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# Asia Rising and the Maritime Decline of the West: A Review of the Issues

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# ABSTRACT

The notion that Asia is rising and is set to dominate the latter half of the twenty-first century has become one of the most discussed of recent issues. The claim rests on a large number of economic, social, political and military assumptions and predictions. The scale and diversity of the issues to be addressed makes the validity of the claim hard to assess. This paper does not intend to provide a clear-cut answer as to whether the claim is true or not, but instead to review the issues upon which such a judgement will need to be based.

Asia's current economic growth, relative to that of the West, is considered and its crucial maritime roots identified. This is closely linked to the region's growth in naval power. The result is a greatly expanded range of naval capabilities that seem likely to challenge the erstwhile maritime dominance of the West in general, and of the United States in particular.

But is this alleged prospective shift in relative maritime power so certain? The paper investigates this and revisits many of the economic assumptions that underpin the argument, specifically with regard to China. Finally, the paper looks with some scepticism at both the particular notion of Western dominance as a historical phenomenon and the more general concept of international dominance in the globalized circumstances of the twenty-first century. It concludes that the whole notion of the rise of Asia and the end of the maritime ascendancy of the West is more complicated, and much harder to measure or predict than is usually claimed.


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# Asia Rising and the Maritime Decline of the West: A Review of the Issues

## Introduction

One of the great emerging issues in the political literature of the early twenty-first century is proving to be the contention that "we are living through the end of 500 years of Western ascendancy".[1] There is a developing consensus that Asia-Pacific concerns will play a much more important role in shaping the international context than it has done for several centuries. Across the spectrum of debate there is little doubt that "Asia is poised to increase its geopolitical and economic influence rapidly in the decades to come".[2]

This is an enormously complex, open-ended issue with inter-related economic, political, social, cultural and military dimensions which has yielded a vast literature ranging in both depth and support for the basic proposition from popular books such as Kishore Mahbubani's *The New Asian Hemisphere: the Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* and more scholarly narrower, sceptical books such as Yasheng Huang's *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics.*[3] Thegeographic extent of Asia, the major focus of concern, is such that many writers narrow the focus of their lens onto China as a kind of shorthand for the rest of Asia and the United States as typically illustrative of "the West". Given the huge variety of countries, peoples and polities to be found in both Asia and the West, both generalizations have their faults of course, but the sheer scale of the problem otherwise explains and perhaps partly justifies the tendency to focus on the two countries that are currently the most important players in their regional areas.

The new levels of confidence to be found in the Asia-Pacific in general and in China in particular, find expression in such things as a refusal to allow the yuan to rise as much as the West will want, or what some will call the deliberate snub to Barack Obama at the Copenhagen climate change summit when Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier, rather crassly sent a mid-level official to deal with the President of the United States: "The unspoken message was that this was China's century, not

1 Niall Ferguson, "The decade the world tilted East", *The Straits Times*, 7 January 2010.

2 Minxin Pei, "Think Again: Asia's Rise", *Foreign Policy*, 22 June 2009, p. 5.

3 Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

America's."[4] Some, like Martin Jacques, go on to argue that the long-term consequences of this will not be a world much like the present but with someone different at the head of the table, one based on a set of governing and operating principles that are more collective and less individual, more state-centric and less liberal system-centred, more authoritarian and less democratic. The yuan will replace the dollar; Mandarin will take over from English. In other words, it is globalization with Chinese characteristics.

This should be no cause for concern, however. China, as the argument goes, will not be an imperialist power like the Europeans were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or Japan tried to be in the twentieth. Its policy will be based on "an instinctive hierarchical order", with assumptions of a degree of deference from its neighbours but much less of a proclivity to intervene.[5] China is, they say, a different kind of "civilizational" state, even if one marked by a "superiority complex"[6], so the change need not be attended by confrontation. It will be a peaceful world and the West will continue to represent some of the most well-favoured and richest parts of the world.

This paper attempts to provide an Olympian overview of some of the key issues in what is manifestly an enormous subject and will focus on their maritime aspects since the sea has played and continues to play a critical part in the fortunes of both areas. It does not pretend to provide an answer to the issue of whether Asia will dominate the twenty-first century or not, but it does hope to identify the key issues which must be addressed before the question can be fully understood. In the first section of the paper, the basic argument will be sketched out; in the second, some of the issues that arise will be reviewed.

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4 Sim Chi Yin, "A rising China says 'no' to U.S.: Refusal to budge on yuan reflects power shift", *The Straits Times*, 19 November 2009; Toby Harnden, "America may be down, but it certainly isn't out", *The Guardian*, 31 December 2009. Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009) pp. 409–413.

5 This is the burden of the argument presented in Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence* (Crows Nest, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2003).

6 Dani Rodrik (Professor of Political Economy at Harvard), "The World according to China", *The Straits Times,* 15 January 2010. See also Jacques, op. cit., pp. 414–439; Pen Shing Huei, "A More Assertive China won't rock the boat", *The Straits Times,* 5 February 2010; William Choong, "House of Chimerica still standing", *The Straits Times,* 5 February 2010.

**Causes and Consequences of Asian Success**

Economic developments have been most responsible for this shift. Compared to the United States or Europe, the Asia-Pacific region in general and China in particular appear to have survived the crisis of 2007–2009 in much better shape than either the United States or Europe, and indeed China has recently over-taken Germany as the world's largest exporter.[7] The increased visibility of the G20 [of which nine economies come from the Asia-Pacific] rather than the G8 in the resolution of the current recession exemplifies this.

The growth of China's economic capacity is the clearest evidence of the relative rise in Asia's economic power. China's GDP growth rates have been fantastic, recording a 10-fold increase between 1978 and 2004, compared to fourfold for the United Kingdom between 1830 and 1900. According to the World Bank, "China and India have emerged in recent years as drivers of global economic growth, accounting for 2.9 percentage points of the five percentage growth in global output in 2007". As a result, China accumulated a current account surplus of 10 per cent of GDP, while the United States on the other hand accounted for more than half the world's current account deficit at six per cent of GDP.[8] A highly effective government stimulus programme and massive credit expansion drawn from the world's biggest accumulated reserves [which is in turn derived from high levels of both savings and foreign investment], meant that it recovered quickly from the crisis of 2007–2009, with export levels 17 per cent higher in 2009 than in 2008.[9] In 2000, the U.S. GDP was eight times larger than China's; now it is only four times larger, and, according to Jim O'Neill, Goldman Sachs Chief economist, will overtake the United States in 2027.[10] Many such as Professor Victor Sit of Hong Kong Baptist University indeed argue that China's economic achievements to date should be seen essentially as providing the foundation for a "Second Global Shift" into a more sophisticated kind of economic prowess.[11]

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7 "China's trade figures bounce back from crisis", *The Straits Times*, 11 January 2010.

8 World Bank Development Indicators, 2008, to be found in http://sitesresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/wdi09introch1.pdf, accessed 12 February 2010.

9 "China's trade figures bounce back from crisis", *The Straits times*, 11 January 2010.

10 Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 285.

11 Unpublished presentation pare at East Asia Institute, Singapore, 26 February 2010.

These extraordinary rates of growth have been mirrored elsewhere in Asia and have resulted in increasing levels of economic inter-dependency. For the first time in many years, Asia's future economic development will be based on Asian currencies since eight of the 10 biggest holders of reserve currencies are now to be found in the region. These facts seem bound to transform the nature of the world economy. The United States, India, China and Japan are projected by Goldman Sachs to be the world's four biggest economies by 2040, with extensive global interests based on the need for markets and for raw materials.[12] But this dependence cuts both ways. China, for example, has developed massive trade surpluses with most other areas and is now one of the world's biggest holders of reserve currencies. As a result, China is increasingly susceptible to systemic currency fluctuations and to major drops in demand for its goods from the United States and Europe. In all these ways the Asia-Pacific in general, and China and India in particular[13], have become major determinants of the world trade system. The region's economic prowess is exemplified by new levels of confidence around the region as it bounces out of a recession that has left the West floundering. This optimism compares most strikingly with the general *angst*, for example, about American competitiveness.[14]

Much of this is due to the countries of the Asia-Pacific regions being increasingly able to exploit the sea as a means of transportation. The Asia Pacific's geography, sea-based trade, energy flows and security concerns mean that the region's strategic order is profoundly maritime. For this reason, "geopolitically speaking, the maritime balance would appear to be the key to future stability in Asia".[15]

## **<u>Success Depends on Sea-based Trade</u>**

India and China have now rediscovered their maritime dimensions after centuries of comparative neglect. In May 2007, for the first time, the Chinese navy helped rescue a

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12 Jim O'Neal, "The Brics dream 2006", Economics Department, Goldman Sachs, accessed on 7 August 2009 at http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/index.html; for a counterblast to the proposition that the Asia-Pacific in general and China in particular will transform the world economy, see Minxin Pei, op. cit.

