

Asian Century : Has It Begun Already?

Munim Kumar Barai writes from New Delhi

RECENTLY, Singapore has been declared as a developed country. It is an amazing performance for a tiny country which took only a period of three decades to transform itself from an agrarian land to a most modern one. There are three other Asian NICs which are soon expected to be branded as developed countries. The economies of Malaysia, Indonesia, China and Vietnam are racing ahead with fast paces of growth. The South Asian economies have the promise to catch up a higher growth plane in the near future. All these confirm the fact that Asia is rising.

So far the Asian rise has been counted as economic one. Now confirmations are also emerging that an economically powerful Asia will not lag behind in undergoing military changes as military modernisation is no more a silent affair in these countries. After the defunct of Soviet Union, the world has become a unipolar one where the dominance of the US has become supreme. But does this unipolarity a shortlived one? Yes, at least if we believe the 74-page report 'A US Strategy for the Asia Pacific' of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). In the IISS report has been written by Douglas T Stuart, Director of International Studies at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and William T Tow, a senior research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations at Griffith University in Nathan, Australia. The threat to US supremacy is all set come from Asia, as the authors have predicted in the paper.

Asianisation
The authors write that the economic and military developments in Asia 'point not only to the Asianisation of Asia, but also the Asianisation of world politics in the 21st century, as more of the decisions that affect global order are taken by Asian states.'

Stuart and Tow have portrayed the emerging scenario in the following manner: 'Sometime in the not-too-distant future, the United States will no longer be in a position to guarantee the stability of Asia-Pacific by its unilateral actions and forward military presence... The Asian region is becoming too powerful to be either contained or controlled by the United States. The region has already become the new centre of gravity in the world economy and Asian states are increasingly asserting their interests and are more willing to challenge US policies that affect the Asia-Pacific.'

The simple corollary of Asia's rise in economic front is that the Asians will invest more and more in procuring advanced and sophisticated military hardware and in defence R&D. The report points to this aspect too: 'Asia is undergoing dramatic military change, with countries dashing ahead to improve their armed forces and naval capabilities. Over the next decade, as Asian military modernisation programmes continue, relative US military pre-eminence will decline.'

The centre of this high expectation or bullishness with Asia is China. China's emergence as an international power can no longer be ignored. Its huge physical and population size, economic potentials and military strength put it to that status. The economists are bullish about China's economic future. Jim Rowber, former executive editor of *The Economist* of London in his book *Asia Rising* predicted that if in 2025 China could manage to raise the income of the average Chinese to the level enjoyed by the average Taiwanese in the mid-1990s (a hard but by no means impossible feat), China's economy would be not only by far the biggest in the world, but

equal to some 70-80 per cent of the then size of the economies of the United States. Japan and Western Europe put together. Japan is already the second largest economy in the world. Among other Asian nations, India is considered to be a giant in making, Indonesia is another country to watch. So an unparalleled economic dynamism with domino effect is sweeping a large zone spreading from east, southeast to South Asia. In the future, for their continued economic prosperity these Asian countries will need more economic space. And that is where they are going to hurt existing US economic interest. Moreover, an economically prosperous Asia is bound to be self-assertive politically and their voices will be heard with more and more respect.

US Decline
Though the US is still trying to put up a brave face with its economic and military might, its downfall has already been evident. The disintegration of Soviet Union has given

The rise of Asia has some effects on other front also. The relative attractiveness of the US as a brain-puller has started diminishing, an eastward flow of the skilled human resource is now visible.

a period of reprieve and a sense of unipolarity has been created. But this is a stop-over phase, as US will not be able to keep hold on the position for long. Because all indications are there to call US now a case of a declining giant. The World War II brought US in the forefront of the world's military and economic power. Notwithstanding the rise of the former USSR as a political and military rival, in the international arena US proved to be more powerful with its economic and informative network. Up to 1970, the US economy did well as its productivity grew and its competitive edge in manufacturing industries remained on a firm footing. But since then what US has been experiencing is a gradual decline of its economic might. During the '50s and the '60s the productivity rate in the United States was 2.8 per cent.

