

America in East Asia: The Rise and the Waning of a Benevolent Hegemon Image

*Victor SUMSKY**

THUS SPOKE COMRADE STALIN (AN INTRODUCTION)

“We never forget that the United States of North America is a capitalist country. But among the Americans there are many physically and morally healthy people, healthy in their whole approach to work, to business. This businesslike attitude, this simplicity is what makes us sympathetic.”

This statement belongs to a cool-headed opponent of the United States—a Soviet leader well aware, among other things, of the US role in instigating the Russo-Japanese War and of American intervention in the Russian Far East in 1918–1920. Thus spoke Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin in a famous interview with the German writer Emil Ludwig on December 13, 1931.¹ Stalin’s surprisingly balanced attitude towards America may serve to remind a student of East Asian politics about the *benevolent hegemon image* (or BHI for short) that the US had enjoyed in that part of the world for decades.

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*Head of Section, Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

Although elements of the BHI were already in place by the middle of the twentieth century, its real power became clear only after 1945. The author's purpose is to trace the origins of this image and to explain its consolidation, against some very heavy odds, during the period of the Cold War. Further, the American triumph of the early 1990s will be portrayed as the turning point in the fortunes of the BHI. The analysis will continue into the present, with the focus on the signs of the waning of the BHI, and will end up with a speculation on the nature of the benevolent hegemony.

TRACING THE BHI ORIGINS

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the age of Asia's political and cultural awakening, the United States seemed to be all that a subjugated non-European nation might aspire to be—a colony that had revolutionized itself into a democratic republic, a land of innovators and pioneers, an expanding economy and a power on the rise.

To be sure, it had already displayed its imperial instincts openly and boldly, but first and foremost in the Western Hemisphere. In East Asia the United States was not perceived as the looming predator, despite the seizure of the Philippines.

Looking for the origins of the BHI in that era, one might point to a set of interrelated moves and developments that contributed to its emergence (apart from the well-known fact that World War I resulted in the enormous growth of America's global power and prestige).

The call for an Open Door policy in China and practical efforts in that direction are a major item on this list. Based on the idea that any external participant in the exploitation of that land should compete with the others on an equal basis and enjoy no privileges, the Open Door policy mostly reflected America's late coming to the table of Asia's repartition. At the moment of its formation and for quite some time after, the US simply lacked the capacity to copy the stronger powers—in other words, to cut out for itself a special zone of influence in China, backing it up by military muscle. In a way, though, the Open Door policy worked against China's partition, giving the US an image of a relatively benign force among hardened imperialist rivals. Unable to impose its will on them, the United States was trying to bind them *through a multilaterally accepted norm* adding a non-egoistic touch to what was essentially a self-serving course and making it look like *a matter of principle*.

Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points (1918) belonged to the same class of initiatives that combined emphatic idealism with calculated realism at its core. Once again, the US offered such a program of action to other great powers that, if implemented to a sufficient degree, would have undercut their abilities to compete politically, economically and militarily with America. Wilson's point 5, dealing with the colonial issue and calling for its free and impartial solution, was quite typical of this. Much like the Open Door policy, it effectively made for the abolition of monopolistic control by colonial powers within their colonies in favor of America's access to their resources and markets. It was, stated bluntly, an exercise in *anti-colonialism by the neocolonialist*. Nevertheless, by the standards of the time and from the perspective of other Western states point 5 was hardly a typical statement. And if it resonated widely among the dependencies, it was also because the United States seemed to be obeying its own prescriptions in the Philippines—the country that became its possession at the turn of the twentieth century, after the Spanish-American and Filipino-American wars.

What the US had established in the Philippines had the appearance of a self-dismantling colonial regime, set up ostensibly to train the natives in the art of democratic politics. Playing on the image of benevolence—in fact the term “benevolent assimilation” has become integral to the period's vernacular—the brand of US colonial rule appeared to be something truly unique. Starting as early as 1907, local political parties were allowed to compete for seats in the colonial legislature. In less than a decade a pledge to grant independence to the Philippines was included in the Jones Law (1916), followed by a no-nonsense Filipinization of the colonial administrative structure. Further developments resulted in the formation by 1935 of the Commonwealth of the Philippines—a dominion-like entity supposed to become a sovereign republic after a transition period of ten years. For other colonialists of East Asia—the British, the French, the Dutch and, naturally, the Japanese—this was nearly a scandal. Dutch officials suppressed publication of news from the Philippines in Indonesian papers and were rumored to view the Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon as even “more subversive . . . than Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin rolled into one”—a gross but telling exaggeration.²

In reality, the Americans were led into these unorthodox policies by their own inexperience combined with the specifics of the local situation. Grabbing the archipelago in the midst of the first anti-colonial revolution

in Asia, they could not pacify it by sheer repression. Some positive response to the demands of the Filipinos, weary of the conservative Spanish rule and heavily politicized in the process of fighting it, was needed too. Many American experiments in neocolonial social engineering were rooted in that need.

