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PERSPECTIVES

Will this be the Pacific Century?

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There is no longer any doubt that the regional security environment is undergoing its most profound transformation since the early days of the Cold War. Defending the nation from hostile states, separatism and other internal threats defined the Asia-Pacific security agenda in the second half of the 20th century.

Combating the scourge of international terrorism, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and strengthening state capacity against a host of emerging non-military challenges have become today's strategic priorities for governments of virtually all political persuasion.

The past as prologue

A decade ago many thought that the 21st century would be the Asia-Pacific century - that we were on the cusp of an historic redistribution of power and wealth from old Europe to the new Asia.

The portents seemed propitious. Over 25 years of double digit economic growth had resulted in unprecedented increases in wealth and a new confidence to match.

But this confidence was pricked and then deflated by the devastating economic crisis of the late 1990s before China and India's extraordinary transformation propelled the region forward on a second wave of sustained economic growth.

Was the economic crisis of 1997 and 1998 merely a temporary setback in the region's inevitable transition to global leadership? Or is this a second false dawn masking endemic, underlying institutional and environmental vulnerabilities that will prevent the Asia Pacific from realising its full potential?

The answer to these questions will depend on how the region deals with the two principal strategic challenges confronting it. The first of these is accommodating China's and India's rising aspirations and crafting a new regional order that will require a reconfiguration of the balance of power among the major states.

Historically, the Asia-Pacific has been shaped by Asian and European powers. In the pre-colonial period they included China and India as well as sub-regional and local hegemons. Then came the period of European colonisation, followed by the post-Cold War bifurcation of the region between the former Soviet Union and the United States.

In the first decade of the post-Cold War there was a brief unipolar moment, where the US was the undisputed super-power. But we are now returning to a more traditional multi-polar structure, in which China, India, Indonesia and Japan are influential. Russia may once again become so, but for the moment, it remains a European rather than an Asian power.

The extent to which each of these states is able to minimise disputes and conflicts and work cooperatively according to agreed norms, will ultimately determine the efficacy of the new order. Recent Sino-Japanese frictions, North Korea's nuclear weapons program and Taiwan's unresolved status are indicative of the challenges ahead.

Each of the major states also has to deal with its own unique problems. Chastened by its Iraq experience, the US will have to accept that while it is still pre-eminent in the region it will have to share power with others.

The uni-polar moment has already passed into history.

China is rapidly reclaiming its historical position as the major Asian power but its impressive economic growth may not continue unless it solves its environmental and energy problems.

Ironically, Japan is becoming more assertive as its relative, strategic position weakens. Unless Japan arrests its plummeting fertility rate it risks long-term decline.

Indonesia will continue to muddle through but the country's capacity to play a major regional role will be constrained by a burgeoning population, social divisions, environmental degradation and ongoing ethnic tensions.

India has many pressing domestic problems to contend with, notably a decaying infrastructure, religious and political conflict and widening income disparities between the networked, beneficiaries of growth and those who have missed out on the fruits of globalisation.

New security challenges

A second strategic challenge is the region's capacity to deal with a raft of emerging transnational dangers which have little to do with the exercise of military power by competing nation states.

These 'threats without enemies' include environmental degradation, infectious diseases, food, water and energy scarcity, climate change and the heightened threat posed by international terrorism, which I believe is morphing into a global insurgency.

Collectively, they are stretching our understanding of security and posing novel challenges for foreign and defence policy.

Some times these emerging challenges are referred to as small 's' or soft security issues, a term which I dislike because it suggests that they are not to be compared in seriousness to so called 'hard', military security issues.

On the contrary, as I will argue, the consequences of transnational threats may be just as dangerous and destabilising as state on state conflicts and they are, by definition, beyond the capacity of any one state to ameliorate or combat.

Some non-state actors, for example, have at their disposal resources and influence that may equal, or even exceed, those of most states. Many are neither benign nor reluctant to use force, as terrorist and insurgent groups with international reach continue to demonstrate not

only in Iraq and Afghanistan but also Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and the United States.

These organisations are challenging the state's traditional monopoly over organised violence.