Since 1970, however, this growth has come down to 1.2 per cent. Though the volume of US international trade is still rising, it is losing its share of export and import every year. Till 1986, US was a net creditor nation, with \$34.6 billion more in assets overseas than foreigners owned in that country. But it has now become the single largest debtor nation in the world? At the end of 1994, it had \$680.8 billion debt. The Federal Government of US has virtually crossed the internal borrowing limit of \$4.9 trillion now. The trade and budget deficits are ballooning every year and the fight between the Republican and Democrat to arrest the deficits and make the budget a balanced one brought the US Government working to a virtual standstill for weeks.

The US leadership in the international arena is becoming increasingly controversial. Though US professes democracy for everywhere, it is most undemocratic with its leadership role. Where it has failed miserably is in the delegation of the leadership authority to the regional powers. No doubt, till today it has the military might to flex its power in most part of the world, but that is no more welcome. For strategic reason, it cannot go withdrawing itself from everywhere, but the habit of interfering and intervening all petty issues around the world cannot be a praiseworthy trait of a responsible leader. Because that generates hatred, sometimes invites retaliation and brings

alteration. The rise of Asia has some effects on other front also. The relative attractiveness of the US as a brain-puller has started diminishing, an eastward flow of the skilled human resource is now visible. A US immigrant brain power is somehow unthinkable. Inside the US, there is an alarming rise of racial and social tensions, kind of a breakdown of social values, which show symptoms of a decaying nation. Arresting this fall or decay is, now a very difficult task.

Conclusion
The role of European nations in the changed circumstances needs to be observed carefully. Presently, they are engaged in an experiment with the European Union and are trying to forge a single Europe. This is not an easy task and proving to be full of obstacles and time-consuming. If they succeed in putting their house together in the future, they might see that the Asians have already gone far ahead of them at that time.

So time has caught three zones of the world in three contrasting phases of evolution — a rising Asia, a declining US and a confused Europe. A sort of historical similarity is also emerging between the rolling back of the European imperial powers in the '40s and '50s and the US from the '70s onward. The Europeans had to do that physically from their colonies, while the US has been doing so by giving up its economic markets and influence mostly to the Asians all around the world.

Now US has started reducing its physical (military) presence from offshore lands. It is not because that it has won the Cold War and wants to give the world a peaceful time, but because it cannot support or afford the financial burden of its presence abroad. During the Cold War, US might have done the same mistake like of the Soviet Union — investing too much time and money for military establishments. So the rise of the Asians could get little attention in their strategic game plan. Now when the Cold War is over and the Soviet Union is gone, the Asians are a bit far to be contained. So if anybody asks me: 'who won the Cold War?' I may reply: 'the Asians'. Why? Because the existence as well as the end of it has given the opportunity to the Asian century to begin.

THE waiting room at Dr Salim Shakur's chamber is a little different from those of other pediatricians. A big fish tank with exotic fish and little moving statues is a big hit with the kids who may have to wait quite a while before their serial number is called. There are other little touches to make the place cheerful. Mickey Mouse, Daffy Duck and other Disney characters adorn the walls and curtains, a big stuffed panda sits on top of the TV that has cable — a welcome diversion for the anxious parents — and colourful little tables and chairs for the toddlers to sit on.

The cheery decor of the visiting area perhaps gives away the kind of person Dr Shakur is. Instead of hurrying over a hundred patients with cursory examination and huge prescriptions accompanied by exorbitant fees as is the tendency of many doctors, Shakur listens attentively to the parents of the child, examines him or her carefully before making a diagnosis. Poor patients are given special consideration and often no fee is charged.

Dr Shakur's sincerity and genuine concern for children places him apart from many other members of his profession who are becoming the subject of great criticism for their insensitivity and preoccupation with the financial gains of their work rather than the quality of service they offer. Dr Shakur who is a well known child specialist and senior consultant of Dhaka Shishu Hospital believes that a doctor's interpersonal skills are a big part of medical service which should be community oriented. 'Doctors should be familiar with behavioural science,' says Shakur, 'they should know, for example, how to talk to a young mother, to a child etc. A doctor must be approachable and be well-versed in local dialects since he or she will be dealing with all types of people.'

