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Op-Ed

Dazzled by Asia

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During his trip to Asia in November, Barack Obama seemed strangely mute. Unlike Bill Clinton, who criticized China's human rights record in front of then-president Jiang Zemin, Obama largely avoided the topic of rights. In Singapore, despite pressure from human rights activists, the president deferred to pressure to not release a statement calling for the freeing of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. In Japan, the president worked valiantly to massage local sentiments, bowing deeply to Emperor Akihito - and drawing flak back in the United States from conservative critics for appearing weak.

More than any recent American president, Obama displayed deep deference to his Asian counterparts. He did so, in part, because, like many Americans, he has become convinced that this will be Asia's century, and that the United States must begin to accommodate itself to this stark new geopolitical fact. A recent report by the US National Intelligence Council concluded that the world is witnessing the rise of "major global players similar to the advent of a united Germany in the 19th century and a powerful United States in the early 20th century...[and they] will transform the geopolitical landscape." Major media outlets covered the president as if he was some kind of Dickensian vagrant, appealing to his increasingly powerful creditors in China for leniency. "Obama's trip reveals a relationship with a strangely lopsided quality to it," wrote longtime China specialist Jonathan Fenby, in one typical example of the coverage.

Over the past two years, some of the most important foreign policy thinkers have chronicled America's decline, and argued that Asia is rising to preeminence. Parag Khanna's "The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order" landed on the cover of The New York Times Magazine, while Fareed Zakaria's "The Post-American World" became a bestseller. Meanwhile, the influential former Singaporean ambassador Kishore Mahbubani, who helped spark the "Asian values" debate of the 1990s, released "The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East." Martin Jacques, a prominent columnist for The Guardian, took the idea one step further. In his book "When China Rules the World," he contends that China's rise will have a greater impact on the globe than the emergence of the United States as an

international power in the 20th century.

Yet predictions of America's decline are vastly overstated. Asia is indeed increasing its economic footprint in the world, but it still lags far behind the United States in military might, political and diplomatic influence, and even most measures of economic stability. Asia's growth, the source of its current strength, also has significant limits - rising inequality, disastrous demographics, and growing unrest that could scupper development. Nationalism in Asia will prevent the region from developing into a European Union-like unified area for the foreseeable future, allowing regional conflicts to continue, and preventing Asia from speaking, more powerfully, with a unified voice.

The future of American power is a vital question. America's foreign policy choices will be directed by judgments about the United States' staying power, and how the United States, like Britain before it, should adapt to new powers emerging on the scene. If, as Jacques argues, America's influence will naturally fade while Asia's grows, Washington should adopt policies similar to Britain's in the mid-20th century - ceding influence over large portions of the world while working to ensure that it remains an important player on a few key issues. American leaders would have to radically shift their style, adopting a new humility while selling the US public on a diminished global role, a major comedown for a superpower.

Conversely, if it is not to be Asia's century, Washington's strategy would be radically different. No concessions of fading glory: Though the United States might not be the only superpower, it could assume that, for the near future, it would remain the preeminent power, allowing Washington to dictate the terms of everything from climate change negotiations to global talks on nuclear weapons.

The idea of American power giving way to a rising Asia has been building for two decades. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many in the United States predicted that Japan, which then seemed to have a hyper-charged economy, would rule the world. But Japan's economy, built on a real estate bubble, imploded, and Japanese leaders never truly matched their economic power with political might; limited by a pacifist constitution, Japan did not fight in the first Gulf War and wound up merely paying the check for much of the battle.

But now China has assumed the mantle. Next year, China will become the world's second-largest economy, according to a study by the China Policy Institute of the University of Nottingham. The global financial crisis has badly dented the Western model of liberal capitalism, leaving Asia as the world's growth engine, and main banker - China alone holds some \$800 billion in American treasury securities. The chief economist of the Asian Development Bank, a regional organization, declared in September, "Developing Asia is poised to lead the recovery from the worldwide slowdown." China and India likely will grow by more than 7 percent this year, compared to minimal growth in the West, and other leading Asian nations, like Indonesia and Vietnam, are also predicted to post high growth rates in 2010.

At the recent Copenhagen climate summit, two of Asia's most powerful leaders, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, showed this newfound confidence. Meeting in a back room, they pointedly tried to exclude Obama from their negotiations. Obama ultimately had to burst into the closed-meeting like a kind of diplomatic party crasher.

Asia's new swagger has caused a crisis of confidence in the West that makes the fear of Japan in the late 1980s look like a mild tremor. In the late 1980s it was only one Asian giant growing powerful, and at that time Europe, newly united after communism, looked boldly to the future. Today many of Asia's nations are getting stronger, and not one major Western nation can be confident about its future growth.

The belief in Asia's rise has sparked this mini-industry of books on the Eastern renaissance. In the most apocalyptic of the bunch, such as Jacques', the authors focus on how Asia's powers, from China to Malaysia to Singapore, are taking the final step from rising power to global hegemon - using state-directed economic policies to dominate industry after industry, while delivering what Mahbubani calls "modernity" - good governance, growth, and the rule of law, without the messiness of Western liberal democracy. In fact, Mahbubani suggests that this "modernity" ultimately may be more appealing than Western democracy, which has not helped produce growth in Africa, Latin America, or many other democratic regions. Other authors, like Zakaria, focus more on American decline.