13 Pete Engardio (Ed.), *Chindia: How China and India are revolutionizing global business* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007), is a good example of this line of thought.

14 See statement of Norman R. Augustine, retired chairman and CEO of the Lockheed Martin Corporation, before the Democratic Steering and policy committee, U.S. House of Representatives, 7 January 2009.

15 Shiv Shankar Menon (former Foreign Secretary, India), "The Evolving Balance of Power in Asia", address at IISS Global Strategic Review, Geneva, 13 September 2009, p. 4.

valuable cargo of export and other Song Dynasty treasures lost in the *Nanhai No 1*, a ship which was wrecked 800 years ago.[16] This nicely illustrates China's re-discovery of a maritime past largely lost in the early part of the fifteenth century, after the epic voyages of the Chinese mariner Zheng He, when the Ming dynasty consciously turned away from the sea.[17] Aware of its absolute economic dependence on marine transport and animated by one of the world's most coherent long-term maritime plans, China has developed into an all-round maritime player. Ninety per cent of the world's containers are manufactured in China.[18] Within the past decade, energetic state-led enterprise and the development of Greenfield sites have led China to become the world's third largest ship-builder, after Japan and Korea. Chinese ports are expanding at a bewildering rate. Shanghai is now the world's largest cargo-port and is putting considerable pressure on both Hong Kong and Singapore as container ports. Uncomfortable with an excessive reliance on foreign shipping, China first set up the China Ocean Shipping Company and later, to provide internal competition and the efficiencies that come with it, China Shipping Container Lines. These have both become major international shipping concerns and operate on a global scale, being the sixth and eighth largest shipping companies in the world respectively.

Although the Chinese re-discovery of the critical importance of the sea is the most marked, much the same can be said of India, Japan and the rest of the Asia Pacific too. The percentage of the GDP of East Asia that was derived from international sea-based trade rose from 47 per cent in 1990 to 87 per cent in 2006.[19] The raw energy of the new centres of industrial production in China are balanced by the more sophisticated marine services industry of Hong Kong and Singapore, countries that still see a slow drift of European expertise out to these areas.

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16 "Chinese navy dives to save a golden junk", *The Guardian*, 13 May 2007; "Unusual Chinese Recovery", *Naval History*, August 2006.

17 This is still a neglected area. For an authoritative if difficult review. See Gang Deng, *Chinese Maritime Activities and Socioeconomic Development c2100 B.C.–1900 A.D.* (London: Greenwood Press, 1997).

18 Ian Storey, "China as a Global Maritime Power: Opportunities and Vulnerabilities", in Andrew Forbes (Ed.) *Australia and its Maritime Interests: At Home and in the Region* (Canberra ACT: RAN Seapower Centre, 2008), p. 109.

19 World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2008* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2008), p. 317.

The Naval Shift

Historically, growth in GDP has a high correlation with naval expenditure and, given the maritime basis of much of that growth, it is not surprising that there is remarkable growth in the size, composition and operational aspiration of the local fleets. Naval modernization plans in the region were stalled by the Asian currency crisis of 1997–1998, and their recovery further interrupted by the global credit crisis a decade later; even so, fleet re-construction is surging ahead. The U.S.-based naval consultancy firm, AMI International, anticipates a naval spending in the Asia-Pacific of US$173 billion by 2030; the Asia-Pacific naval market as a whole is "expected to move past NATO countries to become the second largest source of future naval spending after the United States". Asia already spends more on defence in general than Europe. According to the French naval armaments firm DCNS, the Asia-Pacific region was considered "as a future centre for defence business … the defence market in the Asia-Pacific should be, in about 2016, a major market—even above the U.S.".[20]

The most marked feature of this surge in Asian naval capability is in China, where defence expenditure has nearly quadrupled from about 64 billion yuan in 1995 to 248 billion in 2005. China's real level of military expenditure, however, is estimated to be somewhere between US$35 and US$90 billion—in other words up to three times as much as is officially admitted.

Greater capability: This surge in naval spending is manifested by the acquisitions around the region of high-intensity capabilities such as Anti-Submarine Warfare [especially of the blue-water kind], Anti-Air warfare, ballistic missile defence, the development or maintenance of sea-based strategic deterrent forces—all of which tend to make most sense when planners have relatively sophisticated conventional adversaries in mind. Well over 70 per cent of the Asia-Pacific's projected naval spending over the next 20 years will be taken up by submarines, destroyers, frigates and amphibious warfare vessels.[21] By contrast, the percentage of the projected total spending taken up by the kind of auxiliaries, OPVs and patrol craft associated with the maintenance of good order at sea is comparatively small at around seven per cent.

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[20] Robert Karniol, "Boom time ahead for Asia-Pacific navies", *The Straits Times*, 9 November 2009. I am indebted to Bob Nugent Vice-President (Advisory) of AMI International (http://aminter.com) for these figures and for his personal support of this project. "DCNS plans to expand business in Asia-Pacific", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 11 November 2009.

[21] Figures courtesy of AMI International.

This does not, however, necessarily increase the prospect of inter-state conflict because countries such as China, South Korea and Japan seem to be shifting the pattern of their acquisitions away from specific naval conflict scenarios [such as with, in order, Taiwan, North Korea and the Soviet Union] and towards more balanced portfolios in their fleet development.

In general, the region's navies are seeking much more advanced, first class platforms, weapons and systems, rather than the re-conditioned, second hand, or new but modest equipment they generally received in the past. Whether it is Korea's Aegis destroyers, Malaysia's Scorpene-class submarines or Indonesia's Sigma class corvettes, there is now a new insistence on high quality acquisitions. Inevitably this means larger, and more expensive, platforms. At 5,500–7,000 tons, the Royal Australian Navy's [RAN] eight "Future frigates" are, for example, likely to be significantly larger and more capable than the current Anzac-class and perfectly exhibit this general regional tendency.[22]

This kind of modernization tends to produce navies that, while not necessarily larger, are certainly more powerful. With the completion of the KDX programme, for example, the South Korean Navy's current force of 120 small-and-medium surface combatants will be replaced by about 70 much larger and more capable ones.

While the tendency towards more powerful surface forces is the more obvious indicator of growth in aspiration, the region's development of submarines seems at least as significant for its force-equalization potential. The ROK's acquisition of modern, medium-sized KSS II and the more capable KSS III suggest a step-change in that country's underwater capabilities, especially with the acquisition of Air Independent Propulsion systems[23] [AIP] and the fitting of cruise missiles; some have even suggested that the ROKN explore the acquisition of nuclear-propelled submarines eventually to replace its nine Type 214 submarines. To supplement its upgraded Challenger class submarines, Singapore has acquired two very modern Vastergotland class submarines retro-fitted with AIP systems from Sweden. Indonesia, Malaysia and reportedly Thailand are likewise developing or enhancing their submarine capabilities.[24] Vietnam has reportedly ordered six Project 636

[22] Andrew Davies, "Australia's Defence White Paper 2009", *RUSI Defence Systems*, June 2009.
[23] Richard A. Bitzinger, *Air-Independent powered Submarines in the Asia-Pacific: Proliferation and repercussions* (Singapore: RSIS Commentary 62/2009).
[24] Kelvin Fong, "Asian Submarine forces on the Rise", *Australian Defence Journal*, May 2009, pp. 23–27.

Varshavyanka (Kilo) submarines from Russia.[25] According to its 2009 Defence White paper, Australia's submarine fleet is to be doubled to 12 boats, equipped with cruise missiles, a singularly ambitious project given its past and present difficulties with the now very capable *Collins* class.[26] Submarine numbers in the Asia-Pacific are expected to increase markedly over the next couple of decades, among the smaller and lesser naval powers where they are seen as a force equalizer.[27] With this can be expected significant improvements in local anti-submarine warfare capacities. Developments here will include technological advances such as the future *Red Shark* 20-km-range anti-submarine torpedo being developed for the ROKN, and tactical ones such as those envisaged in the Australian "ASW Roadmap".[28]

The growth of the region's interest in network-enabled operations may in the end prove even more significant in enhancing its naval power. The ROK's establishment of the Korean Joint Command and Control System and its Military Information Management System demonstrates awareness that enhanced information gathering and sharing and real-time command and control systems should significantly improve its operational effectiveness. Australia's already impressive NEC capacity promises to be much enhanced by the Cooperative Engagement Capabilities of its new Air Warfare destroyers. Singapore has long demonstrated a keen interest in this kind of cutting-edge naval technology and its six new 3,200-ton Formidable class frigates are described not just as fighting units but also as "key nodes in the integrated knowledge-based command and control [IKC2] network of the third generation Singapore Armed Forces".[29] This demonstrates widespread recognition around the Asia-Pacific that "the pace of warfare has increased and a major criterion for victory in battles at sea will be the ability to gather, process and act on information".[30]

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25 Reports: Vietnam Orders 6 Russian Submarines, *Defence News*, 4 May 2009.