None of this is to deny that during the last few years preceding the Pacific War the Philippines served as an encouraging example to much of Asia. This is what we want in India, said Mahatma Gandhi to Carlos Romulo, a prominent Manila journalist and a future foreign secretary of his country, as they discussed the peaceful road toward Commonwealth status and Filipino independence outlined in the Tydings-McDuffie Law. Gandhi's words reflected not only his admiration for the achievement of the colonized but his acknowledgement of the colonial master's wisdom.³

If World War I turned America into one of several globally important centers of power, World War II propelled it to absolute dominance in the Western world. To maintain this position and to use it as a basis for still greater expansion, the US found it necessary to wage and win what is known as the Cold War, with East Asia as a major battleground.

COLD WAR AND THE BHI'S CONSOLIDATION

The nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki turned out to be both a final shot in a fight with the Japanese and a prelude to America's nearly half-a-century confrontation with the USSR (whom Harry Truman tried to scare with his newly acquired weapon). Though nuclear strikes were not to be repeated, their shadow—and the shadow of those who ordered them—hung over the rest of the Cold War era. In addition, America's East Asian record of that period included acts of aggression, lost battles, the promotion of political purges, the empowerment and perpetuation of dictatorial regimes. Nonetheless, the US did manage, in these circumstances and with such a record, to build up its BHI. The question is: who would perceive the US hegemony as benevolent and why?

In seeking answers it might be useful to take into account the shape and the images of some other regional players during the first Cold War years. Japan's occupation of East Asian lands in the 1930s and 1940s had infuriated the locals and left a very bitter memory. But Japan was now militarily destroyed and humiliated. Old colonial powers had been

badly weakened by the recent all-European upheaval and, no matter how hard they tried, could not turn back the tide of national liberation sweeping across the region. Neither the Soviet Union with all the damage inflicted on it by the Nazis, nor the People's Republic of China rising out of its civil war ashes were capable, realistically speaking, of posing serious economic challenges, let alone direct military threats, to the United States.

But, burdened though they were with domestic problems, neither Communist regime was in a defeatist mood. On the contrary, having just managed to prevail in struggles of historic proportions, they each felt that the future belonged to them, behaved assertively in the international arena and inspired a militant following worldwide. Since the US ruling elite was sticking then as now to the logic of preemption, its response was loud and forceful. *Systematic demonization of the Communist opponents* (made easier by the repressive aspects of Stalinist and Maoist policies)—and, by implication, *a portrayal of an anti-Communist America as the Force of Good*—became an integral part of the US containment strategy.

With America as its commander-in-chief, the anti-Communist crusade was conceived as a comprehensive military, political, economic and cultural effort of all who joined it. Geared to the use of hard and soft power on a multilateral scale, this bigger-than-life enterprise was ostensibly aimed against “the infidels,” but in reality served as the vehicle for an unprecedented global expansion of the United States. Today, with the acuity of hindsight, one finds more and more reasons to believe that such expansion was actually the first and real priority of the whole operation of containment.⁴

East Asia's share of typical Cold War troubles was enormous. Nonetheless few would dispute the fact that the American strategy of containing Communism helped to bring about *the East Asian economic miracles* and the beginnings of *East Asian regionalism*, thereby changing the region beyond recognition.

The starting point was Japan. In Washington's view, the former enemy's quick reconstruction was an antidote against the rise of local Communism and an essential precondition for the desired regional order. The US military shield and political guidance provided a security framework for the captains of the Japanese industry to resume their work and, in a matter of years, transform the collapsed economy into a booming

one. Treating Japan in this way, the Americans performed a double service to the rulers of East Asian non-Communist states. On the one hand, the reemergence of Japanese militarism as a threat to the region was forestalled. On the other, a reinvigorated Japan was now a valuable source of the capital, know-how and ideas that its less developed neighbors badly needed.