Yet there are many good reasons to think that Asia's rise may turn out to be an illusion. Asia's growth has built-in stumbling blocks. Demographics, for one. Because of its One Child policy, China's population is aging rapidly: According to one comprehensive study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, by 2040 China will have at least 400 million elderly, most of whom will have no retirement pensions. This aging poses a severe challenge, since China may not have enough working-age people to support its elderly. In other words, says CSIS, China will grow old before it grows rich, a disastrous combination. Other Asian powers also are aging rapidly - Japan's population likely will fall from around 130 million today to 90 million in 2055 - or, due to traditional preferences for male children, have a dangerous sex imbalance in which there are far more men than women. This is a scenario likely to destabilize a country, since, at other periods in history when many men could not marry, the unmarried hordes turned to crime or political violence.

Looming political unrest also threatens Asia's rise. China alone already faces some 90,000 annual "mass incidents," the name given by Chinese security forces to protests, and this number is likely to grow as income inequality soars and environmental problems add more stresses to society. India, too, faces severe threats. The Naxalites, Maoists operating mostly in eastern India who attack large landowners, businesses, police, and other local officials, have caused the death of at least 800 people last year alone, and have destabilized large portions of eastern India. Other Asian states, too, face looming unrest, from the ongoing insurgency in southern Thailand to the rising racial

and religious conflicts in Malaysia.

Also, despite predictions that Asia will eventually integrate, building a European Union-like organization, the region actually seems to be coming apart. Asia has not tamed the menace of nationalism, which Europe and North America largely have put in the past, albeit after two bloody world wars. Even as China and India have cooperated on climate change, on many other issues they are at each other's throats. Over the past year, both countries have fortified their common border in the Himalayas, claiming overlapping pieces of territory. Meanwhile, Japan is constantly seeking ways to blunt Chinese military power. People in many Asian nations have extremely negative views of their neighbors - even though they maintain positive images of the United States.

More broadly, few Asian leaders have any idea what values, ideas, or histories should hold Asia together. "The argument of an Asian century is fundamentally flawed in that Asia is a Western concept, one that is not widely agreed upon [in Asia]," says Devin Stewart, a Japan specialist at the Carnegie Council for Ethics and International Affairs.

Even as Asia's miracle seems, on closer inspection, less miraculous, America's decline has been vastly overstated. To become a global superpower requires economic, political, and military might, and on the last two counts, the United States remains leagues ahead of any Asian rival. Despite boosting defense budgets by 20 percent annually, Asian powers like India, China, or Indonesia will not rival the US military for decades, if ever - only the Pentagon could launch a war in a place like Afghanistan, so far from its homeland. When a tsunami struck South and Southeast Asia five years ago, the region's nations, including Indonesia, Thailand, and India, had to rely on the US Navy to coordinate relief efforts.

America also has other advantages that will be nearly impossible to remove. With Asian nations still squabbling amongst themselves, many look to the United States as a neutral power broker, a role America plays around the world. German writer and scholar Joseph Joffe calls the United States today the "default power": No one in the world trusts anyone else to play the global hegemon, so it still falls to Washington.

Even in the economic realm, the United States remains strong. As Zakaria admits, the United States accounted for 32 percent of global output in 1913, 26 percent in 1960, and 26 percent in 2007, remarkably consistent figures. The United States remains atop nearly every ranking of economies according to openness and innovation. While Asia's centrally planned economies can build infrastructure without worrying about public opposition - China has built impressive networks of airports and highways - they are less successful at nurturing world-beating companies, which thrive on risk-taking and hands-off government. Compared to Intel, Google, or Apple, China's major companies still are state-linked behemoths that do little innovation of their own. The leading corporations in most other Asian nations (with the exception of Japan and South Korea) also are either giant state-linked firms or trading companies that invest little in innovation. And censorship or tight government controls alienate the most innovative firms - Google is now threatening to pull out of China entirely.

As Asia throws up barriers to immigration, in the United States immigration helps ensure long-term economic vitality. Chinese and Indian immigrants accounted for almost one-quarter of all companies in Silicon Valley, according to research by AnnaLee Saxenian at the University of California-Berkeley. According to the most comprehensive global ranking of universities, compiled by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, American schools, powered by immigrants and flush with cash, dominate the top 100, with Harvard ranked first. Asia has no schools in the top 10.

Most important, the United States is a champion of an idea that has global appeal, and Asia is not. During the opposition protests in Iran, demonstrators look to the United States, not China or Indonesia or even India, to make a statement. In a reversal of the Iranian regime's rhetoric, some protestors even chant "Death to China" because of Beijing's support for the repressive government in Tehran. As long as protestors in places like Iran, or Burma or Ukraine, call out for the American president, and not China's leader or India's prime minister, the United States will remain the preeminent power.

To be the global hegemon requires military, economic, and political might, but it also means offering a vision for the world. As Mahbubani admits, during Britain's imperial period, elites in places like Malaya, India, or the Caribbean wanted to study in England, or read British authors and philosophers, because they believed that the ideas Britain had imparted - the rule of law, the Westminster political system, an idea of fair play, a meritocratic civil service, evidence-based scientific exploration - had merit for the entire world. Even men and women who, ultimately, became some of the biggest thorns in Britain's side, like Jawarhal Nehru, cherished their British studies and their links to British culture.

So, too, since World War II the United States has been, for many foreign publics, the nation looked up to in this way. Even at the worst moments, such as the period after 9/11 in which the Bush administration created the prison at Guantanamo Bay and allowed torture and other questionable tactics, I have rarely met anyone, in any country, who wanted to move to China, or India, or even Japan, rather than the United States. Foreigners may want to spend a few years in China or India or Indonesia, to see the dynamism of these places, but few, if any, have plans to become Chinese, Indian, or Indonesian citizens. Perhaps one day China or Indonesia or India will draw these migrants, who would come seeking the same dreams and openness as they do today in the United States. But it won't be soon - and it might not even be this century.

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