26 Rear-Admiral Chew Men Long, interview, op. cit., "Australia's Future Submarine Capability" *Semaphore*, Issue 14, October 2009.

27 Andrew Davies, "Up Periscope: the expansion of submarine capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region", *Journal of the RUSI*, October 2007, pp. 64–69.

28 "South Korea fast-tracks cruise missile and torpedo programmes", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 26 August 2009; Andrew Davies, "The Enemy Below: Anti-submarine warfare in the ADF", Australian Strategic Policy Insititute, 2007.

29 Rear-Admiral Chew Men Long, Chief of Navy, Republic of Singapore Navy, Interview, *Jane's Navy International*, May 2009. For the connection between this and the wider Chinese concept of *guanxi*, see Ron Mathews and Nellie Zhang Yan, "Small Country 'Total Defence': A Case Study of Singapore", *Defence Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (September 2007), pp. 376–395.

30 Rear-Admiral R. Tay, Chief of Navy, quoted in article in *Jane's Navy International*, April 2006, p. 47. Singapore was one of the first countries anywhere to recognize the possible impact of

One important aspect of the region's naval advance has been a determination to build up national capacities for indigenous production. Despite the current climate of recession and retrenchment, many countries of the area have significantly expanded their capacities to produce the naval platforms they need for themselves. To compensate for the small size of its population and armed forces, Singapore has always emphasized technological prowess and the capacity to produce as much of what it needs independently.[31] South Korean warship building has, with the start of the six-strong 3,100-ton Ulsan-1 class of frigate and its projected plans to build six KDX-3A *Aegis* destroyers from 1919, moved from mere ship-building to the more demanding area of systems-integration. These ships will use locally developed sensors and combat management systems.[32] This is part of a deliberate strategy "to develop the domestic defence industry into one of the country's key manufacturing sectors as well as one of the world's most successful defence exporters within five years".[33] Malaysia and other countries in the region typically see the acquisition of new platforms and systems as technology transfer, a "significant avenue to develop (the country's) own industry and ensure (it) has the capacity to meet any security challenges".[34]

With all this new technology comes an expanding operational reach. Even though the activities of its immediate northern neighbour command the attention of the Republic of Korea Navy [ROKN] its intentions are clearly to establish more than a regonal reach, and its despatch of a KDX-II destroyer to participate in the multinational anti-piracy operations off Somalia was noteworthy as that navy's first blue-water mission.[35] This is consistent with the ROK's general aspiration for a "'Global Korea' or a fully-advanced, more responsible, and more open nation that positively shapes Asia and the global village to the greatest extent possible within the

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NEC. See its *Defending Singapore in the 21st Century* (Singapore: Ministry of Defence, February 2000), p. 10. Nonetheless, in the area as a whole, there are many cultural, bureaucratic and technological difficulties to be overcome before most navies of the area can be regarded as truly network-enabled. On this, see Richard Bitzinger, "Challenges to transforming Asia-Pacific Militaries", *Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 8, October 2004.

31 Mathews and Zhang Yan, op. cit., p. 388.

32 "Fleet of the Future", *Defence Technology International*, February 2009.

33 Interview, Byun Moo-Keun, Commissioner, South Korea's Defence Acquisition Program Administration, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 22 July 2009.

34 Abu Seman Bin HJ Yusop, Malaysian deputy Minister of Defence, quoted in "Second Malaysian Scorpene poised for trials", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 15 October 2008.

35 "Koreas clash in first border exchange for seven years", *Times online,* 11 November 2009.

confines of its national capabilities".[36] As such, the South Korean, Malaysian and Singaporean navies have all participated for the first time in increasingly blue-water anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, joining other smaller Asia-Pacific navies like the Australians and the New Zealanders, alongside the Americans, Chinese, Indians and Japanese. Singapore indeed has taken charge of Combined Task Force 151, operating in the Gulf of Aden, and participated for the first time in the U.S. RIMPAC exercise off Hawaii in June and July 2008.[37]

Emerging Naval missions: With this expanded reach comes a set of new and challenging missions, or old ones interpreted in more ambitious ways. The latter is perhaps most obvious in terms of the protection of national interests off-shore. The countries of South-east Asia, for example, are showing more signs of taking the defence of good order in their territorial seas and exclusive economic zones more seriously than they used to by acquiring the necessary equipment, beginning with enabling legislation and cooperating among themselves. Even Indonesia, long considered deficient in guarding its 14,000 islands and its fish stocks and in taking action against sea-based people and timber smuggling, has increased its corvette fleet to 18 with the acquisition of four impressive Sigma-class corvettes, and is considering the acquisition of two more locally built ones and is moving to professionalize its navy.[38] More generally, ocean-going patrol and surveillance craft, maritime domain awareness, and port and sea area security are high priorities. Malaysia's two "New Generation Patrol vessels", likewise, will be joined by two more and are specifically attached to Malaysia's Naval region II in the South China Sea.[39] The establishment of the new Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, however, illustrates a general tendency around the region to allocate good order policing functions increasingly to coastguard type forces, leaving many of the region's expanding navies to focus instead on the "harder" state-centred aspects of security. In most cases, however, enhancements of such policing capabilities are long overdue.

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36 Address by Dr. Han Seung-Soo, Prime Minister of the ROK, 28 September 2008, to the IISS-ASAN Korea Forum 2008, p. 23.

37 "Singapore Navy's inaugural participation in Rim of the Pacific Exercise", accessed 07/08/09 at https://app-pac.mica.gov.sg.

38 "Indonesian Sigma Corvette Programme Successfully Completed", *Australian Defence Journal*, May 2009.

39 Admiral Dato' Sri Abdul Aziz Jaafar, Chief of Navy, Royal Malaysian Navy, Interview, *Australian Defence Journal*, May 2009.

The RAN illustrates, as well as China, a developing interest in the traditional tasks of sea control and sea denial. Under the terms of its new Defence White Paper the main task of the RAN is to deter or defeat an enemy and so "Australia might need to be prepared to engage in conventional combat in the region … in order to counter coercion or aggression against our allies and partners and armed attack on Australia".[40] Sea control and its corollary, sea denial and the prevention of access, is a constant theme of the paper and held to be the main justification for a very considerable projected increase in the RAN's frigate and submarine forces. This preoccupation is widely shared among the other navies in the region.

Maritime power-projection is particularly interesting because it has been much less of a tradition among the smaller navies of the Asia-Pacific, but capabilities and aspirations here are expanding notably. The ROKN's first of an anticipated three, Tok-Do class 19,000-ton LHD of 2005 will be joined by a number of new LSTs. Landing ships of this sort have proved particularly important in disaster-relief operations such as Singapore's *Flying Eagle* relief operation after the 2004 Tsunami disaster. Its four Endurance Class 8,500-ton landing platform dock ships [LPDs] have proved useful for this and for participation in operations in the Gulf. The RAN is likewise building two 27,000-ton landing helicopter dock ships and is planning to acquire six heavy landing craft and a new replenishment and logistic support ship.[41] Even Indonesia is in the process of adding two Makassar-class Landing Platform Docks to the three Korean-built LPDs already in service.[42] Malaysia, likewise, has plans to acquire three multi-role support ships of between 8,000 and 15,000 tons and two replenishment ships to support more distant operations.[43]

Ballistic missile defence is a particularly challenging mission which few of the world's navies are able to perform, but concerned about the prospect of North Korea extending its missile attack capability, the ROKN is seeking to add perhaps six locally produced KDX-3A *Aegis*-equipped 5,600-ton destroyers from 2019 to its existing and currently authorized fleet of three 7,600-ton KDX-3 *Aegis* destroyers.[44] Australia's projected three *Hobart* Class *Aegis* air warfare destroyers are similar to these but they

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[40] Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030*, pp. 52, 55.

[41] Interview with Vice-Admiral Russ Crane, Chief of Navy, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 7 October 2009.

[42] Country Briefing Indonesia, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 21 October 2009.

[43] "Full Steam Ahead", *Defence Technology International*, March 2008.

[44] "RoKN eyes homegrown Aegis destroyers", *Jane's Defence Weekly*.

are only significantly more expensive.[45] The more ambitious forms of sea-based land-attack call for the use of effective ship-launched missiles and sufficient target intelligence. The ROKN is reportedly planning to develop 50-km-range supersonic missiles for short-range attack and the 1,000-km-range *Sky Dragon* for this task.[46]

Given such developments around the region, it is not surprising that of the world's 21 biggest navies no less than eight come from the Asia Pacific [excluding Russia and the United States].

