

GLOBAL ASIA:

TURNING POINTS IN MODERN ASIAN HISTORY

by David Bachman, Henry M. Jackson Professor of International Studies, University of Washington

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The immense transformation of Asia can be explained many ways: in the biographies or autobiographies of famous and ordinary people; through the major events of the time; or by examining broad social, political, cultural and economic processes. One very useful means of examining profound historical change is to identify significant turning points when notable occurrences or patterns of behavior emerged and altered the path of societies. This series on Asia uses this device to identify (only) some of the very largest developments that led Asia from being subject to imperial control in 1900 to the influential states and societies of today.

have been different—as in the case of the suppressed Chinese democracy movement of 1989.

It is relatively easy for anyone to identify possible major turning points. But we might disagree about what the five most important actual such junctures are. With regard to Southeast Asia, many Americans might see the US war in Vietnam as a major turning point. Thus the 20 turning points in this series are the catalysts for debates about what is important and what caused tidal shifts in Asian affairs over the last 116 years.

In all areas of Asia discussed in this series, war and state violence figured as turning points, though none is more recent than 1971. In other cases, broad social processes, such as the rise of nationalism and democratization, or new technologies, whether the development of nuclear weapons or the use of social media, are identified as key turning points, and in the case of social media or climate change, the full extent of their impacts lie in the future.

Turning Points in Asia: Introduction

In 1900, Asia was dominated by colonial nations. Even Japan, emerging as a modernizing, powerful state, was constrained in some ways. Foreigners could not be tried in Japanese courts, and other countries set tariffs on items imported from Japan as well. In the rest of Asia, the impact of outside governments was much greater, with most of Asia colonized or absorbed into imperial domains, as was the case with Central Asia in the Russian empire.

Yet in 2016, all of Asia is independent and by a number of measures, China, Japan and India are the second-, third-, and fourth-largest economies in the world. In lands that in 1900 were overwhelmingly rural, cities now dominate social existence and form the core of modern economies.

To say that Asia has changed dramatically in 116 years is both true and obvious. But for some very elderly Asians, this alteration coincides with their time on earth. Similarly, many readers of this essay may live and experience the entire 21st century and the transitions it will bring.

How do we know when something is a turning point? The full impact of many incidents is not always clear at the time. People may have noted that it was significant in 1982 when International Business Machines (IBM) turned to a small Washington-based software firm called Microsoft to develop the operating system for its new line of personal computers, but few realized then what an influential circumstance this might be. The same might be said for the first years of the existence of Amazon.com.

To be sure, some turning points are obvious: When India and Pakistan, with about a quarter of the world's population, went from a British colony to being independent states, this was a noticeable and dramatic change. People who are in the midst of such a turning point sometimes clearly understand they are going through epochal transformations. But some of the turning points the authors in this series have written about might not have been so self-evident when they took place. These pivotal moments may take years to manifest their full effects. And while in this series we focused on actual turning points, had history unfolded differently, our choice of turning points would also

All of the turning points in this series should be seen as developments or events that have lasting impacts, even if they seem like unrelated occurrences, such as the independence of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh or the democratization of Taiwan and South Korea. But the turning points identified are really a shorthand means of expressing the onset of deep-seated processes whose effects play out over time. Historical legacies persist, as particularly well exemplified by continuing heavy Russian influence in Central Asia.

Henry Ford famously noted that “history is bunk.” Yet what this series does in a very brief way is to suggest that Asia's transformations are precisely the working out of historical interactions, human desires and choices, and sometimes chance and coincidence. These turning points are key markers of developments that are making the 21st century very different from the 20th or 19th century.



The Henry M. Jackson
School of International Studies
University of Washington



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