

Globalisation: is the 21st century Asian?

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World Bank and UN forecasts of world population levels to 2050 show an increase of almost 50% in the world's total population; this in itself is a major issue, but it is compounded by the variation in increase from one part of the world to another. Whilst Europe is forecast to remain at around 300m people, Asia is forecast to grow by almost 1.4bn and Africa by over 350m. It is, broadly, the poorer parts of the world that are going to have the highest population growth. Indeed, within Asia, by 2050 forecasts expect to see a levelling off of population levels in China and East Asia, but strong growth in numbers in South Asia.

Thus, in population terms if nothing else, Asia can be seen to be a dominant force globally.

For many major organisations, the economic growth of Asia, particularly of China and India, is a major platform of international strategy and development. However, whilst many 'western' organisations and Governments recognise the emerging importance of these economies, the level of knowledge culturally, eographically and linguistically about Asia remains relatively low for many people. Numbers of people learning Mandarin or Japanese in the UK remain small, and numbers learning other languages such as Korean, Hindi or Vietnamese are miniscule by comparison. Asian languages and Asian culture remain 'peripheral' to the world view of many of those living in the West.

Teenagers on gap years wanting to 'see the world' are often limited to Thailand and Australia, and the level of engagement with Asian cultures and awareness can often be limited to the sometimes sanitised package holiday versions of history.

There remain, however, many variations within the Asian continent about development; both economic and political. Countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea have found models of economic development which have brought massive change to their societies and

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economies, but that does not mean that these instantly find favour in other countries in the region.

European economic development since 1960 has benefitted enormously from the geopolitical transformations in the late 80s and early 90s, and through the unifying influence of the EU in matters of trade, labour mobility and integration. This is not an easy avenue for Asian countries, where the suspicions of the past, and the sometimes awkward diplomatic relationships with neighbours, remain difficult issues. The economic and social familiarity between the UK and Germany is not something that has, or can be easily, replicated between India and Pakistan, or between China and Japan, thus reducing the potential for trade blocs and regional dialogues to achieve sustainable development and rapprochement in the region.

Whilst there have been many examples of economic growth, particularly through the outsourcing to Asia of production and IT-enabled services, this is not universal, and many countries face a future in which the balance between economic growth, inflation and population growth are difficult to sustain.

One key issue facing all Asian countries are their relationships with each other. Many economies tend to look west towards the EU and the US before they look at trade and relationships with their neighbours.

Similarly, knowledge of Asian languages, and of nearby Asian countries, remains relatively low in Asian countries, just as much as it can be said to be so in Europe.

Increased urbanisation, and increased dividedness between the usually urban rich and the usually rural poor globally, may lead to there being more commonality between say Shanghai, London, New York and Sydney, than there is within China, or within Asia.

Clearly, in many ways, a resurgent Asia reorients the world in a way that requires us all to be more aware of the 'east'. To ride out the economic and political changes of the 21st century, many of us need to have a stronger engagement with the variety and diversity of Asia.