A changing naval balance: The growth of the navies of the Asia-Pacific seems to contrast more forcefully with the decline of those of Western Europe, where the universal story is of reducing budgets, smaller inventories and greater problems in meeting increasing commitments. The emerging naval balance between China and the United States is often presented as the starkest strategic consequence of such momentous developments. China's rise, not just as a continental power with a huge population, a vast geographic area, with nuclear weapons and relative impermeability to large-scale overland attack but as a developing naval and maritime power too, fundamentally changes things. Because of its growing and absolute dependence on overseas commodities, energy and markets, China, like the rest of the Asia-Pacific region, has little choice but to become more maritime in its orientation. Almost inevitably it is developing more ambitious naval forces, and even more significantly, the maritime industries that historically tend to go with it. Almost equally inevitably, these will challenge the strategic primacy of the United States in a geographic area hitherto dominated by American naval power; as such, this momentous development could easily degenerate into the levels of competition and conflict that have until now often characterized great changes in the relative power of great states.[47] U.S. sensitivity to these developments is reflected in the current U.S. naval development about how to maintain access in these new and more challenging circumstances.

But against all this there is the argument that the current margin of superiority of the U.S. Navy is such that all these developments will not have material effect on the overall naval balance between the East and the West. Despite the narrowing of the gap indicated by simply measuring the reducing numerical margin of superiority

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45 "The Navy's new Aegis", *Semaphore*, Issue 7, June 2009.

46 "Supersonic missile planned for navy", *JoongAng Daily*, 14 September 2009; "South Korea fast-tracks cruise missile and torpedo programmes", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 26 August 2009.

47 For the dangers of such "power transition", see Steve Chan, "Exploring Puzzles in Power-transition Theory: Implications for Sino-American relations", *Security Studies,* 13(3), pp. 103–141.

enjoyed by the United States, the U.S. Navy is still far ahead of all others in its size, technological sophistication and global reach. Though this is true, current margins of superiority are likely to be reduced in the future by declining naval appropriations over the next few years. The navy currently has 280 ships and is aiming to provide 313 ships to meet the future operational requirements of a two-medium war against regional adversaries plus permanent present levels of readiness recommended by the Bottom-up Review of 1993 and the QDRs of 1997 and 2001. Estimates of the number of ships needed for this target have varied between 300 and 346.[48]

Over the past five years, naval appropriations have averaged at $11.1 billion per year, but the Congressional Budget Office has concluded that $20 to 22.4 billion per annum [nearly twice as much] would be needed to meet the navy's target of 313 ships. That target is therefore likely to be unaffordable in view of the rising level of Federal debt and projected U.S. spending on social welfare.[49] Moreover, as many commentators have pointed out, the existing force level of 280 ships is the smallest since 1916. Finally, the United States' capability to stay in the maritime lead is conditioned by its industrial capacity to produce the necessary equipment but "[F]or the first time since 1890 … the U.S. Navy is faced with the prospect of competing against a potentially hostile naval power possessing a ship-building capacity that is equal to if not superior, to its own"[50]—in some respects at least.

Other factors also have to be entered into the calculation, most particularly a sense of what the U.S. Navy has to do with what it has. The real strength of a navy, relative or otherwise is not the number of units that it has, or their relative sophistication, but how these compare to the requirements of the tasks that it will have to perform. In this more nuanced mode of assessment, the sheer diversity of the U.S. Navy's capabilities will reflect the extraordinarily varied scenarios for which it feels it has to prepare. U.S. naval planners base their acquisitions, among other things, on a need to conduct two medium-scale conflicts with regional adversaries simultaneously, while maintaining combat-credible presence in other areas of concern and sustaining an enduring counter-terrorism mission.

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48 Robert O'Work, *The U.S. Navy: Charting a Course for Tomorrow's Fleet* (Washington: CSBA, 2008), p. 14.

49 Work, op. cit., p. 14 ff. "America's disastrous debt is Obama's biggest test", *Financial Times* 19 April 2010.

50 Work op. cit., p. 71. See remarks by Dr. Donald C. Winter, Secretary of the Navy at the Sea Air Space Exposition, Washington, D.C., 3 April 2007.

As a result of its diversity of missions, naval planners have to prepare against a variety of asymmetric techno-tactical anti-access strategies ranging from terrorists on jet-skis to the anti-ship ballistic missile strategies of the Chinese.[51] "Indeed, navy planners are so concerned about new anti-ship ballistic missiles that they have articulated the need for about 90 fleets of ballistic defence ships"[52] while still satisfying the need to be able to cope with Iranian minefields and fast-attack craft. With the same potentially force dissipation effect, the U.S. Navy now feels the need to maintain a significant and simultaneous presence in the very different conditions pertaining to the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf and Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and to some extent the Atlantic theatres of operation. This makes it extremely difficult for the U.S. Navy to actually assemble that concentration of force that Mahan advocated so strongly. This, in effect, reduces the relative weakness of lesser navies that are less subjected to the centrifugal effects of global coverage, and suggests that U.S. margins of superiority at what turns out to be the decisive point could be a good deal closer than a look at what raw numbers of platforms will perhaps suggest.

So this, broadly, is the general hypothesis about the rise of Asia and the relative maritime decline of the West, and a quick review of some of the basic evidence adduced in support of the proposition. Because of the region's economic prowess, it has both the incentive and the capacity to build up its commercial maritime capabilities and its naval power. The region is doing very well and with that comes such geopolitical clout that the strategic architecture of the twenty-first century is bound to be unfamiliar, very different and for the West, perhaps frightening.

## PART 2

This proposition, though, deserves to be subjected to a closer examination, and we will look again at some of the leading constituents of the case, starting with an investigation of the reality behind the notion of the "elegant decline" of U.S. naval power. This will lead to a second review of some of the less naval, more maritime and economic aspects of the rise of Asia and the decline of the West. Finally, in Part 3, we

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[51] Sam Tangredi, *Futures of war: Towards a Consensus View of the Future Security Environment* (Newport RI: Alidade Press, 2008), pp. 105–7. Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, "Using the Land to Control the Sea: Chinese Analysts Consider the Anti-ship Ballistic Missile"; Eric Hagt and Mathew Durnin, "China's Anti-ship Ballistic Missile: Developments and Missing Links", both in *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2009, pp. 53–86 and 87–116 respectively.

[52] Work, op. cit., p. 71.

will review the notion of "international dominance", what it has actually meant in the past and is likely to mean in the future. This may raise some questions about the legitimacy of the whole approach of debating whether or not Asia will be taking over the leading role in the circumstances of the twenty-first century.

## **The Real Naval Balance**

For all the caveats and nuances, the United States *is* still the world's main military power and seems likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. In some sense, the figures, impressive or depressing according to one's point of view, speak for themselves. At some US$700 billion in 2009, the United States spends nearly as much on defence as the rest of the world put together but this is still only some 4.4 per cent of GDP, more than most countries, but less than some and in strictly economic terms[53] easily affordable. Certainly, even now the United States is nowhere near the level of defence spending that contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the West, if construed as the United States and its NATO allies, still accounts for about 70 per cent of the world's global defence spending, and if allies such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore are factored in as well, the total goes higher still. China's level of defence spending is notoriously hard to measure, but almost any calculation suggests that although China is catching up there remains a huge gap in military spending between the two countries.[54]

While the U.S. Navy's planned expansion towards a future fleet of 313 ships may prove unaffordable, its *current* level of 280 ships seems overwhelming. In the heyday of its global power, the Royal Navy could sometimes achieve a two-power standard, that is, its forces were equivalent to the fleets of its next two rivals combined. In straight numbers of major combatants' terms, the U.S. Navy also has a two-power standard over the Chinese and Russian fleets of 203 ships to their 205. But in themselves, numbers count for little. Indeed, the Royal Navy was rarely able to achieve a two-power standard and for much of its period of dominance actually deployed fewer ships than its immediate adversaries.

Tonnage is a better indication of strength since the offensive and defensive power of an individual unit is usually a function of its size. If we look instead at

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[53] The domestic and political costs of these levels of defence spending, on the other hand, are more difficult to calculate and may prove significantly less easy to bear.

