

Asia Heading Rightward: Embarking on a New Era

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ABSTRACT *For decades, support for Palestine was one of the most important causes taken up by many Asian countries. The Soviet Union's collapse ushered the continent into a more realist era. Consequently, most Asian states either shifted to the right or were replaced by rightists. This shift represented a major setback for the Palestinian freedom struggle; where its major traditional supporters; leftists and Muslims, were marginalized either by realist politicians or by the engagement of people with their domestic problems. The paper tries to understand the major characteristics and motives of this approach.*

Over fifty years have passed since the last colonial power left the Third World and the (new) states or societies have had to deal with many challenging issues, like the Zionist occupation of Palestine. In the 1960s and 1970s, several revolutionary groups, were engaged in combating direct as well as indirect occupations, such as the American presence in Vietnam. These groups were supported by the Soviet Union and its allies like China, Eastern Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Once the revolutionaries achieved independence, they found themselves face to face with the challenge of modern state and the power that

it wields. This challenge required different skills, strategies and tools from those of revolution and internal revolt. Many experiments in creating a state failed because of corruption, cronyism and impoverishment of their own people, making it a must for these regimes to review their policies and try to answer some 'existential' questions in a different way. This was more plausible after the retirement of 'revolutionary men' or the old guard, during the dissolution of the Eastern Block, and the emergence of the 'statesmen' who had a different understanding about the role of governments. Changes in the leading states like China motivated the more marginal states to move in

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the same direction. During the term of President Deng Xiao Ping China started moving slowly away from its Marxist ideology and inched towards a free market and an open economy.

With the Eastern Block dissolved, many Asian countries found themselves in an open confrontation with the West led by the U.S. This time it was without the backing they once had of the former Soviet Union. They had two choices: to go on confronting the sole world hegemon and pay a heavy price in terms of a weak economy and international isolation or to reconcile with the West and believe in the loud promises of development and prosperity dependent of course on committing to IMF and WB loans.

After the ruling elites of those states realized the scale of destruction that colonization had unleashed and left behind, along with the legacy of mismanagement of the previous revolutionaries, people started moving towards reforming the economy and

giving attention to social prosperity by imitating the successful examples of their western counterparts. They adopted the free-market system. They started enacting new laws facilitating foreign and local investments. Moreover, they worked on attracting foreign direct investment especially in infrastructure like seaports, airports, oil refineries, highways, telecommunications and subway lines. They built industrial cities attracting the major multi-national companies that were keen to invest in countries where they can produce high quality products using cheap labor, and pay low costs for raw materials. The growth of the some of the Asian economies skyrocketed as it reached more than 7 percent annually. Unemployment became negligible.

New Realities with Different Visions

A visitor to these countries could sense that they were in a huge workshop full of projects, workers, and work-noise. The Asian countries are now focused on uplifting the social status of their people and expanding their economies. Within this work-noise, the voice of anti-imperialist revolutionary rhetoric seems to be fading. The discourse of revolution is connoted with underdevelopment, corruption and suffering under the rule of leftists who have been politically retreating ever since. With this big shift in political priorities, Asian countries started moving right-ward where they perceived they could progress more in terms of internal



Anti-Rohingya hardline Buddhist group together with Buddhist monks rally outside Yangon's Thilawa port as the Malaysian ship carrying relief aid for the Rohingya Muslim minority arrives on February 9, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / ROMEO GACAD

development with the corresponding economic and social prosperity of their peoples. As with any rightist discourse around the world, Asian rightist discourse has been centered on the sense of supremacy as well as the feeling of being targeted by internal and external enemies.

If we wish to understand the political behavior of Asian states, we need to unpack the main components of the rightist discourse, i.e. fear of internal and external threats and the complex of supremacy.

Fear of Internal Threats

Conservative discourse is usually xenophobic and relies on creating fear among the ‘majority’ that some political, social or ethnic minority is a threat to their existence or values and culture. This minority is also perceived as loyal to some foreign power

or even as a tool for a foreign military intervention, what is called as the “fifth column.” The success of this minority in terms of education and commercial activities adds to the tension promoted by conservatives, who accuse the minority of accumulating wealth at the expense of, and in order to subjugate, the poor innocent majority. However the reality is usually quite different: generally the minorities remain in a more backward situation than the majority community.

Minorities could be religious, sectarian, ethnic or even political. What is important is mobilizing the majority behind the ruling elite to get its support for whatever policies they would like to adopt without disturbance. This can only happen if the majority of the public is made to fear some small, sometimes more visible, minority that is going to ‘enslave’ and

‘subjugate’ them directly or indirectly.

