

CHINA'S HEGEMONIC AMBITIONS MEAN THAT BEIJING'S FOCUS IS NOW ON BUILDING CHINESE CENTURY

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Former foreign secretary Nirupama Rao, who has also served as Indian ambassador to [China](#), reminded us the other day about an important change in Beijing's perceptions of Asia. China once used to talk about the "Asian century". Its current focus is on building the "Chinese century".

The deepening conflict between India and China is bound to complicate the prospects for an Asian century, as well as the Chinese century. As China privileges nationalism, it is bound to compel its Asian neighbours to do the same.

Delhi remembers very well the meeting between India's then Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi](#) and the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in Beijing at the end of 1988. Deng offered a long and warm handshake to Rajiv Gandhi, the first Indian prime minister to travel to China after the 1962 war. Underlining the importance of normalising relations between the two neighbours, Deng emphasised the centrality of India-China cooperation in realising the dream of the Asian century.

The idea of an Asian century has a longer lineage, but it is Deng who gave it a contemporary meaning. The idea of Asian unity was among the many transcendental political notions that emerged in the late-19th and early-20th centuries as the eastern civilisations struggled to rediscover themselves amidst the domination of the West. Pan-Asianism, Pan-Islamism, and Pan-Arabism provided tremendous inspiration for the people of Asia and the Middle East. But all of them crashed against the rocks of nationalism and irreconcilable contradictions among the multiple nations they were trying to unite.

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The current president of China, Xi Jinping continues to talk about Asian unity. But for a very different purpose. For Deng, Asian unity was central to his strategy of rebuilding China. At home, he was determined to heal the scars from Mao's blood-letting under the Cultural Revolution that lasted from the mid-1960s to the 1970s. Deng also put an end to Mao's external adventurism that destabilised the neighbouring states in the name of promoting revolution.

Deng rightly saw peace on its frontiers and cooperation with the rest of the world as a precondition for modernising China. Xi has a very different objective. He is leading a country that has emerged as a great power, thanks to the sweeping reforms under Deng. For Xi, Asian unity is about getting Beijing's neighbours to acquiesce in China's regional primacy.

Xi is not the first Asian leader to deploy a high-minded ideal for the pursuit of national interest. Japan did much the same between the two world wars of the last century when it presented its colonial expansion as building the Asian century. Imperial Japan's attempt at folding the rest of Asia into its "co-prosperity sphere" is seen by many as the predecessor of China's current effort to tie its neighbours into the Belt and Road Initiative.

Russian communists and the Communist International promoted by them brought together the nationalist leaders in Asia and the Middle East, a hundred years ago, at the "Congress of the

Peoples of the East" at Baku. The surging ambition to build an anti-imperialist front evaporated amidst the compulsion of the Asian nations to fight different imperial powers.

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While some Asian nations fought Japanese occupation and imperialism, others saw Japan as an ally in liberating their nations from the clutches of European imperialism. Asian unity and solidarity was even harder after the Second World War, in the era of decolonisation.

Although there has been much romanticisation of the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in Delhi and the 1955 Asia-Africa conference in Bandung (Indonesia), both the events underlined multiple faultlines within the newly independent countries. The 1962 war between India and China and the deep suspicion of the CCP among China's neighbours made the idea of Asian unity or century largely irrelevant to the politics of the region in the 1960s and 1970s.

It was only in the 1980s, when China under Deng opened up to the world, shed its revolutionary ideology, actively sought economic cooperation with the West and its neighbours that it became possible to imagine Asian unity in any practical sense. India's own economic reforms at the turn of the 1990s and its Look East Policy reinforced the notion of Asian unity and the idea of shared prosperity.

At the centre of all this was the Association of South East Asian Nations which demonstrated the high growth path to its larger neighbours — China and India. It also provided a platform for Asia-wide political consultations and economic integration. At the heart of [ASEAN](#)'s success was the shared understanding that nationalism must be tempered in favour of regionalism.

The dissipation of great power contestation in Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new wave of economic globalisation, and the rapid economic growth in China and the region helped renew the idea of the Asian century.

In an unfortunate paradox, the phenomenal rise of China may have created the very conditions for the demise of the Asian century. That China has become far more powerful than all of its Asian neighbours has meant Beijing no longer sees the need to evoke Asian unity. As it seeks to surpass the [United States](#) and emerge as the top dog in the world, it is no surprise that Beijing's imagination has turned to the construction of a Chinese century.

Although China has every right to claim Asian primacy, others are not obliged to accept it. That brings us back to deeply entrenched Asian nationalism that fought against imperial powers and refused to accept the diktat of the superpowers during the Cold War.

If powerful nationalism is driving China to seek more territory from its neighbours and dominate the region, equally intense nationalist forces in Asia will react against the CCP's assertive policies. India's decision to walk out of the China-centric regional economic order (the [RCEP](#)) last year, its standing up to the People's Liberation Army in Ladakh and the announcement of the first steps towards digital dissociation from China underline New Delhi's political will to resist the negative consequences of a Chinese century.

To be sure, an India that is smaller in economic size than China will pay a price for being the first to challenge the Chinese century. But Delhi may be strong enough to extract a cost from Beijing which is discounting the enormous power of the nationalist sentiment that the CCP is unleashing in China's neighbourhood.

This article first appeared in the print edition on July 7, 2020 under the title "Once upon

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