

Reflections on Asia in the 21st Century

Volker Stanzel¹

Many, if not most readers will possess "mental maps" giving them orientation in the political, societal and of course geographical world around them, maps which have been imprinted upon their consciousness during the 20th century. The fact that seven years ago our calendars started to show a new century in itself has nothing to do with a change in our environment or in our minds. The turn of a century is, however, a convenient date to take stock of things that have changed over the past decades. Indeed, we observe changes in the world so dramatic that we need to ask ourselves whether we still have the right maps in our minds or whether the ones we still use might not mislead us and show us the wrong direction when we try to find our way ahead. It is mainly three phenomena, which have changed our world, and all of them in important ways have to do with Asia.

The Need for New "Rules of the Road"

First, the end of the Cold War means more than the end to a time when two superpowers threatened each other and a large part of the world's population faced instant extinction. The Cold War also led to a world order of both a high degree of stability and of complexity that possibly has helped prevent the outbreak of a war between the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union. The international institutions which gave rules to international behaviour, such as the United Nations and its sub-organizations, the World Bank, or the IMF, once established remained almost as "frozen" as the overall world-wide situation because any major change would threaten the balance between the two superpowers and the two major blocks. The interest of the two superpowers in having institutions guiding behaviour between states lay in the fact that "chaotic" conflicts could be avoided which might have had incalculable consequences. This interest guaranteed that international institutions were kept intact even in phases of limited armed conflicts such as the Vietnam War or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, or throughout the period of decolonization.

Our post-Cold War world is characterized by the breakdown, or the threat of a breakdown, of many of those institutional structures. As a result, the international order, as we knew it is crumbling. Efforts to adapt the United Nations to the new situation by the present, as well as the previous, General Secretary of the UN indi-

¹ Ambassador Dr. Volker Stanzel, German Embassy Beijing, PR China.

cate recognition that we need a new world order, or at least new "rules of the road" if we want to avoid incalculable risks of multiple conflict. In a perverted way, even Jihad terrorism may be understood as the promise of a new "order" in an increasingly disoriented world. New actors appearing on the world stage means that defining a new global order will have to involve them. That means that Asian countries, with their newly found economic strength, will have a greater say in how the new rules for the behaviour of states are written. While the 21st century is being shaped, Asia cannot be ignored.

The second phenomenon is the new quality of globalization. World trade expands due to the opening of new markets and the inclusion of large new labour markets. World trade also expands due to the fact that industrial production has moved from "vertically integrated production" to worldwide "horizontally integrated production" (Karl Grove). The process of producing components of products at the most distant locations until assembled and shipped has become possible because of the globally expanding labour market. This in turn has led to continuously decreasing prices. Expanding trade also means that not only traditionally tradable goods – the hardware of globalization – are making their way around the globe. The software of globalization, i.e. formally non-tradable goods such as knowledge and information, have become mobile as well. They have become as sellable and buyable as material goods.

Thus, the competitive advantages of industrialized societies strong in knowledge, in education and in creativity increasingly shrink. The new phase of globalisation has moved far beyond trade in simple material or immaterial goods. Participatory movements, emancipation and hedonistic "world culture" phenomena are traded too and have become elements of "modernisation", subverting the authority of traditional structures, world views, even religions, leading to the appearance of what today is known as "failing states". Asia's new economic dynamism has contributed to this development as well as to its speed – as it has to the globalisation of dangers. Natural disasters that affect a country may severely limit its economic performance and thus have a negative impact on world trade. SARS, and now Avian Flu (both emanating from Asia), show us how quickly pandemic diseases may spread due to the increase in international travel. International crime, the trade in arms, humans or drugs complement the trade in goods in a negative way. The new character of globalization means that many become richer; few become poorer while the same wish to join the globalization process becomes globally ever stronger. With new opportunities come the danger of new threats and the question of who will be able to devise the appropriate "rules of the road".

Lastly, we are confronted with the phenomenon of an increasing number of global centres of gravity. Here, the rise of East/South-East Asia is the most conspicuous. This rise would not have the impact we observe without the rise of China. However, the rise of China can only be comprehended in its full dimension if we take into

consideration how its economy is interwoven with the economies of the countries of the whole of the crescent, reaching from Japan down to Australia. Indeed, the new economic and political stature of China as well as the re-emergence of ASEAN; the resurgence of the Japanese economy and of the previously so called "little tigers"; the growing supra-regional policy of India and the economic growth of that country – all these factors have brought about a new cohesion among Asian countries that goes beyond the economic successes.

This region does not yet speak with one voice – far from it! –; but like a common threat we observe the efforts to establish new structures and organizations, almost a proliferation of institutional efforts, and the will of the region to determine its own agenda. While the region is already a new centre of gravity in the world's economy, it is on its way to becoming a new centre of gravity in global politics as well. That is to say whatever such a "centre" does, it may affect the whole world. Gravity centres are not the "poles" that the myth of a "multipolar world" wants to see – they are cohesive conglomerates of states of very different characteristics, not centralized entities with a unified political will. Gravity centres are rather like the centre of spider webs and the strings of these webs are the lines of interest that span across the globe from the sources of natural resources to laboratories where medicines against pandemics are developed, or where silly caricatures suddenly have repercussions leading to the death of demonstrators far away.

