

ISAS Brief

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Asia and Europe: Emerging Potentials for Cooperation

The existing power balance in the contemporary world is changing rapidly. This paper analyses the reaction of the key Central Asian states to these changes with their consequent implications for the other regions, including South Asia and Southeast Asia.

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The world is in the cusp of major changes, particularly as a result of policy shifts by the key global players such as the United States (US), China and Russia. The US, since the assumption of office of President Donald Trump, has turned ‘inward looking’. The current powers in Washington believe that its championing of active globalisation in the past had created a situation of ‘zero sum game’ where all the other protagonists seemed to have profited, mostly economically but also, at times, politically, at the expense of the US. It was, therefore, time to place ‘America first’ in all its policy pursuits, which entailed a lack of interest in matters and areas of direct benefit or concern. The result was a political vacuum.

To fill this empty space, other influential state actors seemed obvious candidates such as China, despite the protestations to the contrary of its leadership, which continued to describe its ‘rise’, often obviously assertive, as ‘peaceful development’. The National Congress of the

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Communist Party of China in October 2017 has empowered its current leader by underscoring the salience of 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era'. Students of language, as an expression of politics, place great store by these terminologies, each word filled with calculated meaning.

Close at its heels, though not wrapped in such sartorial symbolism of high political theory, is Russia and its leader, President Vladimir Putin. He too, having consolidated his powers domestically, is looking to a greater role in global affairs. His annexation of Crimea in 2014 in the face of international opposition and the current successful championing of President Bashar Hafez al-Assad in Syria and helping retain him in power are two examples of his aggressive assertiveness. While undoubtedly much lower in the economic pecking order on the world matrix, Putin still has the military might to match the US with his nuclear arsenals, something that will be a mistake to forget. An earlier view held in many global quarters that the Americans operated foreign policy on a higher moral plane has now been seriously eroded by many of Trump's actions and remarks ('America First' at all times!), which are to the advantage of Putin because of the consequent moral equivalence.

These emerging developments have been keenly watched by the Central Asian countries. In this respect, particular mention must be made of two of the nations, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and their respective leaders, President Nursultan Nazarbayev and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Nazarbayev has been head of state since Kazakhstan's independence from the old Soviet Union since 1991. He holds the title of the 'Leader of the Nation' and is the architect of the Project 'Kazakhstan 2050'. This is viewed as a long-term strategy to ensure the growth prospects of the country to position it as one of the 30 most developed nations in the world. It may seem a little ambitious, given that, despite its immense trove of natural resources such as uranium, the liberalisation of its political institutions which such a status would surely require, as of now at least, appears to be a distant possibility.

Nonetheless, Nazarbayev is a person of prodigious intellect and capability, and has taken a number of initiatives to forge greater cooperation among the Central Asian countries, which initially was scant, largely because of intramural disputes and personal differences among the leaders. For instance, Kazakhstan's relationship with Uzbekistan soured considerably when President Islam Karimov ruled that country with an iron hand. However, things began to

change rapidly with his demise in 2016 and the succession of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Domestically, the new leader loosened the grip on the state in a way that there was a talk of ‘Uzbek spring’ in a country that was seen as opaque with a government that was viewed as repressive.

Bilateral relations between the two largest states of Central Asia, the wealthier Kazakhstan, with a population of 17 million and a gross domestic product (GDP) of over US\$184.5 billion (about S\$248 billion), and Uzbekistan with its larger population of 30 million but a smaller economy with a GDP of US\$67 billion (about S\$90 billion), began to improve rapidly. While Kazakhstan’s global role has always been more active than that of Uzbekistan, as of now, that has not posed a problem in this new development. Indeed, Uzbekistan can play a very supportive role with its old ‘Silk Road’ connections to China, and help open up central Asia to South Asia with its increasing links with Afghanistan.