[54] Eberhard Sandschneider, "Is China's military modernization a concern for the EU?" in Zaborowski, op. cit., pp. 40–41; Mahbubnai (2008), op. cit., p. 105.

aggregate tonnage, the U.S. Navy has a 13-power standard, with a 2.63:1 advantage over a combined Russian-Chinese fleet, which in any case includes many ships and submarines that are not in fact combat-ready. Its 11 fleet carriers and 10 light carriers provide a nine-power standard, and they operate 980 aircraft, twice as many as those carried on all 16 carriers of the next nine countries. In major surface combatants, factoring in the advantage that the U.S. Navy possesses through its below deck Vertical launch missile systems, its 105 warships transform a comfortable numerical two-power standard into an effective 20-power standard. Its 56 SSN/SSGN nuclear-powered submarine fleet might on the face of it seem overpowered by the world's other 220 SSNs and SSKs but the qualitative advantages of the U.S. submarine force are huge. It is much the same story with regard to the U.S. Navy's amphibious and crucial support fleets, in its capacity to support special forces operations, in its broad area maritime surveillance capabilities, in its U.S. Coast Guard (the equivalent of many of the world's navies) and in the enormous advantages conferred by the experience of many decades of 24/7 oceanic operations.[55] It will be many years before this commanding global lead in deployable naval power is seriously compromised:

> The consensus of sources is that the size and level of operational experience of the U.S. Navy and Air Force make it nearly impossible for potential opponents to mount a serious challenge in the waters and air space over the world's oceans. This is likely to continue until 2035.[56]

Another factor often forgotten is that of the world's next 20 fleets in aggregate tonnage terms, no less than 18 are either formal allies of the United States [13 – 9 of these coming from NATO Europe] or friendly towards it [5]. NATO Europe's fleets already reach high levels of cooperation with the U.S. Navy and the latter's new maritime strategy, *A Co-operative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*[57] is expressly designed to spread such levels of cooperation still further.

## Revisiting the Economic Rise of Asia/China

The counter-case to the "Asia Rising" school of thought which Kishore Mahbubani exemplifies so well, is represented by Razeen Sally's devastating critique of India's

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[55] Work report, pp. 7–12.

[56] Tangredi, op. cit., p. 103.

[57] General James T. Conway, Admiral Gary Roughead and Admiral Thad W. Allen, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (Washington: Department of the Navy, 2007) October 2007.

economic performance and Minxin Pei's more general review of Asian prospects. Minxin Pei concludes:

> Don't believe the hype about the decline of America and the dawn of a new Asian age. It will be many decades before China, India and the rest of the region take over the world if they ever do.[58]

So, what are the issues of apparent contention?

Given the maritime emphasis of this paper, the maritime economy is the obvious place to start. There are several points to be made. Firstly, China's ship-building strengths are focused at the low end of the industry with the deficiencies in quality assurance, skills, innovation and experience to be expected from an industry in the first flush of youth. Outside expertise has still to be brought in to bear . Secondly, things will of course get better, but then the main losers will not be Europe or the West which has already abandoned large-scale ship-building but other parts of the Asia-Pacific, specifically Japan and Korea. Thirdly, there are areas where Western/European expertise is likely to remain for the foreseeable future, not least in the construction of passenger liners, specialist craft like dredgers, oil support ships and the like and in the support services like marine insurance, brokerage and chartering. Indeed in recent years, Europe's marine industries have bottomed out, even showing signs of a modest recoveryuntil the recession. Moreover, there has been a large increase in the proportion of the world's mariners that come from Eastern Europe. The conclusion that may emerge from all this is that the maritime drift from the West to the East may well have largely ended and in the future is likely to follow a different, less dramatic trajectory than it did in the past.

<u>Limits to Current Performance of Chinese economy?</u>

Many commentators on economic growth in the Asia-Pacific region, and most specifically in China, have a tendency to confuse size with strength. Strength, as has already been mentioned, is really the relationship between capacity and what needs to be done. In China's case, questions may properly be asked about both.

Firstly, the underlying strength of the Chinese economy is increasingly being questioned. Chinese manufacturing success, for example, relies on components and

[58] Minxin Pei, "Think Again: Asia's Rise", *Foreign Policy*, 22 June 2009; Razeen Sally, "Don't Believe the India Hype", F*ar Eastern Economic Review*, 1 May 2009; Minxein Pei, "Why China Won't Rule the World", *Newsweek Special Issue 2010.*

designs taken in from outside and seems to be mostly in labour-intensive, low-priced consumer items of reasonable quality; China remains far behind Japan or Germany when it comes to technological innovation, and the export of machinery and other high-value products. China has no brand in the world's top 100.[59] Moreover, "Chinese" products exported to Europe are often manufactured in several different Asian countries, of which China is last in the chain, with comparatively low "value-added" and correspondingly lower-trading benefits, compared to other Asian countries.[60] All of this bears a superficial resemblance to the relationship that Japan had with the United States in the 1960s but China, according to Toshio Egawa, is unlikely to make the transition to advanced economy as the elite tend to go into bureaucracy rather than manufacturing industry.

Moreover, some will argue that much of this is based on a yuan estimated by the *Economist*'s Big Mac Index to be 50 per cent undervalued and is sustained by a level of debt far higher than the $840 billion in public debt officially disclosed by the Chinese government economy, while the People's Bank of China and the Treasury are owed in an economy over-heated by easy credit, potentially $1.5 trillion by cities, provinces and the entities they control.[61] To a variety of academics and financial analysts this, described as "growth on steroids", looks disturbingly like Japan before the great fall, a bubble waiting to burst, and a dire threat not just to China but to the whole economy of the rest of the world, because China is far from being the only country saddled with threatening levels of debt.[62]

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59 Hutton, op. cit., p. 33. Toshio Egawa (MD, Konica Corporation), "Japan Under the Democratic Party", MFA Diplomatic Academy, Singapore, 8 January 2010. Wang Gungwu and John Wong (Eds.), *Interpreting China's Development* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2007), is a useful introduction to the problem.

60 Duncan Freeman, "China's rise and the global economy: challenges for Europe", in Zabrowski (2006), op. cit., p. 15.

61 Much of this is the product of a huge increase in the paper value of property, creating a "bubble" with which the central government is beginning to grapple. "China takes more steps to cool property market", *Sunday Times*, 18 April 2010.

62 Gady Epstein, "Ponzi in Peking", *Asia Forbes Magazine*, January 2010, and William Pesek, "Headed for a Great Fall?", *The Straits Times*, 15 January 2010. Among the worried experts quoted in these two articles are Victor Shih, Northwestern University, Andy Xie, Morgan Stanley Economist, Professor Michael Pettis at Peking University, and Jim Chanos, the Head of Kynikos Associates in New York. If correct, these estimates suggest that China's real level of public debt is not the 20 per cent of GDP officially admitted but more than 70 per cent with another 30 per cent in hazard, significantly worse in fact than the U.S. situation of 50 per cent direct debt and 18 per cent of shared debt. Japan, at some 200 per cent, however, is worse than either. See also Niall Ferguson's warnings, "Riots, upheaval and states gone bust: The price we could pay for forgetting history", *The Guardian*, 26 May 2009.

Will China's Growth Be Sustainable?

But even if the predictions of such doomsters do prove to be wide off the mark, China is still clearly going to have problems trying to run an economy and a society of 1.3 billion people with authoritarianplanned capitalism. According to Niall Ferguson[63], Western ascendancy is based on six things:

- Capitalist enterprise
- Scientific method
- A legal and political system based on private property and individual freedom
- Imperialism
- The consumer society
- The "Protestant ethic" (Max Weber) of work and capital accumulation

China has adopted the first two and maybe the last three [with modifications] but little sign of progress on the crucial third. The dispute with Google over the regime's preoccupations with information security and alleged willingness to engage in cyber attacks as a means of censoring the Internet suggests there is still a long way to go before China enjoys the adherence to legality and transparency of information associated with economic advance, and which are the prime means by which market capitalism and democracy have interacted to produce an explosion in GDP between 1750 and 2000:[64]

> The dictates of modern economics demand that Chinese traders, entrepreneurs and bankers must have the same access to global information flows that their economic competitors in other modern societies have.[65]

This calls for transparency of information, and a greater adherence to legality but some would argue that China is moving away from such necessary standards rather than towards it in a manner that will constrain its future growth.[66]

On top of this, China certainly has a multitude of domestic problems to face—an ageing population[67], massive numbers of people move from countryside to town, acute environmental hazards and lax standards, and gross administrative deficiencies,

63 Ferguson, ST, op. cit.

64 "Mixed views in China over Google's exit threat", *The Straits Times*, 14 January 2010; "China downplays pull-out threat", *The Straits Times*, 16 January 2010. Martin Jacques and Will Hutton, "Is Western supremacy but a blip as China rises to the global summit?", *The Guardian*, 23 June 2009.

65 Mahbubani (2008), op. cit., p. 139.

66 Timothy Garton Ash, "China's economic success may soon bring trouble. It would be ours too", *The Guardian*, 4 December 2008.