Moreover, war has been criminalised in many parts of the world including in this region. The internationalisation of crime and the criminalisation of war have become key strategic issues for all of us.

Today, wars are less driven by disputes over sovereignty and competition between states and more by struggles over identity – notably between those who favour closed, particularist societies and those who advocate tolerance, cosmopolitanism and inclusiveness.

In his seminal work 'The Shield of Achilles', Philipp Bobbit postulates that the current conflict against international terrorism is merely the latest chapter in an epochal struggle for supremacy between market states and authoritarian movements, which he calls 'the long war.'

One does not have to see the attack of 11 September 2001 as a paradigm shift in international relations to acknowledge that the new age of terrorism has major implications for Asian security.

The reasons are threefold. First, 9/11 and its aftermath demonstrated the global reach of al Qa'ida and its capacity to forge transnational, strategic alliances with like-minded groups far from the organisation's home base in Afghanistan and now Pakistan.

Second, today's terrorists are far more likely to obtain and use weapons of mass destruction to achieve their political aims. While their capacity to wreak destruction does not yet compare with that of the Cold War when the world lived with the constant threat of nuclear war, terrorists are much more likely than states to use nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

Third, while terrorists have no armoured divisions, aircraft carriers or squadrons of advanced fighter aircraft at their disposal they have nevertheless demonstrated an impressive and sometimes lethal capacity to perpetrate violence.

But other transnational forces, which have nothing to do with terrorism or organised crime, also have enormous implications for security in this region.

Pandemic diseases, for example, have the capacity to kill extraordinary numbers of people. They are also global in their reach, difficult to stop, create disproportionate panic and may result in massive economic losses which have the potential to destabilise weak states and even undermine regional and global order.

Because of its speed of transmission and virulence, avian influenza could bring the global economy to a halt and devastate the developed as well as the developing world.

The relatively modest SARS crisis of 2003 provides an insight into what could happen if a strain of avian influenza develops into a genuine pandemic.

SARS infected around 8,000 people, mainly in Asia, over a five month period. About 10 percent of those affected died - less than a thousand people in total. Yet it cost the economies of the Asia-Pacific some US$40 billion and reduced air traffic in the region by 45 percent.

Climate change is another transnational issue which has moved onto the international security agenda as evidenced by the first ever discussion of the subject in the UN Security Council earlier this year.

Climate change poses fundamental questions of human security, survival and the stability of nation states which necessitate judgements about political and strategic risk as well as economic cost. The climate change future which awaits us may be just as injurious to the integrity and functioning of the state and its people as those resulting from military conflict.

In assessing the long-term consequences of climate change for international security we should be mindful of the anthropologist, Jared Diamond's, warning.

In his study of the reasons for the collapse and survival of societies, Diamond observed that "in many historical cases a society that was depleting its environmental stocks could absorb losses as long as the climate was benign, but when the climate became hotter, colder, wetter, drier or more variable they were pushed over the edge and even collapsed."

Conversely, it was able to survive its self-inflicted resource depletion until climate change produced further resource depletion. It was neither factor taken alone, but the combination of environmental impact and climate change that proved fatal

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is vital for military commanders to understand the nature and drivers of tomorrow's security environment because without this knowledge they cannot be effective leaders.

Armies in the 21st Century have to be able to win the peace, as well as the war; and when they do fight they must be able to prevail against a diverse range of threats and adversaries often bearing scant resemblance to those of earlier times.

If war is being redefined then so are the core tasks of Armies everywhere. Today soldiers have to be peace-keepers as well as war-fighters, and peace-makers as well as nation builders.

To do this well requires a level of skill, judgement, vision and leadership that few possess. Those Armies that privilege these qualities will set the standard for all others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Professor Dupont has worked as a strategist, freelance journalist, diplomat, policy analyst and scholar and has published widely on defence and international security issues. He is an Australian representative to the Asean Regional Forum's Register of Experts and Eminent Persons and is a special advisor on foreign policy and national security to East Timor’s Prime Minister, Jose Ramos Horta. Professor Dupont is also a member of the Foreign Affairs Council, an advisory body to the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the Defence and National Security Advisory Council to the Minister for Defence.

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