

## **Asian expert Amitav Acharya looks at the emerging global roles of the Asian powers China, India and Japan and points to the lack of an accepted leader or spokesman for the region in international forums.**

### **China, India, Japan -- Who Will Speak for Asia?**



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President Obama returned from a trip to Asia to attend the annual summit of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Singapore on 13-15 November, and visit several other Asian capitals. Among his interlocutors in Asia were the leaders of two Asian nations which have staked a claim to global leadership. China is leading the charge, Japan is not far behind. India, a third contender, was not represented at the Singapore summit (it's not an APEC member), and President Obama has not yet been to Delhi. But on November 24, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh became the first foreign visitor to enter the Obama White House on a State visit.

Asia is rising, and the Asian dream of global eminence is clearly visible, but can China, India and Japan offer leadership to Asia and the world? The debate over Asia's role in global institutions is in full swing now. India, Japan and China are part of the G-20, the much talked-about forum that symbolizes the transition to the "post-American world." But Asians, while not lacking in money or manpower, do not agree among themselves as to who represents Asia and what is the best way of dislodging the West from the perch of global leadership.

Let's begin with the idea of a G-2, an imagined condominium or sorts between China and the US that may actually reflect the global distribution of power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Accepting a G-2 would mean accepting China as the power to represent Asia. But neither Japanese nor the Indians would hear of it.

China has only itself to blame for this. It opposes Japan and India taking up a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, which in many respects remains the true seat of global power.

Japan for its part has been less than enthusiastic about the G-20, seeing a threat to the G-8 forum where it, and not China, is represented. Last July, on the occasion of the St. Petersburg G-8 meeting, the then LDP-led Japanese government strongly defended the G-8 as a more homogenous group of industrial democracies, with a set of common values (forgetting Russia of course). As a government spokesman put it: "...would you call China a democracy? Could a Group of 20 have a meaningful discussion in 60 minutes?"

US, Japan and Australia have promoted the idea of an Alliance of Democracies, which might also involve India and Indonesia. But this is sure to divide Asia and infuriate China, whose 1.3 billion people remain under Communist Party rule that shows no sign of sharing power with the people.

In the meantime, Asian countries have been put on the defensive on global issues such as climate change, busy blaming the West for high carbon emissions rather than coming up with new ideas to ensure global environmental protection. When pressed, the best India could come up with is to promise not to exceed the carbon emissions levels of Western countries, arguing that if the West brings down its carbon emissions, it can set a lower target for India.

As Amartya Sen, Asia's preeminent contemporary philosopher, asks: "Has Asia been doing enough in leading the world opinion on how to manage, and in particular not to mismanage, the global challenges we face today, including that of terrorism, violence and global injustice?" The answer sadly could only be 'no, not enough.' This is not surprising, since Asians cannot agree over who should lead Asia, how can they agree on who should lead the world?

Of course, India, China and Japan all are busy redefining their international roles. The Chinese speak of their "peaceful rise," insisting that China's growing economic and military power need not lead to conflict or expansion, but peaceful integration into the international system. The Japanese are pursuing the idea of becoming a "normal state," an idea first proposed by Ichiro Ozawa of the Democratic Party of Japan (Japan's current ruling party) in the early 1990s. As the Japanese see it, being normal means shedding some of the constitutional restrictions on its military deployments so as that Japan can participate more fully in UN-led peacekeeping missions abroad. But what the Japanese see as normalization, the Chinese see as neo-nationalism and militarization. And India has moved from old Nehruvian idealism to what noted commentator C. Raja Mohan calls a "Curzonian" (after British Viceroy Lord Curzon) foreign policy which acknowledges Indian centrality in Asian geopolitics.

None of these are ideas about global governance or leadership, but are more of self-serving attempts to carve out and legitimize the growing power and clout of these nations in regional and world affairs.

What about Asian regional groups? Led by ASEAN, groups like ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Plus Three do offer a forum for intra-regional dialogue and confidence-building that is valuable. The region is better off with them than without them. But they have not served as platforms for generating new ideas about global governance. It's about time they started building an Asian consensus on who leads them over what issues so they can make a meaningful contribution to the reform and strengthening of global institutions.