

Is Economy or Security More Important in Asia?

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In political science, the answer to the title question is classic: Security is far more important than economy. If there was no security, one would not have a stable economy. Many political analysts would agree with the above statement. The Middle East situation bears out that conclusion, the instability especially battles and wars destroy its economy. However, the 'security' and 'economy' issues are subject to different interpretations, internal and external geopolitical perspectives. The greater a region and the bigger its population, the more its 'security and economy' issues become a global concern. Take Asia or just the Asia Pacific region as an example, the Asian security and the Asian economy are perceived as intimately linked with global security and global economy. Rightly so, because Asia is about 30% of the world in land mass, 60% of the world in population and having an economy growing from 20% of the world economy in 2010 to 25% in 2013 (comparing to Europe dropping from 35% to 33% and North America dropping from 33% to 27% from 2010 to 2013). It is no question that the Asian economy has been driving the world economy over the recent years. If we look over the same period (2010-2013) to examine the Asia security (hindsight), we must conclude that its security has not materially changed much despite of the noisy rhetoric. Sure there were rhetorics among Asian nations (involving external parties) such as disputes over small islands or rocks in the East and South China seas. The U.S. pivot to Asia or rebalancing of her naval presence in the Asia Pacific raised concern, but largely, these maneuvers only caused tension now and then more as annoyances not really as serious security issues in the region. In fact, the Asian economy did not falter; on the contrary, it grew with a healthy rate. The trades expanded among the Asian countries and the maritime traffic passed through the East and South China seas with no incidences.

Why do we pose the title question then? Do the Asian nations value their economy more than their security? The answer is not a simple yes or no but lies in a clear definition of 'Asia Security'. What is 'Asia security' to Asian nations collectively may not be the same as to the external world, for example, the U.S. and her allies. One must understand the 'Asia Security' issue from Asians' (in Asia) perspective. The internal picture of the 'Asia Security' issue is a collective assessment including the big Asian countries such as China and India as well as small countries such as the ASEAN members like Singapore and Vietnam. All together, they will define their 'security issue'. Not that the Asian countries will place their 'security issue' below their 'economy issue'; rather they do understand that there is no real serious security issue in Asia if no internal or external agitation destined to cause insecurity. We have seen that not only the ASEAN members expressing this view, even Asia's close neighbors such as Australia and Russia also sharing that understanding. Therefore, the majority of Asian nations would rather focus on their economy. After all, from GDP per capita point of view the Asians rank near the bottom with an average of \$2500-2900 (IMF, World Bank and CIA statistics) below South America, \$9000-9200, Europe, \$25400 and North America, \$3200-32400. Only Africans at \$1560-1600 have lower incomes than the Asians.

Recently, Evan Feigenbaum wrote an op-ed in ChinaFile on August 18, 2015, How Should the U.S. Conduct the Xi Jinping State Visit?, which drew a meaningful response from Orville Schell. Their two essays do echo each other stressing the point that the two nations need to find **concrete** common interests “from topics overly general in nature - “peace,” “stability,” “security,” “non-provocation,” and so on”. Feigenbaum urges the two leaders to confront rather than tiptoe issues, to face “the central problem in Asia today - the collision between economics and security”. In “Economic Asia,” Feigenbaum states, “a dynamic group of countries, including China and the United States, trades, invests, and increasingly innovates together”. “This Asia, a prosperous \$21 trillion juggernaut, has become the center of gravity in the world economy.” Feigenbaum rightly pointed out, “*another* Asia, “Security Asia,” has locked many of these same countries into an increasingly debilitating cycle of competition, arms buildups, and clashing security concepts..... Instead of an “Asian century,” the region’s story resembles a “Tale of Two Asias” with economics and security colliding, not running in parallel.” Following my discussion above, I must say that it is the external party, U.S.-Japan, not the majority of Asian countries, perceived or created the “Tale of Two Asias”.

Although Orville Schell and Evan Feigenbaum were right to point out that the U.S. and China must find concrete common interests be it weather changes, energy resources, stimulating and financing developments, ...to turn hostility into cooperative relationship, but they failed to underscore the definition of “Asia Security” which was interpreted differently by the United States and China, as alluded to in the earlier paragraphs. The United States tend to define ‘security’ from her national interest point of view and often unilaterally make assumptions followed with policies and strategies to maintain the US version of ‘security’. Whether the U.S. solicited Japan’s partnership or Japan voluntarily advocated the “China Threat” theory totally on her own, their version of ‘Asia Security’ is in disagreement with the view shared by other Asian nations and their neighbors. Granted, there are disputes in the South China Sea but they were there for decades and China had been taking a soft approach all along until more agitation and provocation took place; even then China stressed bi-lateral peaceful discussion as a way to reach a solution. The Diaoyu Island dispute in the East China Sea had also been an issue for a long time; it was Japan that broke the “Tabling” status quo and provoked China to take a more assertive stand. In the past, the “Asia Security” issue had been defined by the Western view which led to the Korean War and the Vietnam War; these wars and aftermath had not shown any concrete evidence that the U.S. had achieved a security victory making Asia a safer region or gained a national security interest/advantage for the U.S. These examples in Asia and others elsewhere must serve as warnings for the U.S. not to suffocate the Asian economy in the name of maintaining an ill-defined “Asia Security”. For China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore,... even Australia and Mongolia, they are more interested in financing their economic development than signing up military treaties for a fake “Asia Security”.

Xi’s forthcoming visit to the U.S. and his meeting with Obama will offer a great opportunity for the two leaders to steer the two nations to a friendlier path. As suggested by Feigenbaum and Schell, seeking concrete common interests are positive steps to take. In this exploration, it is crucial for the two sides to have a frank and open dialogue

on the definition of 'Asia Security'. Only by reaching a mutually understood and accepted definition, can the two sides find common interests. There are many problems existing in the 'Asia Security' issue. First, for example, is the North Korea and its nuclear program and the tension between the North and South Korea, but this problem does not appear to be unsolvable if the U.S. and China can reach an understanding of the 'security' issue. The second example is the South China Sea disputes, if the United States and China both really wanted to assure safe and open international maritime traffic flowing through the South China Sea, an acceptable protocol seems to be easy to accomplish. As for exploring underwater resources, the Asian nations do share a common 'economic development interest', negotiations through diplomatic means are entirely possible without provoking a 'security' issue.

When Obama and Xi meet again this year, the 'Japan' problem should be resolved with highest priority. The reason, Japan, represented now by Abe Shinzo, is a problem not a solution to an Asian perceived 'Asia Security' issue is obvious. Abe (Japan), instead of making a clean and honest burial of Japan's imperial past, still carries the torch of militarism tempted to revive Japan's past 'Imperial glory'. Any tolerance and condonation of Japan's military expansion by the U.S. in the name of a fake 'Asia Security' is a big mistake. It would be naïve to assume that Asia would accept a tight U.S.-Japan military alliance permitting Japan to further strengthening their military power as beneficial to the Asian's definition of 'Asia Security', even citizens of Japan and Okinawa reject such notion. The U.S. must remove this hypocritical mask (US-Japan military alliance is good for Asia not against China) before the two nations can really feel comfortable to find common interests to work cooperatively as partners.