 'A boom of their own'. Time, May 22, 1995

Culture is Destiny is the formula projected by Lee Kwan Yew, the most forceful, articulate and outspoken proponent of this thesis. A former prime minister of Singapore, he travels widely to East Asian capitals -Beijing, Hanoi, Manila-giving advice on how to achieve economic development. His basic advice is that the governments concerned should ensure stability by exercising strict political control.

In a noted interview with Fareed Zakaria in *Foreign Affairs*, Lee gave a very clear forceful exposition of his views. According to him, the main object in the East is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can enjoy freedom. But this freedom can exist only in an ordered state. Asian societies are unlike Western ones. East Asians share the tradition for strict discipline.

As leader of an Asian nation looking at America, Lee finds a number of attractive things about America: the free, easy and open relations between people regardless of their social status, ethnicity or religion; a certain openness in argument about what is good or bad in society; the accountability of public officials; none of the secrecy and terror that is part and parcel of communist government. But he rejects it as a total system because parts of it are unacceptable: guns, drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, unbecoming behaviour in public- in sum, the breakdown of civil society and the expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases at the expense of orderly society.

"Lee believes that the fundamental difference between Western concepts of society and government and Eastern concepts is that "Eastern societies believe the individual exists in the context of his family." He says that "We are groping towards a destination which we hope will be identifiable with our past". For East Asians, that destiny is Confucianist. Lee admits frankly that "if we did not have the good points of the West to guide us, we wouldn't have got out of our backwardness. We would have been a backward economy and a backward society". But he stresses that in the East, if people want to be "modernised", they are "unreceptive to the idea of being Westernised". He objects strongly to "Western democratic imperialism", the foisting of the Western democratic system indiscriminately on others.

There is obviously an ambivalence towards the West in the minds of Lee and members of the elite of other East Asian nations who share his views. They want modernisation, which permits them to achieve fast economic development and enjoy rising prosperity, but they reject the political concomitant of modernisation, economic development and high incomes: liberal democracy. Following the Western path disturbs these elites, who take great pride in having fought for independence from the West.¹²

What are the chances of Lee's views still prevailing in the next 30 or 50 years, during which time modernisation will have progressed by leaps and bounds if the present trends continue? To answer this question, it would be important to study Lee's views in light of those of Francis Fukuyama, who has examined the question thoroughly in a well known book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, the gist of which has been presented at a conference in Taipei in June 1994, on the theme of

¹² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, Avon Book, 1992; and "Confucianism and Democracy", essay presented at a conference sponsored by the Institute of National Policy Research, Taipei, Taiwan, June 1994, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6. No.2, April 1995, pp 20-33

Confucianism and Democracy.¹³

In *Confucianism and Democracy*, Fukuyama finds that, essentially, the modernisation theory is correct. There is a correlation between development and democracy. If the rapid economic development Asia has experienced in recent years is sustained, the region's democratisation will continue as well, for "a significant connection between development and democracy has been borne out over the past 50 years".¹⁴

In his book Fukuyama develops his thesis more completely and in stronger terms. "All countries undergoing modernisation," he says "must increasingly resemble one another: they must unify nationally on the basis of a centralised state, urbanise, replace traditional forms of social organisation like tribe, sect and family with economically rational ones, based on function and efficiency. Such societies have become increasingly linked with one another through global markets and the spread of universal, consumer culture. Moreover, the logic of natural science would seem to dictate a universal evolution in the direction of capitalism."¹⁵

Fukuyama thinks that the growth of liberal democracy, together with its companion economic liberalism, has been "the most macro political phenomenon of the last 400 years".¹⁶ There is a fundamental process at work that dictates a common evolutionary pattern of all human societies; in short, "something like a universal history of mankind in the direction of liberal democracy".¹⁷ From its original beachhead in Western Europe and North America, democratic governments made significant inroads in other parts of the world that do not share the political, religious and cultural traditions of those areas. "If the logic of advanced industrialisation, determined by modern natural science, creates a strong predisposition in favour of capitalism and market economies, does it also produce free government and democratic participation?" His answer is "yes". He notes the "linkage", between development and democracy and points out that Japan, the first Asian state to modernise, was also the first to achieve a stable, liberal democracy. Thus, he concludes: "Looking around the world, there remains a very strong overall correlation between advancing socio-economic modernisation and the emergence of new democracies."¹⁸

Considering the historical evidence cited by Fukuyama, one wonders whether the model advanced by Lee, which Fukuyama calls "Asian alternative to democracy" -the model of "soft" or paternalistic form of authoritarianism combining capitalism with an authoritarian political system can prevail for long in East Asia. Will it be confirmed by history in the long run *or* even in the medium run?

Leaving out the still inconclusive cases like Tien An Men, the agitation in Myanmar (Burma) and the growing disaffection of cadres in the Vietnamese Communist Party; and considering only the clear cases like the undeniable emergence of democracy in a modernised and increasingly prosperous Taiwan, demonstrated in the presidential elections in March 1996; the obvious

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Fukuyama op.cit. p.xv.

¹⁵ Ibid.p.48

¹⁶ Ibid, pA8

¹⁷ Ibid, pA8

¹⁸ Ibid p.112

democratic surges unfolding before our eyes in Thailand and South Korea: and the recent events of Indonesia in July, when the people descended into the streets to clamour for democracy, although between 1960 and 1996 the Suharto regime had brought the average income from US\$ 50 to over US\$ 1000 the thesis advanced by Lee and the ruling elites who agree with him will be difficult to uphold.

To assert that Asians want to live in an Asia-centric world, a world, which they can identify as distinct and their own, is to state a trivial truth. But to maintain that Asians, unlike Westerners, care only about bread and neither want nor need freedom is to state a proposition which history has not borne out so far, and is not likely to bear out in the future, especially in East Asia. This is because in the new setting, opened up by the end of the Cold War and the widening access of the peoples of the world to the fruits of science and technology, especially in the fields of information and communication, the peoples of East Asia can now enjoy new unlimited possibilities for self-fulfillment. And they will surely fight hard for the unfettered right to seek this self-fulfillment.