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Power-Rivalry in Asia:

New Arms Race and Lessons from Ukraine

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Asia was originally a Greek construct, dating back to the classical times, beyond Alexander the Great. It is vast, varied, complex and diverse. There is no discernible common thread that binds it together. Still, it is seen to be a continent on the rise. This perception is helping to lend it a common identity. However, the fact remains that one does not usually feel the sense of being an Asian, as one does of being an American, a European, or an African.

Today, a burgeoning sense of reawakening pervades Asia, the vast mass of land and peoples. The global focus is moving towards contemporary Asia in a ‘tectonic shift’.² This continent is an

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amalgam of ancient civilisations that rose and fell, as Arnold Toynbee argued that cultures do when they are unable to surmount the challenges that confront them. Eventually almost all of Asia fell under western colonial subjugation. The Asians have now shaken off this alien imperial domination. In the cusp of great changes, Asian nations are now forging ahead, albeit at varying speeds. In Europe, the Westphalian system has evolved through many crises and conflicts. This has resulted ultimately in the creation of a set of cooperative nation-states.

Many Asian nation-states are still in the process of being consolidated. There are others who are still evolving. Hence the many irredentist issues. These territorial disputes are often deeply destabilising. In the past they have led to wars between China and India, India and Pakistan, and smaller conflicts in Southeast Asia as between Thailand and Cambodia. Today some Asian states such as China, Japan, India, and Iran are growing in strength and power. They feel it necessary to be able to defend their expanding assets effectively. The challenge for the rest of the world is to manage Asia's rise with deftness, understanding, and circumspection. This could make the difference between Arcady and Armageddon.

SIPRI Report 2013 points to Asia's increased defence spending and nuclear arsenals. Actually only five of the world's top defence spenders are Asian states. Also, as to nuclear warhead numbers, China has only 250 compared to Russia's 8,500 and America's 7,700; and India and Pakistan have around 90 to 110 each compared to 300 of France and 225 of the UK.³ But the smaller numbers should not obfuscate greater Asian risks in four areas: insufficient command and control capabilities, possibilities of accidental discharge or rogue action; dangers of weapons falling into the hands of undesirable non-state actors; and finally, greater production of smaller theatre-grade weapons, enhancing propensity to use and favouring the concept that a nuclear war is 'fightable' and 'winnable'.⁴ The 'blue-water aspirations' of some navies and acquisitions of greater numbers of warships and submarines increase the dangers of accidental conflicts.

² The expression was used by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at a University student forum on 28 January 2014. *Straits Times*, 29 January 2014.

³ See, 'Nuclear Recount: New Report on Asia's Nuclear Stockpiles', SIPRI Yearbook, 2013 (Stockholm:2013)

⁴ For a detailed study of the theoretical concept, see Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, "Nonproliferation and WMD Debate: The Relevance to South Asia", ISAS Working Papers, No.178, 2 October, 2013,

Again, the amount or quantum of weapons is not as significant as the political intent that lies behind their procurement. If there is at all an arms race in Asia, this should be seen as a metaphor for, to quote Clausewitz 'politics by other means'. What is important is the political and strategic competition the procurement implies and reflects. Concerns of global policy-makers should be directed more towards moderating, or calming, Asia's political volatility.

This political volatility is playing out against an unstable matrix. The so-called 'Arab Spring' is still producing unsettling results. Syria and Iraq are in a mess. Arab-Israeli issues remain unresolved. Iran's perceived strength is leading to Saudi stockpiling of armament on a vast scale. While the Indo-Pakistan situation is calmer, and there are other positive developments such as between China and Taiwan and the two Koreas, NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan this year may produce a Taliban upsurge destabilising the region. The Sino-Japanese-Korean spat, together with China's assertion of its claims on the South and East China Seas, are heightening anxieties. This can be seen against the backdrop of the current Beijing leadership's 'China Dream' or *Chunguo Meng*. Despite what it calls its new model of relationship between two big powers, namely China and the US, Beijing takes a dim view of the latter's 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' towards Asia. Japan, with its nationalistic 'Abenomics', is experiencing what some see as a national resurgence. Asia's impressive economic gains have, sadly, not adequately addressed the problems of domestic poverty. Widening income gaps within and among nations remain a source of tension. Asia lacks Europe's structures to absorb such pressures. Regional organisations like SAARC and ASEAN are nowhere close to the EU in terms of either achievements or aspirations.

There are many smaller Asian States that border larger neighbouring countries such as China, India or Indonesia. They have been critically watching developments between Ukraine and Russia. They have two broad options before them: one, 'Finlandization' or the way Finland dealt with the old Soviet Union, which the Scandinavian analyst Erling Bjøl described as 'tacking close to the shark to avoid being eaten'⁵; the other is to strengthen their own defence capabilities, rather than to rely on foreign security guarantees. They see the US and the West hapless, as

⁵ Erling Bjøl, 'The Small States in International Politics' in August Schou and Arne Olav (eds), *Small States in International Relations*, (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wicksell, 1971) , p.33

Crimea is being slowly sliced away from its mother country to be engulfed by the vastly stronger power. There is of course a lesson to be drawn from Ukraine, but Asia must be aware of its uniqueness and not be entrapped by examples elsewhere.

The greatest need is to avoid the ‘Thucydides trap’. The Latin historian had famously observed: “When Athens grew strong, there was great fear in Sparta”. Conflict can arise out of such fears and misperceptions. It happened in Europe before the 1914 Great War, when powers, the sated confronting the not-sated, in the words of the Australian historian Christopher Clark, almost ‘sleep-walked’ into war.⁶ Asia would do well to learn from Europe’s experience. At the same time, the US and Europe must guard against being unwittingly drawn into yet another quagmire of Asian conflict. This time round, given that Asia is awash with deadly armaments, this might have horrendous consequences.

So, as Lenin had famously asked, ‘what is to be done?’ Should there be a series of ‘Big Tent’ Conferences in the Helsinki model of the 1970s when there was talk of a ‘European Home’? CBMs must obviously be put in place, but of what kind? Should international institutions including the UN Security Council be restructured to adjust to new global realities? Should the West enmesh Asia in a web of interactions thus defusing tensions? How can Asia’s vibrant civil society contribute to the continent’s political and security stability? These are questions and challenges that Asia’s leadership confronts in our times.

How they respond will determine if Asia will experience a period of peace it badly needs to buttress its growing economic might. The best bet is that their behaviour will conform to the principle underlying an order a British military commander was said to have given his troops: “Have faith in God, my boys, but keep your powder dry”. Only that, for God, what should be read is international law and global norms.

⁶ Cited in, Andreas Herberg –Rothe, ‘Lessons from the Past- When fear drove Nations to War’, *Straits Times*, 24 January 2014.