South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore led the rest of the region in mastering these lessons and transforming themselves into “the newly industrialized economies” (NIEs)—but not before the US substantially intervened in the first two of them, taking Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist government in Taiwan under its wing, going to war in Korea and establishing a permanent military presence to the south of the 38th parallel. Like Japan, these “four dragons” needed foreign outlets for their export-oriented industries, and the US kept its market open for their products as it had for those made in Japan.

If the aftermath of the Korean War proved conducive to the growth of the first-generation NIEs, then America’s wars in Indo-China indirectly prompted the accelerated modernization and the process of regional integration for another group of countries.

Developments in Vietnam in the mid-1960s compelled the US to acknowledge that its reliance on puppets in fighting Communism was futile. To step out of this mess without provoking the spread of “the Red Menace” to neighboring countries, the Americans needed a barrier—a chain of stable political regimes sympathetic to each other and friendly towards Washington. Demand generated supply: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), initially comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, was launched in 1967. Unlike SEATO, ASEAN was not a military bloc, and all its members belonged to the region itself.⁵ While this reflected the desire of the Association’s founders for more independence in their external affairs, their well-known anti-Communism left no doubts as to where they stood on the Cold War front.

In time it became clear that the Association’s members were united by a deeper resemblance in their political, economic and ideological aspirations. A somewhat similar model of capitalist modernization was evolving in each of the ASEAN five. Guarantees of political stability were provided by rightist authoritarian regimes who ruled with various degrees of repression and rigidity. Much like in Japan and the NIEs, production and services were developing within the framework of export-

oriented, mixed economies, combining market freedoms with a healthy dose of state regulation. Ideology was dominated by official nationalism which, having no tolerance for leftism, was moderate enough so as not to alienate foreign capital. American, Japanese, and later NIEs investors were treated with special care.

Impressive economic growth lasting for almost three decades (with the notable exception of the Philippines in the 1980s and some minor interruptions in other cases) was an obvious result of this strategy. No less significant were the signs that some ASEAN states were transforming themselves into viable subjects of history, to the point that national statehood in the region was becoming stronger. Characteristically, this was not at all detrimental to ASEAN as a regional body. According to Amitav Acharya, Southeast Asians had been nurturing “the nationalist vision of regionalism” well before the birth of their Association.⁶ Developing this idea in his own way, Alexey Bogaturov once noted that these nations, aware of their individual weaknesses, “embraced the idea of asserting the national self of each of them by joining their efforts. . . . While the European integration offered the gradual elimination of state borders, the East Asian one was aimed at their reinforcement and painstaking mutual ‘grinding-in’ of the nations in order to avoid future quarrels that may reduce their capabilities.”⁷

Meaningful as they were, the East Asian changes that are outlined above acquired a new dimension after Richard Nixon’s visit to Beijing (1972). Conducted on the anti-Soviet basis and thus putting the USSR as America’s number one adversary under new pressure, the US-China rapprochement also prepared the ground for the opening up of the Chinese economy, the four modernizations policy, the endorsement of private initiative in the PRC and, eventually, the biggest East Asian miracle of them all. The increasing acceptance of China in the region and its new contacts with Japan, the ASEAN members and even Taiwan, were looked upon as another remarkable sign of the times. Despite their staunch anti-Communism, East Asian leaders were too pragmatic to miss the full importance of the switch from Maoist revolutionism to the reformism of Deng Xiaoping. The opportunities of doing business with China were also not to be ignored. On the political plane the 1979–1991 attempts to resolve the Cambodian conflict brought together the US, its old East Asian allies and the PRC in ways unthinkable in the midst of America’s Indo-China adventure.

As the Cold War came to an end, there was hardly a doubt that Japan,

the NIEs, most ASEAN members and China were among the top beneficiaries of this period in history. Mindful of sweeping generalizations, one might nevertheless suggest that sufficient sectors in the ruling elites and the growing middle classes of these countries, even perhaps some men in the street, did have reason to view the US as the benevolent hegemon of East Asia. Not so the peasants of Vietnam whom this hegemon tried to bomb into the Stone Age, nor the resistance fighters in East Timor annexed by Indonesian generals with the blessing of Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger.

