

A recent ASEAN defence forum held in Hanoi, Vietnam, was graphically illustrative of the landmark changes which are currently occurring in the global political system. Along with ASEAN Defence Ministers, were those of the US, China, Russia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, India and South Korea. No further concrete evidence is needed that the 'old order' is indeed changing and that the global balance of economic and military power is shifting in favour of Asia and the Pacific.

More substance is added to this manifest truth through India's consistent push for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (UNSC). India's former Foreign Secretary and High Commissioner to London, Lalit Man Singh, touched on some of the more important issues in current discussion on the unrepresentative nature of the present UNSC when he said that: 'The Security Council needs reform. Permanent membership went to the victors of the Second World War but so much has changed since then. It should reflect the reality of 2010 not the reality of 1945.....India joining the Security Council takes us a step closer to permanent membership – things are looking hopeful.'

He was speaking against the backdrop of India taking up position in the UNSC as a regional representative of Asia recently. India along with Germany, Brazil and Japan have been campaigning vigorously over the years for UN reforms, including the expansion of the UNSC to include them, since the present UNSC is reflective of only the global power balance that came in the wake of World War Two. The world power structure has changed considerably since then and an expansion of the UNSC to reflect these global power realities seems imperative.

The importance of UNSC expansion is underwritten mainly by the greater role East Asia in particular is playing in global economic growth. For instance, an Eastern economic bloc is currently seen as taking shape, comprising countries, such as, India, China and Indonesia, whose productivity would constitute one fifth of the world economy, 20% of global trade and \$ 1.5 trillion in monetary reserves. The latter is said to be 10 times that of the US. The Free Trade Area of China and ASEAN set up in 2002, is the world's largest, with a population of 1.7 billion and a GDP of US dollars 2 trillion.

Besides, there is the now very much spoken of BRIC phenomenon to take cognizance of. Brazil, Russia, India and China or BRIC are said to be the new economic front runners and world economic growth and health are increasingly being seen as revolving around these countries. The contribution of BRIC to global economic growth in 2007 was reported to have outstripped that of the US for the first time, 30% to 20% - so markedly is the global economic balance changing.

Increasingly it is becoming evident that the central stage of global power politics is no longer Europe but East Asia and the Pacific. To the credit of the US it must be said that it saw these changes coming as early as the first few decades of the 20th century when it played a prime role in bringing into being the ANZUS cooperative pact, centering on Australia, New Zealand

and itself. It perhaps saw that it could not shape-up as a super power without acquiring a firm hold over the strategic resources of East Asia and being a Pacific power too, nothing was more natural for the US than to strengthen its military presence in the East Asian theatre.

Given the central role the free market economy has been playing over the decades in the material well of the US in particular and the West in general, one should not be surprised if contemporary US policy pronouncements bear a striking similarity to the policy positions of US political leaders who played key roles in taking the Allied powers to victory in the World Wars of the 20th century. Germany needed to be disempowered and downgraded in the European power structure because it posed a serious threat to the economic and political hegemony of the Allies. US political leaders spoke in terms of the need to keep the world 'free' for the conduct of untrammelled trade and commerce. Likewise, at the recently concluded ASEAN-led defence forum US Defence Secretary Robert Gates was quoted saying: 'We have a national interest in freedom of navigation, in uninterrupted economic development and commerce and in the respect for international law.'

However, as could be seen, US expansionist designs in the East Asian theatre are not going to be winked at by the principal powers of Asia – China, Russia, India and the ASEAN bloc. What is principally at stake is the Asiatic hydro-carbon base and what we are seeing at present is a scramble of sorts among these Asian economic giants for firm control over this resource base which spreads from Siberia, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Northern reaches of the Indian Ocean, to the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

How else could one account for the recent round of tensions between China and Japan? The observer cannot view the eye ball-to-eye ball confrontation of South and North Korea, a few weeks back, from entirely the same perspective but it is amply clear that for the resource-hungry Koreas, freedom of navigation and risk-free transportation routes are growing in importance. This makes the preservation and protection of land and sea boundaries extremely important. Perceived infringement of territorial waters, significantly, was an issue in the dispute between the Koreas. All in all, what is clear is that East Asia would emerge as a region of fierce contention among the resource-hungry powers of Asia.

Therefore, the 21st century would be an 'Asian Century' in more senses than one. Since it would be the central theatre of future power struggles, it would be also the main arena of armed conflict and war. However, unlike in the case of the West of the last century, the lines of political division in Asia would not be ideological nor would there be a polarization on the basis of easily identifiable power blocs. The global power distribution would be mainly multi-polar in nature and by virtue of this fact the world would not be a very safe place to live in.

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