

Asia After the End of the Cold War

Hermann Wentker /

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The end of the Cold War is generally associated with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of bloc confrontation in Europe, the pullout from Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union and its disintegration into former Soviet Republics. Of the hostile blocs' two primary powers only one, the United States, survived. Yet in no way, as we have become painfully aware today, did this result in a triumphal advance of the liberal, democratic, capitalist system under the unchallenged hegemony of Washington. Instead, the present day shows us two other results: a breakup into new fault lines beyond the old East-West conflict and the rise of China and India.

Excepting the efforts of Russia under Vladimir Putin to expand Russian influence in the states of the former Soviet Union, especially by annexing Crimea and destabilizing Ukraine, these processes have been taking place chiefly in Asia. This is where today's most destructive wars and conflicts have been playing out, in particular under the Islamist banner. This is also the back yard of the new powers challenging US hegemony. Against this backdrop it is instructive to look back at the origins of these processes, which stretch back to the time before the ruptures of 1989-90.



The role of Communist China as a rival to the Soviet Union has been discussed since the 1960s. Although China possessed a nuclear arsenal since 1964, both the "Great Leap Forward" under Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution obstructed any global political offensive. This was set in motion only by the economic liberalization under Deng Xiaoping from 1979 onwards, propelling China to the status of Asia's leading economic power. On the one hand the country is dependent on trade with others; this, however, has not prevented China from asserting its economic and territorial interests through increasingly robust policies that include military expansion.

The case of India has been somewhat different. Its economy has liberalized and opened up only since 1991 under Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. The decisive processes here were set in motion only after the Cold War, once the Indian variant of a "third way" between capitalism and socialism had proven to be a dead end. However, while China is now undeniably a great power, India is still on the path to becoming one.

In the second half of the 1970s, political Islam also experienced an unforeseen renaissance. Belief in the future viability of secular Arab states both in North Africa and the Middle East was profoundly shaken by the Iranian Revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini, which swept away the regime of the Shah and then established itself permanently. In neighboring Afghanistan, too, fundamentalist Islamic powers began spreading even before the Soviet invasion in 1979 and gained support under the Soviet occupation, not least from the US. No one could sense



at the time that this would yield the militant Islamism of our time, whose extremist regimes have expanded through the Middle East and into Africa and which threaten Europe and the US through terrorist attacks. Still, the origins of these realities are to be found in the Asia of the late Cold War.

If we consider contemporary history to be the prehistory of the present day, inquiring into the end of the Cold War must, in my opinion, take into account not only Europe and North America but to a greater extent Asia, because this is where processes began that have deeply influenced today's global (dis-)order and continue to do so.

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