Shakur also promotes natural remedies rather than strong drugs that may have side effects on the child. While many doctors prefer to write long prescriptions of medication, Shakur points out that this is also because parents are not satisfied with just verbal advice which they don't think should change. 'This attitude should change,' says Shakur, 'since many minor ailments do not really require medication but can be cured with home-made remedies.' At Shakur's chamber, small leaflets are attached to the prescriptions giving receipts for such remedies to cure simple ailments such as the common cold or

Making Healthcare More Humane

by Aasha Mehreen Amin



Dr Salim Shakur — dedicated to taking care of children.

ough. For colds, for example, Shakur prescribes — plenty of drinks like soup, lemon juice, honey, raw tea, while for diarrhoea he gives out rice ORS, which he supplies in ready made sachets containing chocolate flavoured powdered cones with salts according to WHO formula. He also attaches leaflets on the prescription which contain printed formula of rice based saline to be made at home.

'Patients,' adds Shakur, 'should be satisfied with only advice from a doctor when that is all that is needed to make the child better.' For example when a child catches a cold, the best remedy Shakur recommends is giving her plenty of drinks and normal food. 'The patients and the parents should bear in mind that they are visiting or paying the attending doctor for consultation, not necessarily for prescription for drugs,' says Shakur. Similarly, he continues, a practising doctor should not ideally feel any pressure to prescribe drugs unnecessarily in order to justify his visit fee. Unfortunately, says Shakur, this sort of practise although sensible enough and definitely more ethical, is difficult to do in reality and requires a lot of self confidence, knowledge and experience as far as the doctor is concerned. In this regard, says Shakur,

doctors need to be more child health oriented rather than just treatment oriented. This means giving continuous advice to parents on how to take care of their child, how to prevent diseases (through vaccination especially) and how to prevent malnutrition, one of the major child health problems of developing countries like Bangladesh. Parents too, says Shakur, must be more sensitive to their child's health.

Parents, particularly young, inexperienced mothers should jinx their children to doctors, preferably to a child physician or if this is not possible, to a health worker, for regular check ups, to assess their growth and development. Moreover, says Shakur, this about the right diet for their children, when their children have to be vaccinated and other steps to keep them healthy. Parents should be told when to consult a doctor and when they should rush to the nearest hospital or health centre for immediate treatment. Diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhoea, typhoid hepatitis (jaundice) are quite common among children in Bangladesh. 'Children afflicted by such diseases,' says Shakur, 'often become critical because the sick child is brought to the doctor at a very

advanced stage.' Often the parents are reluctant about admitting the child to a hospital which is what the child needs, and this aggravates the situation, making it very difficult for the doctor to treat the child,' says Shakur.

There are other factors that interfere with treatment. Sub-standard drugs, lack of sufficient beds in the hospital, difficulty in admission, economic constraints in admitting patients and sometimes the indifferent insensitive behaviour of the medical staff in the hospital — all are impediments to proper treatment. Parents should regularly consult their child's physician or health worker to monitor his/her growth and development.

On the other hand, Shakur warns of being overly anxious about your child. 'Many parents are excessively worried when their child is not eating enough according to them and they think that she is not growing,' says Shakur. As long as the child's weight and height are within the normal growth curve limits as monitored by the physician adds Shakur, parents need not be worried and should not resort to force feeding which may actually worsen the situation.

Shakur also emphasises on proper care of the expectant mother since her health will determine her future child's

well-being. Also, extra attention should be given to the newborn (Shakur strongly advocates exclusive breast-feeding for the first five months and breast-feeding in addition to solid meals up to 2 years). 'Low birth weight and pre-term babies, neonatal sepsis (newborn infection), birth asphyxia (brain damage associated with inadequate oxygen) are common causes of newborn mortality,' explains Shakur. To reduce newborn mortality, proper antenatal check ups of the expectant mother is essential. All risk associated pregnancies should be previously booked and delivered in a hospital or a place where satisfactory delivery related care is available. The newborns of such cases should have a paediatrician present at birth.

Mortality of infants under one year and five years is still quite common in Bangladesh, says Shakur. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first five months, prevention of infection especially by a good vaccine coverage, pure, clean drinking water and pollution free environment, early treatment of pneumonia, with proper antibiotics, and treating diarrhoeal diseases with oral saline and oral rehydration therapy are essential ways to reduce infant mortality.

Supporting services such as diagnostic laboratories (on which a doctor sometimes has to depend for diagnosis) nursing and pharmaceuticals have to be upgraded in order to improve the overall standard of health care, suggests Shakur.