The burgeoning cooperation among the key Central Asian states is also helping to create the idea of Eurasian solidarity and a desire to connect with neighbouring regions, including South Asia and Southeast Asia – from Afghanistan to Singapore. This is also being influenced by certain evolving factors in the global arena which, while providing opportunities, are also throwing up challenges. Some of these are discussed below.

One, the diminution of American leadership role in globalisation has resulted in challenges for all. It has created a need for those with discernible common concerns to come together for reasons of both security and development. Even if there is no decline of the United States in objective terms, both militarily and economically, there is most certainly a decline in American interest in the rest of the world. At the same time, we are witnessing a rise of China, despite the disinclination of the Chinese to state this as such, reflected in Xi’s *Zhong Guo Meng* or ‘China Dream’, and *Yi Dai Yi Lu* or the ‘Belt Road Initiative’. Not lagging too far behind is Russia’s ‘Eurasian Project’ – an attempt to place itself as the key player in forging this bi-continental idea of a cooperative union.

Two, the perceived need of every country to buttress its security capabilities. This is because post-World War Two institutions, such as the United Nations, are no longer seen as capable of providing such protection politically, economically and, important, militarily (unless it is

in consonance with the interests of the Big Powers). Examples of the invasion of Iraq and Libya in this millennium have given rise to a sense of 'might' being 'right', leading countries who feel threatened to equip themselves to defend their sovereignties as best as they deem fit. An example is the behaviour pattern of North Korea where there is a conviction on the part of the leadership that the situation in the Korean peninsula can only stabilise when a state of nuclear deterrence is reached between Pyongyang and Washington. The failure of disarmament and non-proliferation worldwide, including among the most powerful nations, will only lead to greater danger for all.

Three, the inability of many regions to overcome the post-colonial irredentist issues when the colonial powers made hurried retreats without delineating boundaries and resolving conflicting claims of newly-independent states. Two examples come to mind in this respect. The first is the problem of Palestine, which appears to have given rise to a perennial problem between Israel and the Arabs – it is often seen as being at the core of the Middle East crisis. The second is the India-Pakistan rivalry, mainly over the unsettled claims of both over Kashmir, the main – though not the only – apple of discord between the two.

Four, the existence of communal disharmony exacerbated by the inability of some states to absorb minorities within their national fold. The refugee situation in Europe, following the repression of ethnic minorities in Syria as well as the instability in the region, and the crisis unfolding in the Rakhine State of Myanmar leading to an enormous cross-border influx of Rohingya people into Bangladesh, are cases in point.

Five, there is still the lingering challenge of poverty alleviation in Eurasia, particularly in South Asia and Southeast Asia. In spite of the talk of this being the 'Asian century', India has more people in extreme poverty than in the entire Sub-Saharan Africa. Also, in South Asia and Southeast Asia, there are still at least 13 to 14 nations that are classified as 'Least Developed Countries' (LDCs) by the United Nations. The loss of influence of global agencies such as the World Trade Organisation, as evident in the proliferation of a large number of regional trading arrangements, means a diminished interest in the creation of a level-playing field for these countries in global trade by offering special and differential treatment in facilitating market access, which was a mandate of the WTO. This has become a serious impediment to the development aspirations of the LDCs. Regional trade organisations are

naturally loath to afford them opportunities which global bodies, with higher ideals, are in a position to do so. Poorer countries have lesser capacity to successfully confront global phenomena such as climate change or health hazards in the form of epidemics and pandemics, and end up being greater sufferers of these hazards.

The above is not a comprehensive list. However, the five points appear to be some of the primary challenges for Eurasia as well as South Asia and Southeast Asia. While it is an irrefutable truism that, just because there is a problem does not mean that there is a solution, regular consultations at regional and global levels, as are now being conducted in such Central Asian locations as Astana in Kazakhstan or Tashkent in Uzbekistan, are seen as necessary. It is because they often produce ideas that relieve pain and propel progress. This underscores the now self-evident Churchillian assertion that to ‘jaw-jaw is better than to war-war’.

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