With regards to the Arabs and Palestine, this sort of discourse has been very harmful to the cause as it has harmed two minorities that were always supportive for the Arab causes, with Palestine at the top: the *Muslim and leftist minorities*.

The Muslim Minority: Muslim minorities in Asia have always been cultural and commercial bridges between their motherlands and the rest of the Muslim world, especially the Arab world. They even played political and diplomatic roles as in the case of India whose policy was to send Muslims as ambassadors to the Arab and Muslim countries as they knew better how to understand and deal with such societies. Sri Lanka also followed the same policy, and its well-educated and well off Muslim minority have been a bridge to the Muslim and Arab worlds as well as many others.

In this regard, the European colonization came as a great loss for the Muslim *Ummah*, including the Muslim minorities in Asia that had their problems doubled. The *Ummah* lost its sovereignty with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the occupation of Arab and Muslim lands that paved the way for the creation of ‘Israel,’ which has always been an enemy of the peoples of the Middle East along with Muslim minorities in Asia. However, when the colonial powers retreated, the focus of Asian countries shifted inward and moved from the left to the right. The status of

Muslims consequently decreased after being challenged by the ultra-nationalist movements that started winning ground in Asia. Muslim minorities were perceived as a threat to ‘national identity’ and national security and sometimes they had their loyalty questioned. Such claims would arise more if the country was in war or conflict with any Muslim power. This situation created enough troubles for the Muslim minorities making their focus shift from external issues, as they always did, to focus inward.

When it comes to the Palestinian cause, this pressure on minorities along with the deteriorating situation of the Palestinian and Arab leaderships that acquiesced to Israel and the U.S. demands, has made it a very secondary priority, if we could call it so. It is, however, important to notice that Muslim minorities’ support for the cause is still higher than that of others.

The Left: Leftist powers that once dominated the realms of local and international politics have turned into minor parties or NGOs calling for good governance and social justice. They have lost the appeal and influence that they once wielded. The leftist revolutionary spirit is now imprisoned in the hearts of a bunch of university students, passionate about the cause or a group of elderly people living on the bright black and white memories of the revolutionary past. This spirit can be sometimes found in the lines of the books and letters of Lenin, Guevara, Stalin and other leftist symbols, re-printed by the victori-

ous rightists who would like to study the books on socialism as political history. The present day governments are ruled by tools and visions unfamiliar to the left.

Fear of External Threats

Sadly, in many Asian countries the external threat discourse continues to be present. This provides space for political mobilization to gain public support for governmental policies, no matter how inappropriate or corrupt they might be. Keep in mind that this discourse is a perfect pretext for increasing military expenditure and expanding the security apparatus which leads to the wasting of resources, curbing freedom and bringing the military institution into the decision making process. The situation of India and Pakistan is a prime example. The relations between these two countries have been exacerbated, leading to investing heavily in the procurement of arms. The South Asia region, because of the unannounced arms race between India and Pakistan, is inching towards an unprecedented destructive war. Aside from the security threat, which is sufficient in itself, there is the huge loss of local financial and natural resources, which could be utilized locally for reforming the economy, education sector, infrastructure, social welfare and so on. Both nations have multiple internal problems that need to be addressed but the heavy military expenditure stands as a real obstacle to solving these.

Moreover, since the alleged external threat discourse 'justifies' increasing

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military expenditure, subsequently it will 'justify' approaching the United States and 'Israel,' the last colonial regime. This means more diversion from the founding principles of many countries that were subject to European colonialism in the past two centuries. The prophecy of Edward Said seems to have come true, when he warned that 'the Orient itself may turn into an Orientalist' through using the same colonialist approach with each other.

This means many Asian countries that were supportive of the freedom movements, in the past, Palestine being the most well-known case, will neglect those causes. Perhaps the latest abstention of the representatives of India and Sri Lanka in UNESCO during the vote on al-Aqsa Mosque Compound is an example of that, despite the fact that the decision in one way or another touches the notable Muslim minorities they both have.

Complex of Supremacy

Gustav Le Bon in his *Psychologie des Foules* (Psychology of Crowds), argues that building of civilizations is dependent on having a bigger dream derived from the delusion of grandiose that acts as the driving force

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for people to go into adventures and dream big. Proceeding from this understanding, politicians and statesmen push their people to believe their leaders. The leaders engage them in adventures to achieve the superiority dream, even if it requires them to rely on immoral means.