A TURNING POINT IN THE BHI STORY

What could have strengthened America's BHI more than the Cold War victory? If the answer is "Nothing," then what about the noticeable signs of this image's erosion so soon after the triumph? A comparison of the views and intentions typical of East Asian and American leaders in the immediate post-Cold War period provides a clue to this puzzle.

The East Asians were interested, above anything else, in sustaining their economic dynamism and avoiding any political instability that might disrupt it. Longing to preserve a status quo in this very basic sense, they imagined that a sudden disappearance of what used to be known as the Soviet threat might prompt an American military withdrawal from the region. Local and external analysts hypothesized that this would create a power vacuum and provoke a disruptive competition to fill it. They feared for the peace and prosperity of the region from the aggravation of some dormant but potentially harmful conflicts (such as the multilateral dispute over the sovereignty of the South China Sea islands). Some drew up pessimistic scenarios in which Japan, or China, or both, no longer restrained by the US presence and Cold War obligations, succumb to their latent imperial instincts and opt for aggressive regional strategies ruinous to the whole neighborhood. America's presence was considered so vitally important to the region that when in 1991 Manila legislators voted for the evacuation of the US bases from the Philippines, other ASEAN countries immediately offered the US Navy and Air Force access to sea ports and air fields (though not in the framework of permanent basing).

This is not to say that the American habit of imposing its own humanitarian standards on the rest of the world was not provoking allergic reactions among East Asians. They also had an impression that, having

adopted in the late 1980s the Australian idea of creating a structure to promote economic integration and trade in the whole of Asia-Pacific, Washington was striving to secure its pre-eminence in the newly emerging body. In fact, Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad said as much by his 1990 counterproposal to convene the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) without the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. And if eventually the ASEAN countries joined the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and approved the American program of energizing it at the summits in Seattle (1993) and Bogor (1994), they were, in all probability, motivated by the desire to keep America engaged in East Asia. Simultaneously, however, they were making clear their intention to become collectively a stronger and more autonomous player. This is seen in the policy of ASEAN's enlargement through the admittance to full membership of the Indo-Chinese states; the launch of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, 1994) focused on issues of Asia-Pacific security, with the Association in "the driver's seat"; and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM, 1996) where the EU members represented the Old World, while the members of ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea represented Asia.

In the meantime, US policymakers demonstrated in words and deeds that their post-Cold War agenda was rooted in the adamant desire to preserve in perpetuity the status of "the only superpower" and to convert their late twentieth century geopolitical victory into mammoth geo-economic gains. Globalization sermons with their anti-statist themes, calls for instant political democratization, and adoption of free trade and economic liberalism were aimed at achieving both purposes. Old anti-Soviet alliances were being refashioned and overhauled to make them handy for nipping in the bud *any* future attempt to challenge the US hegemony. Neo-conservative think-tanks kept trying to identify potential challengers before it was too late.

The early (and often mutually contradictory) manifestations of this line in East Asia included hypercriticism of Japan (or "Japan-bashing," as they called it) for alleged practices of unfair trade and economic advantages due to strategic dependence on the US; unnecessarily provocative approaches to the hotbeds of tension on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Straits; and attempts to draw Japan, South Korea and Taiwan into the development of East Asian Theater Missile Defense. The latter efforts exposed the US perception of the PRC as a state that was grooming itself for global rivalry with the United States. Assessments

of this kind, circulating among the temporarily out-of-power Reaganites, obviously influenced the treatment of Beijing by the Clinton administration. Its diplomacy was not well calibrated, liable to variations and not too popular in the region.

At the same time the behavior of East Asians themselves was provoking more and more displeasure across the Pacific. The expectations that APEC would work as a tool for opening up East Asian economies were not being fulfilled. At the APEC summit in Osaka (1995) the Japanese, the representatives of ASEAN and other Asians managed to insist that they themselves would determine the speed of their trade liberalization. Wishing to add the debating of international security issues to the APEC mandate (and outflank the ARF whose prerogative it was), the Americans ran into further resistance. ASEAN's offer of membership to Myanmar, whose military rulers were depicted in the West as the worst human rights violators, angered Washington still more. Another hot issue was the mistreatment of East Timorese by Jakarta, periodically denounced by the US Congress. Weary of these reprimands, the informal leader of ASEAN boldly returned the favor. In 1997, months before its financial collapse, the New Order regime refused to buy an F-16 squadron from the US and announced instead the purchase of Russian fighter planes. From the US point of view, this was strengthening a bad trend. Just two years before, in 1995, Kuala Lumpur resisted American arm-twisting and came to an agreement with Moscow over the supply of eighteen MIG-29s. Following Malaysia's and Indonesia's examples, Thailand and the Philippines also started taking an interest in Russian military hardware.⁸