67 "China is growing old before getting rich", *The Straits Times*, 14 January 2010.

as well as endemic corruption[68], which the 2005 Transparency International Corruption Index measured as pushing China down to 78th position in the world, its worst ever performance.[69] A recent study by the World Bank claims that China has 16 of Asia's 20 most polluted cities and the UNDP, 2005 *Human Development Report* showed that over the last 25 years, China's levels of social inequality have nearly doubled, fuelling domestic tensions, straining domestic harmony and resulting in locally destabilizing explosions of wrath, that, according to official Chinese statistics, are 10 times worse in number and seriousness than they were in 1993.[70] For all these reasons, "China's present leadership is acutely aware that eventually China will have to move to democracy",[71] difficult though that will undoubtedly be.

Since the Chinese economy is increasingly integrated with that of the wider Asia-Pacific region, difficulties here will have widespread effects elsewhere because other countries in the region have their economic, political and domestic difficulties too, which according to Minxin Pei, are looming demographic problems, a lack of innovation, low per capita levels of GDP and earnings, and deficiencies in the education system.[72] All this is likely to constrain Asian "dominance" of the twenty-first century.

In any case, there will be other significant players because other states are rising too, as well as India and China which have so captured the public imagination—Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Saudi Arabia—and Russia. The expansion of the global market with total world output quadrupling since 1980 means that the increased economic weight of such emerging market economies has not come at the expense of the more developed economies. Instead, they are responsible for a bigger slice of a growing global pie.[73] Accordingly,

> There will be no *absolute* losses: Most Western states will remain among the most affluent and well-endowed states. However, there will be *relative* losses.

68 "China to stem exodus of corrupt officials", *The Straits Times*, 12 January 2010; "No corrupt official is above the law", *The Straits Times*, 13 January 2010.

69 Will Hutton, *The Writing on the Wall: China and the West in the 21st Century* (London: Abacus, 2008), pp. 32–36; Peter Ferdinand, "The Challenge of Democratisation", in Marcin Zaborowski (Ed.), *Facing China's Rise: Guidelines for an EU Strategy* (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper No. 94, December 2006), pp. 32–34.

70 Ferdinand, op. cit.

71 Mahbubani (2008), op. cit., p. 143.

72 In per capita GDP terms, for example, China currently just ranks 104th in the world. Lee Kuan Yew, "China and U.S. need each other", *The Straits Times,* 8 April 2010. "Chinese varsities growing too fast", *The Straits Times*, 17 February 2010.

73 Martin Parkinson, "The Role of the G-20 in the global Financial Architecture", address to the Lowy Institute, Melbourne, 9 October 2006.

The relative material superiority the material West has enjoyed for centuries will gradually diminish.[74]

While the relative influence of the West may well diminish, it will certainly not disappear. It is easy to over-react to recent problems for the United States, such as its difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Enron scandal, the failure to rescue Lehman Brothers, deficiencies in dealing with Hurricane Katrina and even the intelligence services' failure to deal with the attempted bomb plot over Detroit, but the passion of the debate now going on in the United States suggests a striking national determination to do something about all these things. According to the dispassionate Toby Harnden,[75] "Americans combine resilience, resourcefulness, hard work and patriotism in a way that is unique" and he might have added faith; America may be down but it certainly isn't out. Piers Brendon, likewise, argues that easy comparisons of the end of the American power with the collapse of the Roman Empire, for example, are wildly un-historic.[76]

However, neither should the extent of post-modern Europe's strategic and economic demise be exaggerated. From the bottom of the World Bank's list in its table of growth in GDP, Europe and Central Asia's rate of growth before the recession was dramatic, overtaking all areas with the exception of East Asia and the Pacific.[77] In 2005, the West [in the shape of Europe and the United States] though comprising only 13.4 per cent of the world's population, still controlled 62.6 per cent of its GDP.[78] In 2008, Europe still commanded 19 per cent of the world trade and the biggest share of earnings from services and income, twice that of China's rate in both cases.[79] Its productivity rates are still good and compared with most other areas of the world, the prospects of debilitating inter-state or even substantial intra-state conflict are exceedingly remote.

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74 Mahbubani (2008), op. cit., p. 102.

75 U.S. Editor for the *Daily Telegraph.*

76 Toby Harnden, "America may be down but it certainly isn't out", *The Guardian*, 31 December 2009. Piers Brendon, "The U.S. is dead, long live the U.S.", *The Straits Times*, 26 February 2010. There is, however, plenty of current evidence of American angst over its present and future position in the world. See statement of Norman R. Augustine, op. cit., for reference to and description of the depressing conclusions of the high-powered bipartisan "Gathering Storm" Committee.

77 World Bank Development Indicators, 2008, found in http://sitesresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/wdi09introch1.pdf, accessed 12 February 2010.

78 Mahbubani (2008), op. cit., p. 117.

79 *Economist Pocket World in figures: 2010* (London: *The Economist*, 2010).

All the same, we seem to be moving into a much less unipolar and more familiarly multipolar world in which responsibility for the direction of the world's affairs is rather more shared than it used to be. Mahbubani puts it like this: "The world is returning to the historical norm in terms of the natural place of Asian societies in the hierarchy of societies and civilizations around the globe", warning that it would be best for all concerned if the West accommodated itself to that fact.[80] Perhaps in this sense the world is going backward to the past.

**Part 3: Revisiting the Concept of Dominance and Dominating Powers**

In the debate about the putative rise of Asia, perceptions of the extent of change in the twenty-first century are not infrequently distorted by over-simple perspectives of the various situations in preceding eras, where the allegedly "dominating power" has often proven to be more constrained and limited at the time than it does in nuanced retrospect.

The European "moment" of dominance, for example, was shorter and much less total, more conditional than often assumed. For Asia, the arrival of the Portuguese seems, in retrospect, a seminal event, dramatically epitomizing the beginning of a transformative 500 years. But, in fact, success was less inevitable and pre-ordained than often argued. The notion that European "dominance" of Asia was simply based on an unassailable general scientific pre-eminence and a unique capacity for technological innovation has been shown to be unsound[81]; nor was that apparent dominance as total in its effect as was often claimed. European influence was conditioned by the fact that at the critical time, many key African and Asian states (most obviously China), distracted by other domestic or strategic priorities, looked inward rather than outward towards the sea. Nonetheless, the Europeans stumbled into an Indian Ocean dense with mercantile activity. Globalization—or at least global connectedness was *not* simply a European project.[82] Moreover, disease, unfamiliar topography, climates the Europeans found hostile, the limitations of distance and inter-European disputes and rivalries all limited what any of them could do.[83] There were, after all, perhaps only 7,000 Portuguese between Sofala and Macao in the

[80] Mahbubani (2008), op. cit., pp. 52, 126.
[81] Peter A. Lorge, *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008).
[82] John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires 1400–2000* (London: Penguin, 2008), pp. 13–15.
[83] Darwin, op. cit., pp. 114–5.

1540s. Even so, naval power proved decisive and consequently better sources of market information ensured that they came, stayed and prospered.

For their part, the Chinese had extensive sea-based trading links with the rest of Asia and the Indian Ocean and a sophisticated economy linked by a network of internal waterways with extensive trades in both smuggling and piracy.[84] Between 1403–1424, the Emperor Yung-Lo engaged in ambitious naval adventures, being determined to take over Vietnam. His successor, however, concerned about the effects of all this on the nature of Chinese society and the political system, famously turned his back on the sea, and focussed instead on turning back the Mongol tide lapping at the Great Wall. This did not lead to national decline, however, and the Chinese Empire was arguably at its apogee in the second half of the eighteenth century. China retained some of its links with the outside world, but the sheer size of its internal market [bigger than the whole of Europe's] meant that in relative terms China's international trade was quite small.[85] China's turn from the sea allowed a sudden explosion of Japanese and European maritime endeavour but by no means implied a significant loss in relative strategic weight.

The point is that Europe's "rise" was as much due to the transient passing weaknesses of others as it was to European strengths. Indeed, as late as in 1820, Western Europe's share of global GDP was just 23.6 per cent compared to Asia's 59.2 per cent. For centuries before that, in fact, Asia was the largest player in the world economy.[86] The real European system dominance only came with the onset of European industrialization at the end of the eighteenth century, a sophisticated system of credit that could finance distant enterprise and, crucially, command of the sea.[87] Even then, trade was the objective, not the establishment of the empire. Where they could, the British in particular were content to trade with advantage as in South America and China [with its treaty ports] without having to assume the burdens of an empire. This phenomenon was the result of a unique combination of factors, one of them, the first industrialization, being much more transformative, in effect, than anything else apparently on offer now.

