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IT'S ASIA (AGAIN)

Dr. Andrew Scobell

One of the persistent claims made as the 20th century came to a close was that Asia and the Pacific were increasingly significant to the United States and the world. Analysts and commentators proclaimed that we were entering a "Pacific Century" and pointed to the rising power of large states such as China and India. Japan has been a major economic power for decades but the growth rates experienced by China and more recently by India, and expanding trade flows suggest the world's economic center of gravity is indeed shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

While South and Southeast Asia are still reeling from the widespread devastation caused by the December tsunami, domestic and international relief efforts are underway. The heavy toll in lives and property represents tragedies of immense magnitude for countries such as Indonesia and Sri Lanka. It will take months and years for rebuilding and reconstructing. However, the people of the region are resilient and resourceful, and national economies will bounce back.

Politically, too, the Asia-Pacific is increasingly dynamic and many states are either democratizing or have become bona fide democracies. 2004 could easily be called the "Year of the Election" as some 12 countries in the region held national elections. Voters in established democracies such as Australia, India, the Philippines, and Taiwan all went to the polls, and burgeoning democracies, such as Indonesia, and nascent democracies, such as Afghanistan, held important elections.

While these trends are new and noteworthy, they ought not to obscure the fact that Asia has long been a continent of concern for the United States. China, in particular, has been the focus of American interest for almost two centuries because the country was historically seen as a vast market of lost souls in need of spiritual salvation as well as U.S. products. The result was a wave of missionaries seeking Christian converts and generations of entrepreneurs working to tap the vast Chinese market.

Asia also has been a focus for the United States strategically and militarily. The United States became a bona fide Asia-Pacific power following its victory against Spain in 1899. Acquiring the Philippines led the United States to base land forces there. American forces were involved in various operations throughout the region, including in China's Boxer Rebellion in 1900. While World War I was primarily fought in Europe, the Asia-Pacific was a major theater for World War II with the United States playing the decisive role in the defeat of Japan. The U.S. role in the post-war occupation of Japan and the intervention in the Korean War cemented significant American military presence and strategic interest in the region which continues today.

From Post-Vasco Da Gama to Post-Dien Bien Phu.

Paul Bracken argues persuasively that the emergence of European hegemony over Asia was symbolized by the exploratory voyage of Portuguese adventurer Vasco Da Gama in 1498. Bracken refers to Asia as having been living in the "Post-Vasco Da Gama" era. With China's assumption of sovereignty over the Portuguese colony of Macao in 1999 and the transformation of the former Portuguese territory of East Timor into the world's newest independent state in 2002, symbolically and practically this era is clearly over.

It is now more appropriate to speak of the "Post-Dien Bien Phu era." Dien Bien Phu, of course, is the battlefield where Viet Minh forces won a stunning victory over the French Army 50 years ago. This event marked not only the twilight of European colonialism in Asia but also heralded the rising power and dynamism of the Asia-Pacific. It was only the second time since 1905, when Japan shocked the world by defeating Russia, that an Asian country had resoundingly defeated a European power at war. The Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu dramatically demonstrated that Asian armed forces were not inferior to their European counterparts in terms of strategy, tactics, or soldiers.

Moreover, the 1954 Viet Minh victory underscored that Asia was on the move and would only continue to grow in power and influence relative to Europe and North America. In retrospect then, Dien Bien Phu did not mark the continued inexorable expansion of global communism but, rather, a high point in the extended and bumpy Marxist-Leninist detour some key East Asian states took on the road to the 21st century. China and Vietnam are currently emerging from that bumpy detour and gathering speed on smooth blacktop. Other party-states, meanwhile, such as North Korea and Laos, seem to be approaching the end of the road.

The threat of communism has been replaced by the scourge of global terrorist networks and the proliferators of weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, Asia remains a key--if not THE key--battle ground for the United States. Iraq may fall in Central Command's area of responsibility but geographically it is an Asian country. Similarly, Afghanistan and Pakistan are in CENTCOM's AOR, but they are both undisputedly Asian states. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines are also breeding grounds for terrorists. In Northeast Asia, North Korea remains a major challenge to the United States militarily and the Taiwan Strait standoff appears to defy resolution. The world's six largest militaries are all located in the Asia-Pacific (China, India, North Korea, South Korea, Russia, and the United States). In short, Asia is likely to continue to preoccupy the Armed Forces of the United States.

As the Pentagon grapples with dissuading, deterring, and defeating, if necessary, adversaries in Asia from Karbala to the Korean Peninsula, the United States should pause to acknowledge that we are indeed still in the Post-Dien Bien Phu era. In facing these contemporary challenges we would do well to heed the admonition of Asia's most renowned strategist, Sun Tzu, to "know your enemy." We must be sure to take the time to understand the nature of our enemy, especially how and why he fights, or the United States risks the specter of its own 21st century Dien Bien Phu.