Sincerity and the honesty on the part of the doctors and other producers of health services, however, according to Shakur, is the most important factor that needs to be cultivated in order to improve the state of health care in this country. 'The medical profession is a well recognized, noble profession and medical professionals are ideally expected to be dedicated, fully committed to their noble job and free from corruption, greed and unfair means.' However, he continues, 'practically speaking, to get the best possible service from the medical profession, the quality of services from all other disciplines of the nation — including administration, education, business, politics etc. needs to be upgraded and made corruption free simultaneously.' We must remember that medical professionals are not superhumans and therefore the surrounding activities are likely to affect his or her profession. Only when all this is resolved can services for the public be standardized,' adds Shakur.

The Standstill Leaves its Mark

by Raffat Binte Rashid and Sharier Khan

SHEFALI is now back to where she was, when she was eight-years-old and working as a maid servant. Only a few days ago, she was reasonably well off, at least compared to her present status. This was when she was working for a garments factory, a job that she lost when the factory was forced to close down.

In fact, hundreds of small factories like the one she works for have been forced to close because of the delays in shipment due to the recent political situation in the country. No foreign country is willing to place further orders with their already scheduled shipment has been postponed for an indefinite period.

This is certainly no fault of the garment workers like Shefali or their employers, who are themselves in hiding because they cannot pay their employees, answer their buyers or face their bankers.

Who will take the responsibility for them being unemployed or for such huge foreign exchange loss? Why is it that these income-generating people are the main victims of this turmoil? It has been simply the ongoing non-cooperation that has bogged us down and

put us on the streets', said an owner of a garment factory, breaking down with emotion.

The garments factory owners as well as other businessmen, had repeatedly pleaded to the government as well as to the opposition parties, to exempt their sectors from the political programmes in order to save the economy.

'Because of the stagnation at the Chittagong port as well as the transportation system, I am now cursed with a stock lot of exportable garments worth 1 million US dollars. I am now ruined. I do not know how I am ever going to cover up these losses,' said Akhtaruzzaman of Lancer Garments.

Because Akhtaruzzaman is already stuck with a huge stock lot, the bank with which his factory deals in, now refuses to cooperate and his business has nearly come to a standstill.

The garment industry in Bangladesh is a major foreign exchange earner, (50 to 60 per cent of the total earnings) and this is almost doomed. Except for the few really big ones, most of the smaller ones will close down,' said a high official dealing with foreign exchange in a local private bank requesting anonymity.

'The economic loss that

took place during the hartal or non-cooperation days, will take at least another five years to gain grounds and recover,' he continued. It is not just national level business that has suffered loss but trade in general. Starting from a mere vendor to small entrepreneurs doing insignificant yet flourishing business in their own small way, all have been affected.

It has been estimated that the garments factories have incurred a minimum loss of over Tk 1200 crore because of stock lots, while they lost orders worth similar amounts, according to BMEFA sources.

A shipping line official said that as business had totally stopped at the Chittagong port, his company is now suffering from huge liquidity crisis. 'We could provide only 50 per cent of the salary of the staff because we don't have any more cash.'

A perishable items exporter, Taufiquzzaman, was raking his life every day to transport fish and vegetables from different

districts to the Zia International Airport every week. 'My business has dropped by 90 to 95 per cent. But I am trying hard to keep up my business links.'

Zehan Khan, an importer, received his consignment of electronics last month. 'I have invested all my money in this business. Now I am broke. Because of the political crisis, I could not sell my items.'

Ishtat who earns her living by block printing clothes for boutiques was forced to stop her work. 'No shops or small entrepreneurs who sell shalwar kameez and dresses during the Eid sale is placing orders. Though this is peak time for people in the clothes business, it is quite impossible to run my shop without big or wholesale orders,' she said informing further that she cannot make enough profit on individual orders. As a result of this her employed workers were finding themselves temporarily out of work.

Thus people with low in-

come living on hand to mouth basis have become unemployed and are totally insecure. 'I bought my merchandise from as far as Comilla during these non-cooperation days. I hired a rickshaw for Tk 550, fed the pulley meals and bought pigeons for Tk 70 a pair,' said a vendor and who sells pigeons on local bazars. In addition to so many risk factors the pickets have taken away his goods leaving him with no money, no food and no way to earn some either.

Now that poultry is scarce and price extremely high, people are going for anything like buying pigeons for Tk 80 a pair to the vendors selling even for loss or very nominal profit. 'Chicks, that are used for soups are now selling for Tk 40 to Tk 50 each and chickens for nothing less than Tk 90 to 100 a piece,' informed a man buying his weekly stock of vegetables, fish and poultry.