The same point could be made about the "American-empire" or even of the very idea of Empire itself. A few years ago, there appeared a shoal of books and

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84 Darwin, op. cit., p. 41.
85 Darwin, op. cit., pp. 105, 130.
86 Mahbubani (2008), op. cit., p. 51.
87 Niall Ferguson (2009), op. cit., pp. 285–287.

articles arguing that the military and economic might of the United States, when compared to that of all the other states, made it not just a superpower, but a hyper-power. As Hubert Vedrine, the former French foreign minister, once proclaimed: "The United States today predominates on the economic, monetary [and] technological level and in the cultural area … in terms of power and influence, it is not comparable to anything new in modern history."[88] The un-admiring Erik Hobsbawm agreed that the United States now "occupied a historically unique and unprecedented position of global power and influence. For the time being it is, by the traditional criteria of international politics, the only great power; and certainly the only one whose power and interests span the globe."[89]

From this was born the notion that we were all living in an American empire. This supposed fact of life was common ground, even if its consequences were not. Niall Fergusson wondered whether this new empire which dared not speak its name would prove as effective as the British one had been; some wondered whether such an empire would serve moral purposes and yet survive and prosper [90]; others just feared the worst.[91] But, in fact, this very recent example of group-think, quickly proved exaggerated, suggesting perhaps a need for caution with the still more confident and pervasive predictions of the "Asia Rising" school.

Moreover, just below the surface, there were and are real doubts about just how substantial *any* kind of empire actually is, or in fact ever was. British imperial historians have for years been making the point that the empire rested essentially on sufficient consent of a sort. How else could the British "rule" India, a region of 225–250 million people with just 1,250 senior civil servants and 35,000 British troops?[92] Collaboration, concession and consent were an essential part of the imperial project, even one so apparently based on brutal military power as Spain's.[93] Without at least a degree of consent and collaboration, no empire could survive for long. Since power will always beget counter-power, "better, and probably more economical in the long

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88 Cited in Josef Joffe, "Power lies in the Balancing", *The Australian*, 6 August 2003.

89 Eric Hobsbawm, "America's neo-conservative world supremacists will fail", *The Guardian*, 25 June 2005. See also V. G. Kiernan, *America: The New Imperialism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), and Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Random House, 2008).

90 Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite* (New York, Vintage Books, 2003).

91 Hobsbawm, op. cit.

92 Angus Wilson, *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977), p. 137.

93 Henry Kamen, *Empire* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003).

run, is a strategy that undercuts the incentives for ganging up [against the imperial power]—to soften the hard edge of [in this case] the United States' overwhelming power with the soothing balm of trust".[94] This requires the imperial power to attend seriously to the interests of others, as all of them sooner or later have had to do. And of course when that consent is gradually withdrawn, empires have collapsed, often because of their essential complexities and fragilities, with bewildering speed.[95] The American "empire", if it exists at all, could follow the same path.

Moreover, it was easy to point to the other limitations of power even at the time the critics of the United States were lamenting its extent most loudly. First, it was a democracy with all the constraints of a free press, a cumbersome division of powers, legions of lawyers and a marked reluctance to accept that it *was* an empire.[96] Accordingly, other countries could genuinely wonder, "Who rules in Washington?" Easily and often, this could mean that the United States was incapable of wielding power as effectively as the more imperialist of its leaders might have wanted, or its opponents might have feared.

Second, the United States had a financial deficit—insufficient savings relative to investment and taxation relative to public expenditure.[97] The U.S. economy, though it was large, was declining in comparison to everyone else; it was no longer the centre of global manufacturing, and had stopped being a net exporter of capital, or indeed the main provider of foreign direct investment. Its financial deficit could only be stabilized by East Asian capital—a situation worsened by the sub-prime crisis of 2007, the credit crunch of 2008 and the "Great Recession" of 2009. Its economic dominance was increasingly dependent on the views and policies of Europe and, especially, of the Asia-Pacific.

Third, the other main source of America's power lay in the military dimension where it seems beyond competition. After its apparent definitive victories over the forces of darkness in Afghanistan and Iraq, subsequent events in those two unhappy countries cruelly demonstrated the limitations of even America's military prowess.

94 Joffe, op. cit.

95 Niall Ferguson, "Complexity and collapse: empires on the edge of chaos", *Foreign affairs*, March/April 2010.

96 Nugent, op. cit., pp. 316–317.

97 Some have argued that in the long term this will make a close economic linkage of the United States and China, which Niall Ferguson and Dr. Moritz Schularick popularized as "Chimerica" dangerously unsustainable. But see William Choong, "House of Chimerica still standing", *The Straits Times*, 5 February 2010.

No one could doubt that prowess when measured in terms of the capacity to project kinetic power, or the extent to which Donald Rumsfeld's faith in the Revolution in Military Affairs had indeed transformed the way in which that kinetic power could be dispensed. What was at issue was the extent to which military power of this sort enables the United States or indeed any other modern state to achieve even their most crucial objectives.

Weaknesses in the economic and military bases of America's power may to some extent be compensated for by the third element mentioned by Vedrine, the matter of culture and its attractiveness to others. This could be measured in the spread of McDonald's and Starbucks around the world at one level and, at another, in the global popularity, measured in global opinion polls of "the American idea" of free, democratic and prosperous societies, sometimes as strongly distinct from its leaders. The United States retains this advantage, even in China, whose "modernization" at least superficially looks a good deal more Americanized, than American development looks "sinified". In the rest of the world it is hard to imagine China's Confucian Institutes, for example, having the same impact on world consciousness as that enjoyed, for better or worse, by Starbucks or Hollywood.

Finally, there is the issue of the degree to which the Asia-Pacific region itself can currently or prospectively be seen as a coherent entity. Kishore Mahbubani in his claims has put considerable stress on the advantages Asia derives from the "Asian way" of non-interference and the culture of peace. But there are significant rivalries in the area between China, India, Japan and Korea. The so-called "trust deficit" between China and India, for example, remains because while bilateral trade is growing it is still very imbalanced and political tensions over the border, military modernization, Pakistan and water supplies persist.

## An End to Dominance?

Beyond the debate about who might dominate whom, there is cause to tackle the deeper issue of whether "dominance" means much these days anyway. Interestingly, the *Newsweek Special 2010* which focused on the issue of "The End of U.S. Dominance" has on its cover a picture of the huge statue of a Dinosaur at Palm Desert, California; but the issue is not so much that the United States is the dinosaur but the whole concept of dominance. Many will say that the primacy of individual nations no longer makes sense in an era of globalization when events are largely decided by economic forces above and beyond the remit of individual states. We are entering, as the argument goes, an era of what Richard Haas calls "non-polarity" a world of a dozen or so major actors, state and non-state "ordered" by the links that join them.[98] In this concept, even potential global competitors such as China and the United States have things in common that are critical to the peace and prosperity of both; the cycle of China exporting to the United States and then lending it the proceeds that result, for example, has worked well so far and nicely demonstrates such linkages. All the same, both China and Russia clearly want to "facilitate the establishment of a multipolar world and [the] democratization of international relations".[99]

The maritime industries, which have been a focus of this paper, illustrate the same point. The merchant shipping industry is famously globalized. The ship's constructors, owners and operators may well come from quite different countries. Its crew and cargo, totally international, its flag, chartering, brokerage and insurance arrangements are widely dispersed in accordance with commercial convenience. Shipping firms establish local regional offices to be near their customers, so they will possibly have a shifting head office somewhere and regional offices spread strategically around the world to exploit taxation and exchange control regimes that make most commercial sense. It is often hard to establish where the centre of gravity or the prime beneficiaries of such global operations actually are. Accordingly, to talk of the manner in which maritime trade is shifting from one area to another is to miss the essential point. In this as in many other areas, it is not a question of the East versus the West, or one part of the world "against" another. Maritime industry operates over and beyond the purview of regions and still more of national governments, although noone could doubt that they can still influence the process.

From this perspective, transitions of power from the West to the East will be represented as more gradual and much less confrontational in process, extent or consequence than is sometimes claimed. After all, China, the United States and all the other countries to a greater or lesser extent face the same range of problems—such as

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98 Richard N. Haas, "The Age of Nonpolarity", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008. The perceived rise of the BRICs and the "Next 11" world economies can only accelerate this process. Jim O'Neill, "Brics Are Still on Top", *Newsweek Special 2010.* See also Dilip Hiro, *After Empire: The Birth of a Multipolar World* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), and "A new fluidity to power plays", *The Straits Times*, 26 February 2010.

99 Quoted in "Putin, China's Xi vow 'strategic' support in first meeting", AFP Staff Writers, Moscow, 23 March 2010.

the financial crisis, organized crime, mass migration, global warming, pandemics and international terrorism which can only be addressed by serious collective action. More states have a significant share in the global economy and, in consequence, an interest in advancing solutions to global challenges. China, the United States, Europe and India have common interests and consequently a huge stake in global governance and international security.