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The Chinese U-Turn and Heading Westward

In the last few decades, Sino-American competition has taken a new direction. While the Chinese were working day and night on creating a large economy, supported by a huge population and a strict bureaucracy, the U.S. under the President Bush administration dragged itself into endless wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan, exhausting its own bud-

get. A study in Harvard University estimated that the expenses of the two wars stand between \$4 to \$6 trillion. This gave China the space it needed to expand in regional markets like ASEAN and to be their major trade partner in 2015 with a market share of more than \$470 billion. Regional markets were not the only destination. In 2013, Sino-African bilateral trade overtook that of Europe reaching around \$170 billion.

Therefore, the gap between the two economies has been gradually shrinking with some indicators showing that the Chinese economy has already overtaken the American in some fields, a dangerous sign for the United States. In 2014 the IMF announced that China had replaced the U.S. as the world's first economy a position which the U.S. had been in since 1872.

The Americans understand this better than anybody else. The U.S. has been an isolated power for decades prior to the First World War, when it realized that it needed to expand in order to provide raw materials and energy for its factories and secure consuming markets to buy their products. This pushed it to build a strong army and navy to protect its exports and invest more in the military gradually turning itself into a world empire. The Americans know very well that the Chinese are on the way!

This can be felt through many indicators. The Chinese Sea Silk Road stretching over the shores of the Indian Ocean through ports and bilat-



eral agreements with many countries, building a military post in Djibouti and President Déte's declaration that they are diverting from the U.S. foreign policy are just signs of that direction. This will make things more difficult for the U.S. while attempting to 'contain' China and making it busy with regional conflicts in the South China Sea, which is on its way to becoming a Chinese backyard.

It may be early to say that the Chinese Dream, as they call it, is going to be successful as it is facing many internal and external challenges. However it certainly has achieved a notable level of success making Asia, for example, the playground for them and their allies along with the U.S. and its allies.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, and despite the Tun Maha-

thir's 'Look Easy Policy,' many Asian countries are still undecided whether to follow that policy and move towards China, Japan, Korea and other Asian countries or to continue looking westward towards the U.S. and its allies as their major suppliers and allies. Here the relations with Israel become significant.

Asian Justifications for Relations with Israel

The long Asian experience with resisting the oppressive European colonization has made them very committed to freedom movements around the globe. However, when they became more realistic, they experienced a 'cognitive dissonance' between their principle-based legacy and the new realistic calculations. This prompted the Asian statesmen

Indian paramilitary troopers stop a Kashmiri resident during a curfew, following the killing of a Kashmiri student in downtown Srinagar on June 9, 2017.

AFP PHOTO

to work hard on finding plausible justifications to their public as well as to themselves for this shift in their foreign policies. The justifications are totally centered on the materialistic gains that their countries are going to get by having relations with the ‘colonization’s last bastard,’ as Israel used to be called by many Asian politicians. The main justifications are:

- Getting advanced military technologies
- Nuclear and space technologies
- Israeli expertise in agriculture and water desalination
- Investing in Israeli markets
- Developing human resources
- Security and anti-‘terror’ expertise
- ‘Israel’ as the perfect gate to the West and the U.S. in particular
- Using the ‘Israel Lobby’ in the U.S. for their own interests
- Attracting Jewish investors around the globe through ‘Israel.’

This policy would eventually harm Asian countries before anyone else for reasons that will be discussed in another article.

Arab and Muslim Reactions

It is self-evident that, despite the multiple cards at their disposal, the official Arab and Muslim reactions to this shift create no serious pressure

on Asian states. According to Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, around 23 million Asians live and work in the Arab Gulf countries, aside from the Asian need for energy that is satisfied by Arab Gulf oil. In an IMF report for 2014, Saudi oil exports to Asia amounted to 4.4 million barrels a day, UAE 2.4 million barrels a day and Qatar around 6 hundred thousand barrels a day. Geographical proximity and the need for Arab and Muslim markets are only some factors as the list is long.

However, the change in the Arab and PLO approach towards ‘Israel’ has made it even easier for Asian countries to find justifications for the shift in their foreign policies. It seems as if Asians are saying: we cannot be more loyal than the king or more papal than the pope!

To sum up, with the new generation of leaders, Asian countries are steadily moving rightward and adopting inward-centric foreign policies making a radical shift from their traditional approach. Palestinians along with other oppressed peoples fighting for freedom are on the losing side in this new emerging trend as the nations that were their major supporters have now revised their foreign policies and moved towards building strong ties with their oppressors and occupiers. ■