Unusually frequent rifts and clashes of opinions between the US and the ASEAN members were hardly a matter of coincidence. Trans-nationalist, radically pro-market scenarios of globalization were incompatible with the efforts to strengthen national statehoods in the ASEAN zone. These countries were told to discard the model of modernization that had shown its efficiency, and to do so with the work of modernization still in progress. Refusing to obey, they tried to defend their choice through the concept of *Asian values*. This attempt to explain the specifics of social transformations in the region got a pointedly lukewarm reception in Europe and America.

Booming East Asian capital markets of the mid-1990s served as a smokescreen to cover the growing differences between the US and the region. But this same boom, made possible by hasty financial liberal-

ization in several countries, allowed transnational currency speculators to hit them like never before.

THE ASIAN CRISIS AND THE BHI EROSION

The strictly economic aspects of the crisis that started with the crash of the Thai baht on July 2, 1997, have been described too often to warrant a retelling. Today most victims of that crisis have improved their macroeconomic performance. China, untouched by the financial havoc of the late 1990s, continues to grow with amazing speed, while Japan is finally out of an unusually lengthy recession. Many observers tend to see the Asian Crisis as a thing of the past. This may be correct if one views it as a moment of dangerous instability for a number of currencies and banking systems. But those who approach it in a less technical and more holistic manner and take into account the entire spectrum of its consequences, be they social or psychological, domestic or global, may not share this conclusion. Among the present day phenomena observable in East Asia that can and should be linked to the shock of 1997–98 are the weakening of ASEAN as well as nation state structures in some of its member countries. Not to be overlooked are various manifestations of the middle-class disillusionment with official politics, the rise of extremism in religious, particularly Islamic garb, coupled with denunciations of the whole globalization project and the US role in promoting it.

Though the BHI erosion started fairly soon after the US triumph in the Cold War, it was the Asian Crisis that turned this process into something almost palpable. The reasons lie in Washington's own reaction to the troubles of its long-time friends.

To the US, this crisis, at least initially, was a kind of reward for the regional discomforts it had endured in the early 1990s. Failing to impose its prescriptions on East Asian economies through APEC, it now pursued the same objective by relying on the International Monetary Fund. IMF "assistance" came along with a set of such well known conditions as limits on budgetary expenses, mass bankruptcies of insolvent companies and the admittance of foreign investors to segments of domestic economies previously inaccessible to them. Nevertheless, pressing circumstances forced the leaders of Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea to accept these packages.

The dire impact of the crisis not just on ASEAN, but on the wider forums for regional security and multilateral cooperation was not too

worrisome for Washington. Not playing a central role in ARF and excluded from ASEM, it did not have much to lose in that sense. Instead, the US exploited the sharpened sense of vulnerability in East Asia by offering increased military aid to some in exchange for greater access to their naval and air facilities, training grounds and maintenance centers. These moves added greater flexibility to the American military presence and at the same time shortened the strategic lead on which the US held its regional partners.

While Washington was making these gains, the crisis victims were becoming increasingly unhappy with IMF stabilization programs. Ample evidence in the Fund's history showed that such programs could only aggravate the situation that initially pushed the borrowers to this creditor of last resort. There were also suspicions that the US and the Fund were trying not so much to save the local economies as to bail out big foreign investors who faced the prospect of heavy losses. Finally, the IMF-prescribed restructuring might easily end up with the dirt-cheap sale of the best local banks and production units to transnational dealers, and the reduced capacity of the states in crisis to determine their own economic policies.

On top of that, the Clinton administration blocked the initiative of Japan and Taiwan to create the Asian Monetary Fund (which was designed to grant assistance with no IMF-like conditions), and employed the IMF for purposes of regime change in Indonesia. Next Vice President Al Gore who represented the US at the November 1998 APEC summit in Kuala Lumpur urged the Malaysians to disobey their duly constituted government for its temerity in rejecting the Fund's dictate.

Whether or not Washington realized what these policy moves were doing to its reputation is anybody's guess. But if it acted in full awareness, then it was practically notifying everyone that *a benevolent hegemon image was not necessary for the One and the Only Hegemon*.

