

GLOBAL ASIA:

TURNING POINTS IN MODERN ASIAN HISTORY

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Turning Points in Asia: Looking into the Future

It is impossible to predict what major turning points will shape Asia and the world's future in the 21st century. Predicting events years in the future is an even more hopeless task. There are too many interacting processes, future unknowns and technological and other advances. Coupled with human beings often acting in unexpected ways, these changing dynamics will create the future in ways beyond our current imaginings.

But though the future can't be predicted, it is possible to at least identify some major trends that will influence the decisions and actions that political leaders and ordinary citizens will make and engage in. Five important ones going forward are described here; several have already been highlighted in this series.

Demographic forces will have a major impact on Asia in the 21st century. Japan's population is already shrinking, and barring large-scale migration, South Korea and Taiwan's populations will also begin to decline soon. In these three countries and in China, society is aging rapidly. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh face a different kind of challenge: large numbers of young people will be coming on the job market in the very near future. These various population trends will have different kinds of effects. A shrinking population means a smaller domestic market — to keep growing, companies in Northeast Asia will have to look increasingly at export markets. An aging population means fewer people working, perhaps leading to the installation of increasing numbers of robots in production. It also means growing demands for social security, health care and generally larger government budgets to provide for the elderly, who will be a large percentage of the voting population. In the case of South Asia, inability for the government to provide jobs may lead to great social dissatisfaction and perhaps to radicalization by the younger generation.

Climate change may have an extraordinarily profound effect. The watershed of almost every major river in East, Southeast and South Asia comes from glaciers on the Himalayan Tibetan Plateau in China. Once those glaciers melt, a major source for all the significant rivers will be gone. Monsoon rains also feed these rivers, but water supply could be greatly reduced, challenging human existence. Climate change will have other impacts, but for Asia, glacier melt is perhaps the single most important danger.

Water scarcity, even without climate change, is already a significant problem. China and India have about a third of the world average of per-person freshwater supply, and in both societies, much of that water is severely polluted. In Central Asia, the Aral Sea, perhaps the major source of water in the region, has been shrinking dramatically for decades.

The sustainability of human habitation is challenged by water shortage.

Nationalism and national pride, coupled with growing power, particularly in China and India, will challenge the United States and perhaps many aspects of the way the world works today. Chinese and Indians are taking great satisfaction in the recent rapid successes of their countries. They want to see their countries recognized as world leaders, perhaps even more influential than the United States. They want to have more say in the way the rules for international society are set. This is likely to lead to rivalry and competition that, if managed poorly, could lead to war. With continued Indian and Chinese growth, the era of the United States being the sole superpower in the world will come to an end.

Technological change will have an impact on the ability of states to govern effectively. Social media has made it much easier for citizens to express their views and dissatisfaction with governments and their leaders almost instantly — and perhaps more assertively than they would in face-to-face meetings. Democratic governments like that of the United States, with its separation of powers, are generally unable to respond to problems as quickly as the people who are affected by those problems would want. This in turn leads to greater dissatisfaction, threatening the support necessary for any kind of government to endure and thrive.

It is of course easier for the analyst to foresee future problems and challenges than it is to imagine fundamental solutions to chronic problems. But while none of the essays in this series have mentioned it, over the past century there has been a tremendous decline in absolute poverty in Asia, a fundamental expansion of literacy and a great lengthening of life expectancy. There is much to be concerned about in Asia's 21st century, but there may also be many positive breakthroughs that are impossible to imagine yet.



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