Forces of Order

In order to deal with the new environment of the 21st century brought about by these three phenomena, in order to draw those new "mental maps", we need these centres of gravity – certainly the strongest, the US, certainly traditional ones such as Europe, but also the most important of the new ones, the East/South-East Asian crescent. How do these centres of gravity exert influence? The most important factor is their ability to create order within their own regions and also have an impact outside, not necessarily globally, but at least with various problems that might arise. They might contribute to the solution or to the aggravation of regional and global problems. For that they need the capability and the will to use economic, diplomatic, and if necessary military resources globally. Another important means of influence is the so-called soft power that transcends economic impact with its attraction and integrational strength of values and cultures, often of more sustainable strength than even military power.

Both Europe and East/South-East Asia will have to establish themselves at the side of the United States as forces of order in the world. In the future, their action (or non-action) will have more consequences than in the past. Transparency about new health threats may prevent the spread of pandemics; good governance that prevents corruption domestically will also impede the spread of international crime. When the value of the RMB is allowed to float or not, it may have an impact on other coun-

tries. The efficient organization of a textile industry in one country may mean poverty to workers in that same industry several thousand kilometres away. Asian countries, due to their increasing economic strength, will have to find a new way to manoeuvre on the international stage. Today, they discover that a new international status gains more respect for them than when they were developing nations. Strength allows more room to act in one's own interest. At the same time, this newfound freedom also limits the room for manoeuvre. While in the past Asian countries were able to wait for decisions of global importance to be taken by others, their new strength and power to influence events gives them the responsibility to analyse situations and problems and to devise strategies themselves at an early stage. Dealing, for example, with the threat of proliferation of nuclear arms today is, in the eyes of the world, also part of the responsibility of newly arrived countries on the global stage.

These countries discover that bilateral agreements by traditional national states are not sufficient anymore to deal with the consequences of a dissolving world order and dynamically developing globalization. Even traditional notions of balance and power or "multipolarity" have so far not proved able to help new concepts evolve. A world of interdependency, meaning a world of different actors needing each other to exist and develop – such a world only allows the representation of a country's or region's interests together with others. Therefore the more "multilateralist" the approach, the more partners are involved and the more efficient a solution can be. Therefore, cooperating in the global community multilaterally has also become the task and responsibility of East/South-East Asian countries as they wish to develop a global policy reflecting and using their strength, in order to join other countries in exploring ways to at least minimize the risk and to maximise the opportunities derived from new globalisation processes.

Multilateralism and the United Nations

Cooperation in itself does not mean that there is already a new "world order" or even only "rules of the road". For that, an overarching universal framework is indispensable. The United Nations in the 21st century will remain the most important forum of global rule setting. There is no other organization that commands comparable global legitimacy even though it is not a true democratically based legitimacy. To shape the world of the new century, however, the United Nations cannot remain as it was created in 1949. It has to reflect a world consisting of almost 200 countries. Before the U.N. can define "rules of the road" for the world, it therefore needs to be reformed itself. Asia, represented in the U.N. with one P-5 country – China – possesses a new global weight to contribute to reform the United Nations. The danger if we do not get an efficient, reformed U.N. would be that different forms of cooperation in smaller circles will evolve, disregarding the interests of a larger number of states.

A major factor in creating a stronger U.N. would be contributing to developing further international law. Legally bound international relations would increase calculability and transparency of the way states deal with each other. They would establish the rule of law over the rule of the sheer power. It is not enough to subscribe to the values of international law – the rule of international law can only be a solid basis for international relations if countries accept this law as preceding national law. To give new stability to the world and to replace the crumbling structures of the Cold War age with a new world order which shapes the norms of future stability, a conviction of the importance of international law will have to grow world-wide, foremost in the countries forming those new centres of gravity. This is the most concrete part of the task facing Asia in the 21st century: Strategic problem-solving multilaterally and mainly in rebuilding the United Nations. "Strategic" means that common problems have to be identified together and solutions have to be charted and implemented together. Such "strategic partnerships" are only possible if all work involved has the same basis. Anachronistic ideas of statehood or of state sovereignty will only lead to traditional national solutions instead of transnational solutions.

Value Partners?

Dealing with the task of creating a new global system, Asians and their major global partners have been made 'interest partners'. They pursue similar interests and objectives. The question then arises: are they 'value partners' too?

Possibly, but for the time being important differences remain. They arise from our different history and different cultural developments. Therefore the best that Asians and Europeans – and others – can do today is leading an open dialogue on value questions. It is not just the "hard facts" of politics and economics that decide the quality of our relationship, the limits and the potential of our cooperation in the international arena. It must also be a cultural exchange, precisely on "values" in the widest sense. Only if cultural exchange is intense, societies are able to understand each other and each other's values upon which these interests are based. Mutual comprehension provides the ideal basis for productive cooperation in both politics and economics because it will lead to shared values that then provide a much more solid basis for an interest partnership.

If Asians and Europeans know so much about each other today and are able to cooperate fruitfully, they owe a great deal of this knowledge to the cultural exchange between our countries during past decades and centuries. Such a cultural exchange must not be confined to institutionalized exchange. Due to the process of globalization our societies have an increasing number of partners worldwide. That might lead to a relative decrease in importance for existing partnerships. Governments on their own can only achieve so much. This then is the field of civil society. Only the innumerable actors that constitute "civil society" have the combined potential to initiate an exchange of knowledge on values, philosophies, and visions that may

constitute a robust basis upon which political and economic leaders can build. Therefore, to draw those new "mental maps" in the 21st century, both in Asia and in Europe, is less a task for politics and business. It is more than ever before a task for all of us "civilians" constituting our societies.