Painful as it was, the double trauma of the crisis and the US reaction to it did not reduce the leaders of East Asia to fatalism. In December 1997, right after the ASEAN summit in the Malaysian capital, its participants were joined by counterparts from China, Japan and South Korea. Next year a similar session took place in Hanoi. In 1999, the same group met in Manila to issue its *Joint Statement on Cooperation in East Asia*. In 2000, in Singapore, it expressed the intention to create a regional free trade area. Though these and further meetings were outwardly focused on issues of economic cooperation, the whole of the ASEAN + 3 or 10 + 3

process, as it has been called, was loaded with discernible political meanings, and some officials gladly took the chance to highlight the latter. For instance, Malaysia's Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar warmly welcomed ASEAN + 3 as the reincarnation of the East Asian Economic Caucus idea, knowing all too well that the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific Stanley Roth had proclaimed that idea dead.⁹

In the late 1990s a spontaneous East Asian move away from the United States would have been more than understandable. But cautious and calculating regional leaders would have never dragged their countries into a quarrel with America for purely emotional reasons. By all indications, their maneuvers were based on a sober assessment of what was going on.

Each of the Northeast Asian economic heavyweights welcomed ASEAN + 3 as a chance to show a friendly face to Southeast Asia and draw it closer in this time of trials. ASEAN's own motives seemed a bit more complex. No other country in the region had suffered from the crisis like Indonesia. Being ASEAN's core member-state for three decades, it had lost the capacity to play this role in the foreseeable future, and that loss had to be compensated. Entertaining no illusions about US benevolence, the Association was presumably trying to help itself by forming a set of special external partnerships to overcome the crisis and prevent its recurrence. Moreover, these partnerships were supposed to keep ASEAN members from drifting apart and losing the benefits of togetherness. Those chosen to get involved in this project were China, Japan and South Korea. The first displayed immunity to stock and currency exchange fevers and, refraining from devaluing the yuan, earned the gratitude of its neighbors. The second remained a major investment and financial assistance provider to the countries of the region in spite of its stagnating economy and failure to form the Asian Monetary Fund. The third, incurring heavy losses in 1997, had managed to develop such productive capacity and was so active in the ASEAN area, that to neglect it would have been unwise.

On the diplomatic front ASEAN was courting this trio much like Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines had courted Indonesia some thirty years ago. Back then Indonesia with its size, ambitions and development potential was offered the role of the group's unofficial leader and the stage on which to play the role. The major requirement had been that Indonesia lead in a non-aggressive way, without hampering

the dignity and rights of the followers. It now seemed that ASEAN was making a somewhat similar proposition to China and Japan. To stay face to face with either of these two would have been less than comfortable for the Association. By contrast, having formed a group with both China and Japan (who often saw things differently but still looked destined to coexist) ASEAN might be able to appeal to the one in case of difficulties with the other, or to mediate between them when they disagreed with each other. Most important, within such a framework ASEAN would be almost obliged to sustain its own internal cohesion as a precondition of being on a more or less equal footing with the Asian giants.

As for the goal that inspired all the ASEAN + 3 participants (namely, joining forces for the sake of common prosperity and stability), it seemed legitimate and anything but unexpected. What was unusual was the fact that *a new page in the history of East Asian regionalism was being opened against the wishes of the United States.*

LONELY AT THE TOP (AND NO LONGER BENEVOLENT)

At the dawn of the millennium the United States sits alone on top of the world. Its presence in East Asia, as in many other parts of the planet, is multidimensional and solid. The end of its hegemony is still not in sight. Yet, had the US given itself the task of thoroughly destroying the impression about its benign attitude towards the rest of the human race, it could have limited itself to doing simply what it has been doing since 9/11. Acting under the guise of fighting terror, eliminating “the outposts of tyranny” and introducing the world of Islam to democracy, *the Bush administration has not only demonstrated disregard for international law, a unilateralist stance in global affairs and readiness to wage pre-emptive and preventive wars. It has codified these into principles* in “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (2002).¹⁰

Yet Washington’s determination to get rid of its enemies and remake the world in its image has not been rewarded with the successes befitting its supposed omnipotence. Osama bin Laden walks free. Afghanistan and Iraq are yet to be pacified. Neither North Korea nor Iran is ready to bow to American pressure.