To the extent that this is true, the rising power of one state relative to another will, as the argument goes, matter much less than it used to in the pre-globalized world. The real issue for concern and debate, instead, would clearly be about threats to the prosperity and security of the entire international community and about how that community works to head off common challenges. Such problems demand strong and effective governance and international consent rather than dominion, but a degree of leadership, rather in the manner of a chairman of the board, is still likely to be required. At the moment, many will argue, while only the United States can provide this sort of consensus-building leadership, it must do so in partnerships with others, including China.[100]

Today, this kind of leadership is indeed exemplified in the critical maritime domain. The absolute dependence of today's globalized sea-based trading system on good order at sea and the safe and timely sailing of the world's merchant shipping means that the world's navies and coastguards need to cooperate against anything that threatens maritime security, whether that takes the form of pirates and other forms of maritime crime, direct attack by forces hostile to the system or from the incidental effects of inter-state and intra-state conflict. This is the burden of the U.S. Navy's recent doctrinal statement *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* with its avowed aim of helping to set up a "global maritime partnership". The fact that this has generally been welcomed around the world suggests a general acknowledgement of the fact that for the moment at least, in Kishore Mahbubani's words,

> "The real reason why most international waterways remain safe and open—and thereby facilitate the huge explosion of global trade we have seen—is that the American Navy acts as the guarantor of last resort to keep them open.

[100] Fareed Zakaria, *The Post American World and the Rise of the Rest* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 254–279; Timothy Garton Ash, "Only a strategic partnership with China will keep this new dawn bright", *The Guardian*, 27 November 2008.

Without the global presence of the U.S. Navy, our world order would be less orderly."[101]

It may well be that a relative shift in naval capacity will provide both the incentive and the opportunity for other navies and coastguards, most obviously those of the Asia-Pacific to take a bigger share in such activities. If this does indeed turn out to be the way things go, then the majority of observers might well be tempted to conclude that a possible change in the nature of the naval balance really wouldn't matter very much.

This impression is reinforced by those who argue that China is in any case a different kind of state whose "peaceful rise", even if it were to materialize, would not represent a threat to others. This is the burden of the school of thought which argues that China will prove true to its roots of being a civilization rather than a conventional Western-style state, even if it does continue to expect a degree of deference from its neighbours.[102] China in other words does not, according to this argument, "do" dominance in the way the West does.

## A final hurdle to prediction

Such cosy conclusions, however, rest on one key assumption, which may turn out to be unwarranted and so ought to be included in this litany of issues to be considered, namely the likely durability of globalization itself.

But globalization is undoubtedly under strain and has failed before, particularly in the period just before the First World War, and it might again, at least in terms of being an economic system that promotes prosperity, peace, stability and international harmony. Even attempts to resolve its economic and political problems, if mishandled, may become a major cause of instability and conflict.[103]

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101 Mahbubani,(2008) op. cit., p. 105.

102 This much-discussed point depends on interpretations of the significance of Chinese history, another vast issue. For an introduction, see Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute Trade and Influence* (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 155, and especislly pp. 226–245. Stuart-Fox argues that China is the world's last empire but one notably constrained in its use of raw military power. The great debate about the extent, nature and purpose of Zheng He's famous voyages of the fourteenth century provide a useful maritime illustration of this crucial point. For this, compare Geoff Wade, "The Zheng He's Voyages: A Reassessment", NUS Singapore Asia Research Institute Working Paper No. 31, October 2004, with Johannes Widodo, *The great explorer Cheng Ho: Ambassador of peace* (Singapore: Asiapac, 2005).

103 This is the burden of Joseph Stiglitz, Chief Economist at the World Bank 1997–2000 in *Globalisation and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2002), pp. 12, 14, 15, 17. See also Francis Fukuyama, "History is still over", *Newsweek Special 2010.*

Protectionism is on the rise, says Mahbubani, citing the EU as being a particularly bad example with its agricultural subsidies.[104] George Soros is worried that the current recession may well lead to financial protectionism_in which governments are forced to adopt their own regulatory mechanisms, because as the United Kingdom found out with regard to Iceland, states can't afford to rely on foreign-owned banks or the responsibility of overseas regulators.[105] Given the EU's difficulties in agreeing to an international regulatory system, what hope is there for the rest of the world? Fuelled by such worries, concerns about the ultimate survivability of the current system in the aftermath of the 2007–2009 recession, abound.[106]

Such a weakening of the system could well lead to a relapsing future world in which national interests *do* still matter as much as they used to, and in which competition and confrontation become more the order of the day than cooperation. Perhaps this was the real lesson of the Copenhagen climate control conference of 2009. Its failure to agree to legally binding environmental regulations was, by many, specifically blamed on China's determined pursuit of its own national interests because of its perception that fixed long-term goals would jeopardize its economic growth.[107] It is easy to imagine a great range of other future quarrels from the consequences of China's poor human rights record[108] to increased levels of rivalry over sources of energy and other raw materials, especially if China adopts the strategically mercantilist approach to such issues that some analysts foresee.[109] This may challenge the rather comforting assumptions of those who believe that a plenitude of key resources [energy, food, water] means that the cake of the world economy will continue to grow in size, satisfying everyone, more or less. Instead, we

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104 Mahbubani (2008), op. cit., pp. 27, 186.

105 George Soros, "Recovery could run out of steam", *The Straits Times*, 7 January 2010.

106 Thus John Gray, *False dawn; The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (London: Granta, 2009) pp. 209–228. Mike Moore identified areas urgently needed for reform, *Saving Capitalism: Why Globalisation and Democracy offer the best Hope for Progress, Peace and Development* (Singapore: John Wiley, 2009), pp. 259–267.

107 Mark Lynas, "How do I know China wrecked the deal? Because I was there", *The Guardian*, 23 December 2009. "Don't blame China for flawed Copenhagen outcome, says Prescott", *The Guardian*, 28 December 2009.

108 Fury at China over refusal to pardon Briton", *The Guardian*, 29 December 2009.

109 Philip Andrews-Speed, Liao Xuanli and Roland Dannreuther, "The Strategic Impact of China's Energy Needs", *Adelphi Paper No. 346* (London, IISS, 2002); Kenneth Lieberthal and Mikkal Herberg, "China's Search for Energy Security: Implications for U.S. Policy", *NBR Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2006, pp. 5–42.

may be faced with a more turbulent future in which inter-state conflict cannot be ruled out. As one respected commentator has argued:

> [O]ver the next few decades, the mere avoidance of a major war, whether between China and America, or inside Asia, will require conscious effort and statecraft of a high order.[110]

This would do particular harm in the Asia-Pacific region where, as Mahbubani has pointed out, economic prosperity has depended in large measure on the, perhaps somewhat surprising, absence of inter-state conflict, and in fact a level of intra-state conflict lower than all areas other than Western Europe and North America. Given the extent to which this peace depends on increasing economic integration and prosperity and on the willingness of local states not to engage in potentially transformational arms races that destabilize local balances, a resurgence of nationalist emotions and inter-state competition in the Asia-Pacific region would do major harm to its prospects for global influence—and damage global prospects generally.[111]

Should this darker, bleaker world materialize, then many of the assumptions on which the previous arguments are based will collapse. Acknowledging this final possibility, many will argue that the task of the international community should focus on heading off such dangers, a necessary process in which debating and worrying about prospective shifts of power from the East to the West are both irrelevant and dangerous. Given the general problems of power transition and the particular issues that divide countries like the United States, China and India, this is likely to prove as difficult as it is necessary.[112] As Niall Ferguson succinctly comments, "major shifts in the balance of power are seldom amicable." In China, as elsewhere, there are hawks who most definitely still think in old-fashioned great power politics terms.[113]

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110 Timothy Garton Ash, "As threats multiply and power fragments, we need realistic idealism", *The Guardian*, 31 December 2009.

111 Here, see the arguments in Robert S. Ross, 2003, "The U.S.-China Peace: Great Power Politics, Spheres of Influence, and the Peace of East Asia", *Journal of East Asian Studies* 3(3), pp. 351–375; Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (Eds.), *China's Ascent, Power, Security and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, 2003, *Regions and powers: the structure of international security* (Cambridge University Press); Benjamin E. Goldsmith, 2007, "A Liberal Peace in Asia?", *Journal of Peace Research* 44(1), pp. 5–27.

112 Lee Kuan Yew, "China and U.S. need each other", *The Straits Times*, 8 April 2010. Wang Gungwu, "China Talks tough but policy unchanged", *The Straits Times*, 24 February 2010.

113 Niall Ferguson, "The Trillion Dollar Question", *The Guardian*, 2 June 2009. "China should aim to be world No. 1", *The Straits Times*, 2 March 2010. This article discusses Professor Colonel Liu Mingfu's (of China's National Defence University) recent book, *The China Dream*.

## A Conclusion?

This paper does not pretend to answer the questions it raises. Instead, it reviews some of the many issues that need to be addressed before one can even think about coming to conclusions. But one thing is clear, and that is that the whole notion of the rise of Asia and the end of the maritime ascendancy of the West is more complicated and much harder to measure or predict than is usually claimed.

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