There are traders who create artificial crisis as well, for

instance raising the price of rice, pulse, sugar, all basic ingredients required to survive,' he complained. The traders or the other hand have blamed, the indefinite strike, transport problems etc. for such raise.

'The BNP government has totally ignored to properly assess the gravity of the situation. Erstwhile Prime Minister Khaleeda Zia must shoulder the blame for not being able to govern,' said Imran Alam, a businessman in frustration adding, 'but Sheikh Hasina should also shoulder the blame for she steered such a political movement that directly affected the businessmen — not the administration in particular.'

Until March 30th when the political crisis came to an end, frustration and despair had set in among the people. Moreover even if the crisis has come to an end it will take a long time for these businesses to recover if they do at all.

Not Women Alone

by Munira Khan

The other day a lady employee at a bank perhaps found me in confidence to express her disgust about her husband's teasing her with 'Evedom'. Adam was driven out of the Garden of Eden because of Eve. Her husband was said to be lamenting what would happen to us where two ladies have almost the sole authority to direct the people of the country.

This is ridiculous. From my childhood days I detest the idea of making Eve responsible for exile of Adam. It is God who designed it this way. Eve was persuaded by the serpent to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree and Adam to share it. Both of them were responsible equally to yield to other's persuasion. And then what about the creation of mankind? Out of this decision of eating the fruit came the origin of human existence and human history. Can we say we do not want human existence which is the result of Eve's persuasion of Adam for sharing the fruit together as man and woman? This is not a matter of unequal gender! God created two human beings who would equally be responsible for their existence and work hard to perform their respective duties, discharge whatever responsibilities entrusted upon them.

Bangladesh which is a democratic country has a multi-party system and a very cautious section of citizens who guard their democratic

rights. The parties have chosen their representatives from among their own members and elected a leader whom they think fit for the responsibility. When we look into the major party structures we would find a very small portion of leadership is occupied by women.

When the two leaders of two big parties were chosen by the respective party members who are mostly men we have to admit that they must have the qualities to be their leaders and must be enjoying everybody's confidence. There is no question of men and women involved in it. Moreover, in a democratic political party, members have all the right to change their leaders if they are not satisfied with them; also no leader can act unilaterally and take any decision without consulting the other leaders of the party. Everybody has the option of disassociating from the party if he/she does not like the decisions the leaders are taking.

Nowadays we feel very strongly against the words used to differentiate man and woman in the same post. For instance, when a newspaper headline reads 'Dui Netri Jal Desh Bandi', people feel as if they are caught prisoners under the political moves of two women leaders, not two political leaders. Like the word 'leader' there should be a common Bengali word like

'Neta' or whatever people may choose.

In my opinion, women are capable of giving leadership and discharging their duties entrusted upon them competently so long they get the same opportunity and environment men enjoy. Many NGOs in Bangladesh have been successful by giving women the leadership in their domain of activities. All over the world, many lady-politicians have been successful while in power or in opposition and many kings, dictators, or even democratic leaders who happened to be men have caused destruction and downfall of their country.

When something happens to a nation, good or bad, it requires the involvement of the whole nation, although responsibilities to lead lie with the leaders whoever they are, men or women. One or two leaders cannot be responsible for any action taken politically in a democratic country. I think highly about the theory a country gets a government it deserves.

So to deserve a good government people and political parties should act very carefully, should choose very judiciously their leaders without being swayed away by any sentiment. Politics, as political philosophers say, is a very highly technical subject which needs training and learning.

Along with it the political leaders who would make the policies, who would lead the nation, should have spontaneous love for people and the country without having any ego or personal interest. They should have special qualities of leadership in running an administration. We have seen and heard about many politicians in the world who were virtually worshipped for their role in movement but became very unpopular and turned unsuccessful after getting into power. How can we forget Lafayette, the French leader whose footsteps people used to kiss but was quitted by the same people?

All of us, men and women of Bangladesh, are hoping and praying to get a correct type of leadership who could take us out of this mess we have created. We do not want any more politics of destruction we want change of government through peaceful method and manner. Why should we be compelled for destruction of our own economy by hartal, oborodh, killing to change a government? Why should we take law in our hands and be compelled to agitate concerning the issue of election when there is supposed to be law enforcement agency and Election Commission completely free from any political bias? Above all, why should anybody blame only women for all the mess created by the politicians of our country?