What is questionable is not just the efficacy of specific American moves, but America’s fundamental capacity for constructive relations with other nations and, from their perspective, the historical wisdom of sustaining close relations with America. None among the East Asian

countries has had such a long history of political, economic and cultural interactions with the US as the Philippines. It cannot be mere coincidence that this same country is suffering today from a severe social polarization, an oligarchic grip on its government and an appalling shortage of economic dynamism.

A predisposition towards political and economic options that contradict or ignore American priorities is reflected in phenomena of regional importance. Among the examples are Seoul's disagreements with Washington about what comprises an optimal approach to Pyongyang, and lively discussions without US input and participation about the need for an Asian currency unit. And then, of course, there is the process that recently led from ASEAN + 3 to the 1st East Asian Summit (Kuala Lumpur, 2005), with a prospect of using the latter as a basis for the future East Asian Community.

Disapproval of US behavior is expressed with remarkable frankness even at the highest official level. "Who is the real terrorist? Well, it's America . . . In fact, the US is the King of terrorists because of its war crimes in Iraq. The US condemns terrorists but itself carries out terror acts on Iraq," said the Indonesian Vice President Hamzah Haz in 2003. At about that time 74 percent of his compatriots who took part in a corresponding opinion poll were reportedly worried by the prospect of the US military threat to their country.¹¹

The importance of these facts is underscored by the emergence of a force that has not yet acquired hegemonic proportions but whose stature is nevertheless growing constantly. This is, naturally, China, perceived by a considerable number of regional players as not devoid of benevolence. Without going into the details of its present "charm offensive" in East Asia, suffice it to note how smartly and opportunely it displays the qualities that Bush's policymakers reject. Only lately a believer in multilateralism, Beijing has become a masterful user, interacting with its neighborhood in a lively way and putting relations with the neighbors on a sound legal basis. Its contributions to the well-being and integration of East Asia are doing much to enhance China's image as a supporter, not disrupter, of the status quo.

Although the overall regional potential of the US is still relatively greater, China now holds the political initiative. Unless China stumbles over something, a US effort to grab the initiative back will not be easy.

Will the US resign itself to the rise of this new rival, or will it try to undercut it? Judging by all that is known about the instincts and outlook

of American ruling elites, they are more likely to pick the second option. If so, then the predictions about another Great Game or another Cold War are not quite hollow, and the region's future is less than bright.

A major variable in any East Asian scenario is the state of relations between China and Japan. The current strains in this relationship are often attributed to the overlapping of historical wrongs, painful memories and nationalist feelings that arise on both sides as each longs for new international prominence.

The problem, however, is more complicated. Tokyo, with its declared intentions to be a more independent international player, does not see the strengthening of its alliance with Washington as contradictory to these intentions. But Beijing obviously does. It is against this background that Mr. Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine where all of Japan's war dead (including A-class war criminals) are consecrated arouse more and more anger in China. Of course, these visits, as well as Japanese history textbook revisions to correct the record of Japan's incursions, may be quite irritating in themselves. But are they creating bilateral strains, or are they just steeling China's firm refusal to accept Japan's contradictory posture? And if China is so unreceptive to the Japanese bid for membership in the UN Security Council, then is not this posture at least partly to blame? Does China after all need a new Security Council member whom it expects to vote in unison with the US?

Working to build up its relations with Beijing and Washington, Tokyo cannot rely on just its own impressions and assessments of these two. Being linked as closely as it is to East Asia, Japan needs to take into account the opinions about the US and China that dominate in the region. If the present trends are correctly described in this article, then someday the opinion that America's benevolent hegemony is history will get the attention it deserves among the Japanese leaders, and appropriate conclusions will follow.

CONCLUSIONS

This rich and graphic material offers a base for generalizations that may be valid beyond the regional limits that frame the discussion in this paper:

- A benevolent hegemony is a contradiction in terms and by nature cannot be stable and permanent.

- A benevolent hegemon image signifies that a hegemony has not yet reached its full development.
- A fully developed hegemon does not care about attributes or apologetics. It is not ashamed of using naked power, feels no need to appear benevolent or to cultivate in others a perception of its benevolence.

THUS SPOKE PROFESSOR TARLE (A POSTSCRIPT)

Putting finishing touches to this text, I cannot resist the temptation to make one more statement and ask another question. *The BHI erosion was as much a product of circumstances beyond the US control as an outcome of America's self-punishing but fully conscious actions. Where is the logic in this kind of behavior?*

Just as my introduction was built around a meaningful citation, another memorable quote will bring this paper to a close. The author is Evgeny Tarle (1875–1955), a brilliant Russian and later Soviet historian who penned in the 1930s a volume of essays on the genesis of European colonialism. Describing the Invincible Armada's catastrophe of 1588, Tarle noted that for Spain this expedition was essentially a preemptive move aimed at crushing potential contenders for supremacy on the high seas. He summarized his observations in the following passage: "Pretty often in the history of feudal and capitalist states it happens that, when the ruling classes start to realize that time is working against them, they launch a military offensive in too much of a hurry and in this very way accelerate their own end."¹²

Tarle's message is that for a hegemony, self-destructiveness, fed by disproportionate concerns about self-preservation and overemphasis on preemptive actions, is the norm rather than an aberration. If this is so and if hegemonies are inherently self-destructive, capable of damaging themselves in ways that no external enemy is able, then two more points arise.

- A loss of benevolence shows that a hegemony, no matter how mighty its appearance, is already operating in a self-destructive mode.
- While statistics, depicting imbalances of power, may suggest that a hegemon is much stronger than its potential adversaries, it is worth remembering that in a phase of self-destruction a hegemon is playing against itself, too. And the stronger it is, the stronger it can play against itself.

NOTES

¹ I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniya* [Works], vol. 13 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye izdatelstvo politicheskoy literatury, 1951), 114.

² Theodore Friend, *Between Two Empires: The Ordeal of the Philippines, 1929–1946* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1969), 170.

³ Carlos P. Romulo, *Mother America: A Living Story of Democracy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1943), 117.

⁴ For a consistent development of this theme see A.I. Utkin, *Amerikanskaya imperiya* [American Empire] (Moscow: EKSMO, 2003), ch. 3.

⁵ SEATO, standing for Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, was established in 1954 with the participation of Australia, Great Britain, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, the US and Thailand.

⁶ Amitav Acharya, *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43–51.

⁷ A.D. Bogaturov, *Velikiye derzhavy na Tikhom okeane. Istoriya i teoriya mezhdunarodnykh otosheniy v Vostochnoy Azii posle vtoroy mirovoy voyny (1945–1995)* [Great Powers on the Pacific: History and Theory of International Relations in East Asia after World War II, 1945–1995] (Moscow: Konvert–MONF, 1997), 201–02.

⁸ D. Litovkin, “Dorogu indoneziyskim SU prolozhili malayziyskiye MIGi” [The Way for the SUs to be Sold to Indonesia was Prepared by the MIGs Sold to Malaysia], *Izvestiya* (Moscow) 7 August 1997; D. Kosyrev, V “Moskvu priyeyzhayet potentsialnyi pokupatel rossiyskikh istrebiteley” [A Potential Buyer of Russian Fighter Planes Comes to Moscow], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Moscow), 10 September 1997; I. Korotchenko, “Moskva predlagayet oruzhiye Bangkoku” [Moscow Offers Weapons to Bangkok], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 24 October 1997; C. Bickers, “Bear Market: Russia Wants to Be Top Arms Supplier to Asia,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Hong Kong), 4 September 1997, 25–26.

⁹ “America’s Asia Point Man: Roth Defends APEC, Engagement and Al Gore,” *Asiaweek* (Hong Kong), 19 February 1999; S. Oorjitham, “ASEAN + 3 = “EAEC”, *Asiaweek*, 15 March 2000.

¹⁰ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002 <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>>. For an analysis of reactions to the Bush Doctrine in East Asia see: Amitav Acharya, “The Bush Doctrine and Asian Regional Order: The Perils and Pitfalls of Preemption,” *Asian Perspective* (Seoul), 27, no. 4 (2003): 217–47.

¹¹ M. Baker, “Southeast Asia Turns on Bush,” *Age* (Melbourne), 20 March 2004; E. Economy, “China’s Rise in Southeast Asia: Implications for Japan and the United States” <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=6350>>.

¹² Ye. V. Tarle, *Ocherki istorii kolonialnoi politiki zapandoyevropeiskikh gosudarstv (konets XV-nachalo XIX v.)* [Essays on the History of West European States’ Colonial Policy, Late Fifteenth–Early Nineteenth Century] (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), 92.